

CHAPTER 3

SATTRIYA: AN ENDURING RITUAL TRADITION

A tradition of performance, in the conventional and popular sense is understood as ‘genre’. However, the word ‘tradition’ implies something much more than just genre. ‘Tradition’ implies to the ‘movement of action’ through the passage of time. “Performance traditions, like religious or literary ones, are best thought of as inherited collections of established ways of feeling, thinking, and doing that are passed down through generations and just as importantly, consist of the active and often contentious process of transmitting what has been received on inheritance.”¹ In other words, a performance tradition could be understood as a “body of knowledge, including techniques of performances, texts, and aesthetic principles or rules or assumptions, which constitutes and defines what the particular genre is and it is simultaneously the process of handing that knowledge on from one generation to another.”² In most, if not all Indian performance traditions, a convergence or synthesis of music, dance, and drama is inevitable just as “in other traditional forms of Asian performance, the arts are a composite set of skills practiced by a team of artists who through creation of verbal, vocal, aural, spatial and visual patterns create a total performance.”³

As quoted earlier in Chapter 2, “rituals and ritualized performances... play an important role in the shaping of groups of people, as they relate to and experience their everyday worlds. This becomes crucial to our understanding of the different ways in which people shape ritual practices when creatively constructing a ‘usable past’ ”⁴, as an intangible heritage.

The Sattriya, as has been discussed in the earlier chapters, constitutes a set of large number of traditions born of the *Bhakti* Movement in Assam, consolidated, pursued and preserved in the Sattras of Assam with participation of the Sattria community comprising the monastic order and the surrounding society. These traditions, constituting both the plastic and performing art forms, get transmitted through generations not only in ritual forms of religious prayer services in the Sattras and elsewhere, but also assume the proportion of an artscape where religion and aesthetic sensibility combined with each

generation of practitioners in each of the genres get this expanded and enriched with additions of frills of what have been received through transmission.

3.1 The Place: Locating the 'Living Heritage'

3.1.1 Majuli

Majuli, a river island is located in the heart of the Brahmaputra⁵ river in the state of Assam. Till a few years back, it used to be the “largest fresh Water mid-river deltaic island in the world”⁶. Situated in the upper reaches of the river Brahmaputra (colloquially considered a ‘male’ river) in Assam within the latitude of “26045' N – 27012' N & longitude of 93039' E – 94035' E with mean height of 84.5 Mt above MSL”⁷, the island is known for its bio-diversity and has a rich ecology with “rare breeds of flora and fauna.”⁸ The island is about 300 kilometres east from the state capital- Guwahati, and can be reached by ferries from the city of Jorhat in the south and Lakhimpur in the north.

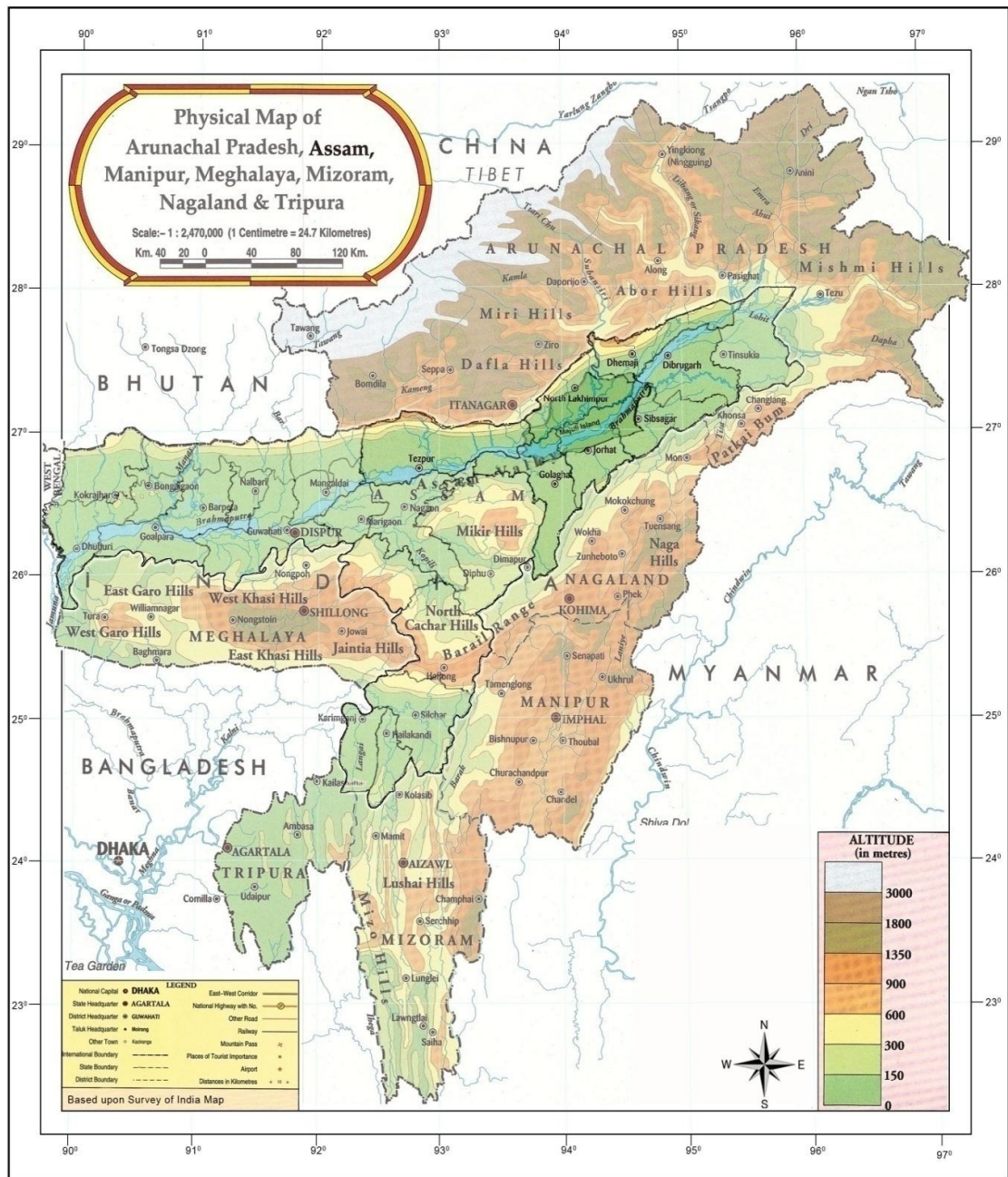


Fig. 11 PHYSICAL MAP OF THE NORTH EAST INDIA

[Source: http://majulandscape.gov.in/images/geography2_original.jpg viewed on 25 May 2015]



Fig. 12 and 13 GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF MAJULI ISLAND IN THE MIDDLE OF BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER

[Source: Fig. 12 <http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2013/04/15/world/asia/15india-map.html> and Fig. 13 http://www.weather-forecast.com/place_maps/ma/Majuli.8.gif viewed on 25 May 2015]

3.1.2 People

“Being an isolated zone with abundance of unoccupied land, Majuli provided shelter to all immigrants coming from all around since the middle ages, particularly from its northern border across the Suvansiri River.”⁹ The majority of the population of Majuli constitutes non tribal caste- hindu as well as the Mising tribe who came down from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh centuries ago and settled in the plains of Assam. Apart from them, the inhabitants are also from the Deori and Sonowal Kacharis tribes in large numbers followed by some Rajbonkshi, Bengali and Muslim population as well. Languages spoken here are Mising, Assamese and Deori. (Nath 2009: 3-5). The island has roughly has about 140 villages (as of in 2013) with a population of over 150,000 and a density of 300 individuals per square km. Due to heavy soil erosions and flood almost every year, there is a serious loss of land which might include several villages. (Personal Communication with a Ferry operator on 25 September 2013)

3.1.3 Economic Activities

Paddy being the chief crop, their main industry is agriculture. Majuli has a rich and diverse agricultural tradition which prides itself on growing close to a “hundred different varieties of rice.”¹⁰ Most of it is organic farming that is pesticides and fertilizers are not used as much. Among the fascinating arrays of rice produced is the *Komal Saul*, a unique type of rice that can be eaten just after immersing the grains in warm water for fifteen minutes. It is taken out of a variety of rice that grows abundantly here. This is usually eaten as a breakfast or a snack cereal. Fishing, dairy, pottery, handloom and boat-making are other important economic activities. (D. Nath’s *The Majuli Island: Society, Economy and Culture* and Participant Observation)

Handloom is a major source of engagement amongst the villagers. With so many tribes people living there, it possesses a wide spectrum of weaving designs. Although, largely a non-commercial occupation, it keeps many of the inhabitants occupied. Weaving is exquisite and intricate with the use of a variety of colours and textures of cotton and silk, especially the famous Assam [*pat*] silk and *muga* silk. (D. Nath’s *The Majuli Island: Society, Economy and Culture* and Participant Observation)

3.1.4 Cultural Milieu

The Mising community celebrates Ali-aye-ligang, one of their major festivals during mid February. Traditional Mising dance known as *Gumrag Somang* is performed in every village worshipping the almighty Donyi-Polo (literally: the mother sun and father moon) asking for a good year of harvest. Being an agrarian community, they worship the nature and its elements. The celebrations last for about a week. Christmas is also celebrated by those who converted to Christianity. Jengraimukh village in upper Majuli is the epicentre of Christians i.e. majorly misings who converted to Christianity. (D. Nath's *The Majuli Island: Society, Economy and Culture* and Participant Observation)

However, it is safe to say that Majuli has been the cradle of Assamese culture for the past five hundred years. The island has been the hub of neo-Vaishnavite culture of Assam. According to the early biographies, Sankardeva took refuge in Majuli and spent a couple of months at Belaguri in West Majuli (Neog 1998; Sarma 1999). This is popularly known as 'Manikanchan Sanjog' since it was an auspicious and historic meeting between Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. This place was also known to be the first Sattrā in Majuli. Sixty five Sattras were set up post that event (Ibid). However, today only twenty-two of the original sixty-five still exist as vibrant institutions.

A few of the 'original' surviving Sattras are, Dakhinpat Sattrā, Garmur Sattrā, Auniati Sattrā, Kamalabari Sattrā, Bengenati Sattrā, Samaguri Sattrā. Being the abode of the Assamese neo-Vaisnavite culture, these Sattras are also the treasure house of *Bargit*, *Mati Akhora* (ground exercises), Sattriya Dances, *Ankiya Bhaona* traditions of craft and other plastic arts, all introduced by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva (Nath 2009, Neog 1998 and Sarma 1999). These Sattras are also keepers of some exquisite antiques like weapons, utensils, jewellery, textiles and other items of cultural significance. Sociologists have stressed on the necessity to preserve these unique peoples, whose cultural expressions are untouched by modernism for which representations have been made at UNESCO as well.

3.1.5 Erosion

Unfortunately, this island is facing an imminent extinction from two most serious problems caused by the surrounding Brahmaputra with its rivulets flowing out of the river:

- Severe bank erosion leading to continual loss of land.
- Flood inundation causing damage to all kinds of properties- material and cultural.

“In 1853, the land stretched till about a 1246 sq. km. (Source: Mr. A.J. Maffat Mills of British East India Company). In 1993, it was observed to have shrunk to 880 Sq. Km. (Source: Brahmaputra Board Quoted by E.F. Muller, May, 1996)”¹¹. After the great earthquake of 1950 erosion of the river Brahmaputra in this reach became active and a part of the southeast and southwest side of the island was washed away by the river.¹² In the recent years there were floods in the Brahmaputra in 1931, 1935, 1948, 1949, 1951, 1962, 1962, 1966, 1969, 1970, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1996 and 1998 (Ibid). This has posed an increasing threat to the island and the rich natural and cultural heritage it represents. The Kamalabari Sattrra (which now stands in Titabor in Jorhat District of Assam was washed away into the river in 1975. In 1998, the floodwaters submerged almost the entire island. Even the Sattras, which are normally built on earthen embankments, were under a few feet of deep water. The flood wiped out entire standing crops and rendered thousands of acres sterile depositing millions of tons of sand. (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora and Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat from Kamalabari Sattrra, Titabor, Jorhat on 28 September 2013).

This persistent problem has affected the bio-diversity of the island, flora and fauna, socio cultural fabric and the demographic pattern of the population. People were forced to shift to other locations on the island and some were even forced to leave it. The Sattras, shaken by this recurring problem, have now decided to shift to mainland. The prominent Sattras like the Auniati Sattrra, Dakhinpat Sattrra have started constructing their establishments in the mainland. This naturally would affect the cultural heritage and the spiritual identity of the island. (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora and Sonaram Sarma Burabhakat from Kamalabari Sattrra, Titabor, Jorhat on 28 September 2013).

3.2 The Space

3.2.1 The Sattra: The Birthplace of Sattriya Nritya

A Sattra has been defined as:-

ekanta vaisnava yata nibasa karaya |

jivako sarana diye, sattra taka kai ||

(Where the single-minded Vaisnavas reside,

where they offer sarana (shelter) to the souls, that (place) is called a Sattra.)¹³

The Sattra institution of Assam has been playing a vital role in shaping the religious and cultural history of the Assamese people from the 16th century. Religious in its origin, it is mainly responsible for shaping and stabilizing Assamese society and for the last five hundred years, it has been administering and serving the spiritual and cultural needs of the people. Sattras, today refer to the neo-Vaishnavite monasteries or institutional centers of Assam numbering to be more than 700 in the whole state. And these institutions have uniquely preserved and proliferated the *Ekasarananamdharma*. They are categorised under 4 *samhatis* (please refer to Chapter 1 for the detail on *samhatis*).

3.2.2 Origin of the Name

The word ‘Sattra’ is a Sanskrit word and traces itself back to the *Bhagvata Purana* as a sense of sacrifice. In the Purana it is used to explain an assembly or a congregation of devotees (Sarma 1999, Neog: 1998). But in the context of Assam’s Vaisnavism, the term acquired a different and distinctive meaning. The Sattras in Assam are a unique type of institution which for the sake of understanding, may seem to be similar to a Buddhist *vihara* or a Hindu math in the form of its working and functional structure. However, in reality a Sattra means much more than that.

Sankaradeva is said to have established his first Sattra at Bardowa, his birth place, and then at different centers as he had to move from one place to another on account of internecine conflicts and hostility from royal quarters. He founded *Hari Grihas* (literally, prayer houses) at most of the places he preached the new religion. It is believed that during Sankardeva's lifetime, the assemblage of his followers happened out in the open and under the trees. Some kind of temporary prayer houses were built though, the tradition of devotees living in the premises did not happen during Sankardev's lifetime.

The first mention of the *hati* is found in the context of the Patbausi Sattrā of Damodardev (Neog 1998). Madhavdeva built the Barpeta Sattrā, and laid down the system of daily prayer service and initiated the system of religious *tithis*. Vamsigopaldev played a very important part in the establishment of the Sattras in eastern Assam. (Neog 1998, Sarma 1999)

Sankardeva's apostolate consisting of his twelve chief disciples, who took it as their duty to spread the message of the *Ekasaranamdharmā* founded several important ones which, in the course of time, spread all over the Brahmaputra Valley, gradually growing into hundreds in number. These institutions, gradually expanded, and became centres of cultural activity. They were known at the beginning, as *Than* (Sanskrit: *Sthana*, literally space). Sattras in which the principal preceptors lived, or which preserve some of their relics are also called *thans*. The Barpeta Sattrā is acknowledged as the biggest *than*. Some other important ones are Belaguri *than*, Barpeta *than*, etc. Certain biographers however use the term Sattrā synonymously for *Than* (Neog 1999). The "embryonic" institution which began as congregational gatherings thus developed into full - fledged Vaisnavite monasteries and eventually came to have a new nomenclature- Sattrā. However, the terminology of Sattrā as an institution of ritual congregational service appears in Sankardeva's writing (*Bhagavata*, Book I. Vol. 10) which leads scholars and even devotees at large to believe that the concept or the embryo of the institution of Sattrā was laid by the saint himself. (Mahanta 2007) These centers are generally independent of each other and under the control of individual *adhikaras* (or *Sattradhikars*), though they are grouped into four different *samhatis* (orders/sects).

There were initial years of resistance from the Ahom kingdom in the east and the Koch kingdom in the west towards this religious movement but eventually both the royal houses took the Sattras under their royal patronage i.e. donated them huge pieces of land enabling some Sattras to be self-sustained working structures. This led to the mushrooming of Sattras in the 17th century because of various factors including expansion of Sattrā families belonging to the domestic order. This was crucial to the spread of this new faith. Soon, *Ekasarananamadharmā* spread throughout this stretch of land and Majuli became the centre of Sattrā traditions, culture and religious leadership. Many of the larger Sattras house hundreds of celibate and non-celibate *bhakats*

(depending on the specific *samhati* they follow) who hold vast lands and are repositories of religious and cultural relics, artifacts and artistic pursuits. (Sarma 1999, Neog 1998)

The embryonic prayer hall from which the Sattras came into being have been called by various names in various *caritas*¹⁴:

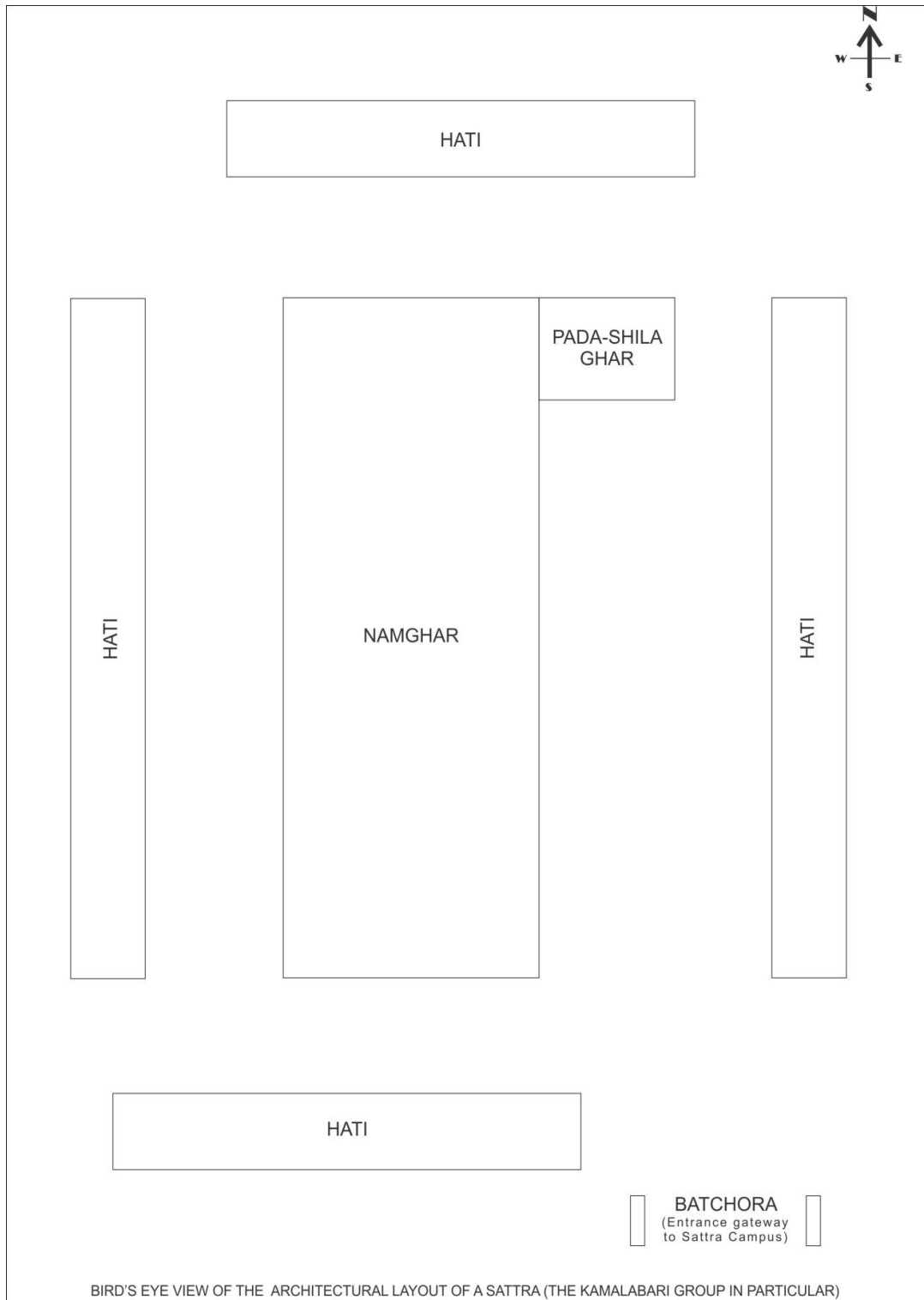
- Deva Griha
- Hari Griha
- Kirtan Griha/Ghar
- Prasangar Ghar
- Sattras Griha

Over the centuries, this unique institution, has become intimately connected with the Assamese life and culture in all respects. From Majuli to Koch Behar, the Sattras dominate the social landscape of Assam and the entire state was found to be integrated into one religious whole by this network of Sattras till early 19th century with numerous Vaisnava householders affiliated to one or the other Sattras. The preservation of the Sattras, however is a matter of great concern not only in the light of the fact that they contain manuscripts, artifacts and antiques of immense historical value but also as they are the nurturers and carriers of the modern day Assamese fabric of culture and faith. The most unique aspect of the arts that are nurtured at the Sattras is that they are part of a living cultural tradition. The Sattras, though born in the cusp of the 16th century, are vibrant entities to date. They still command devotion from the traditional Assamese and attract new followers into their fold, including those Sattras that follow a more demanding commitment from their members as celibate monks. The Sattras are the living centres of 'Sankarite' heritage and culture. For centuries, certain Sattras have preserved the cultural traditions of the Sankaradeva Movement in their pristine purity. They have relentlessly encouraged the arts and crafts, like dance, drama, music, book-illustration and the making of decorative objects for the beautification of the Sattras interiors. (Neog: 1998, Neog: 1999, Mahanta: 2007)

3.3 The Sattras Architectural Layout

A Sattras consists of a square enclosure, with four openings or gateways called *batcora* or *karapat* (Sanskrit: *kapata*), housing four rows of residential huts called *hati* i.e. a row, each divided into individual residential quarters called *boha* . The *Namghar*, the central

sacred space, is located in the centre of the Sattra (all Sattras irrespective of the *samhati*). The *Namghar* is a composite of a shrine called the *manikut* and a *padashila ghar* (in some Sattras- the relic house where the artefacts, belongings and relics of the deceased mentors are kept to be taken out on the *tithis*). (Please refer to Fig. 14) (Participant Observation)



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE ARCHITECTURAL LAYOUT OF A SATTRA (THE KAMALABARI GROUP IN PARTICULAR)

Fig. 14

3.3.1 *Namghar*

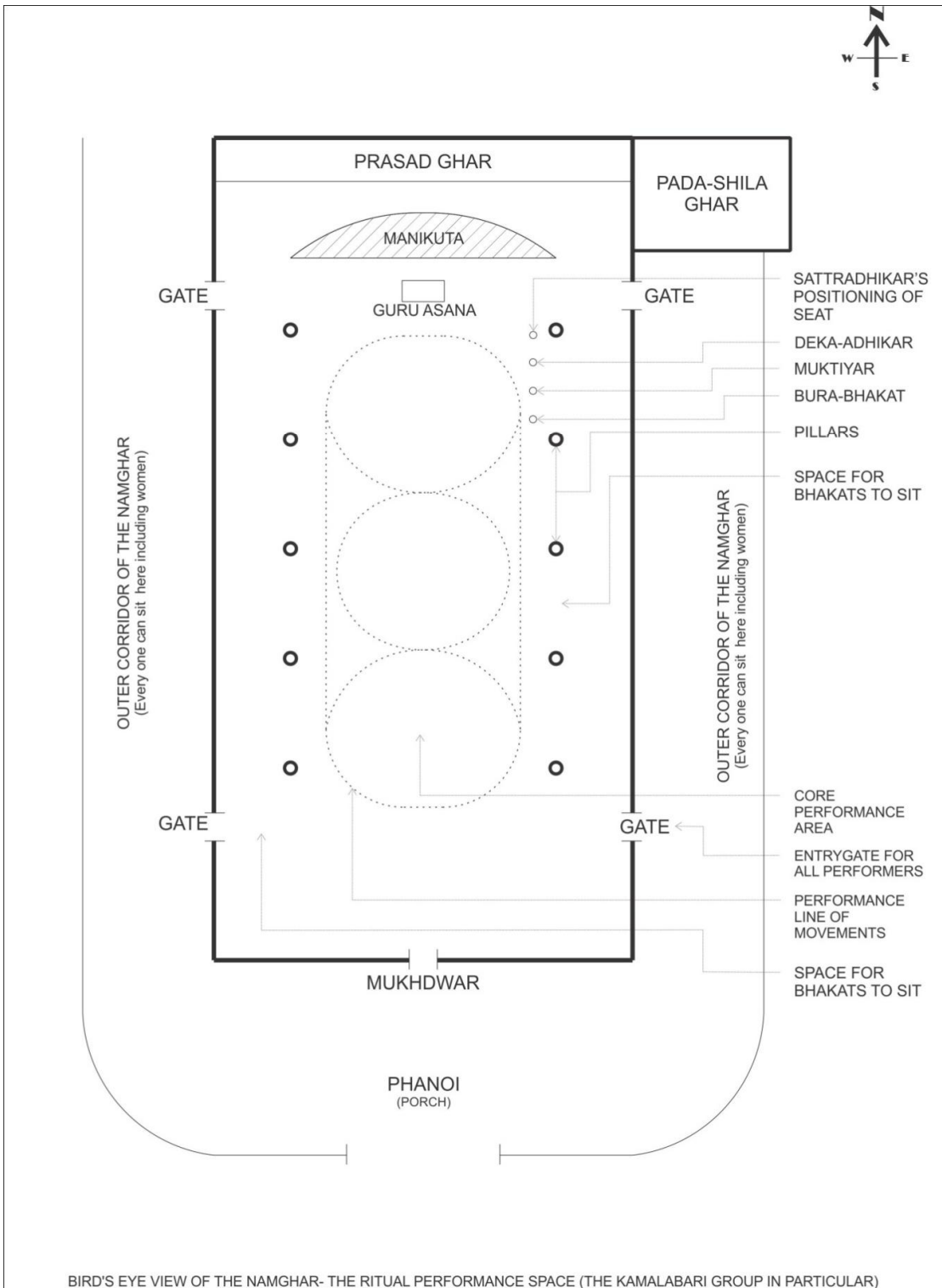
(Please refer to Fig. 15) *Namghar*, also known as the *kirtan ghar* is the centre of all activities in a Sattrā. The *bhakats* always enter it from the eastern gates, though they are free to exit from any gate they want. It is a huge structure with its roof supported on proportionately huge wooden/concrete pillars (concrete being a later development) and a big floor-space. At north end (in case of the Kamalabari Sattras) of this prayer-hall is the *Manikuta* which houses the sacred throne- the *Guru Asana*, in which the sacred text (usually, the *Bhagavata Purana*) is placed. This symbolises the presence of the Divine i.e. Narayana/Krishna/Rama, the Gurus i.e. Sanakaradeva and Madhavadeva (again in the case of Kamalabari Sattrā), their words and teachings. Entrances are made at the southern end diagonal to the *Guru Asana*. During offering of the rituals, the *bhakats* progress down the central space towards the sacred text to begin most of the performances. (Participant Observation)

All performances i.e. the rituality takes place within the confines of these prayer halls or *Namghar*. The audience who comprise of the Sattrā inmates and the devotees from the surrounding villages sit on the ground or stand while the performers i.e. the *bhakats* make their way up and down the ‘central theatre arena’. “At times, scenes are played behind one side of the audience, literally enfolding them in the dramatic action.”¹⁵ A ritual performance during the *tithis* of the Gurus- Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Badula Ata, happen round the clock. The spatial layout (or as it is popularly said in urban/street theatre), the ‘blocked spaces’ of the performers along with the effect of natural light achieved by the “spaced rhythm [of the ritual performance] on the vertical and horizontal surface”¹⁶ helps create a religious and ‘Divine’ environment.

Architecturally, a *Namghar* is a large open hall with “gabled” roof having a facade at the southern side (in case of the Uttar and Natun Kamalabari Sattras) and the western side (in case of some other important Sattras). “The apsidal roof has an elaborate structure in wood which is very typical of *Namghar* construction. The interior is a simple nave and two aisles with pillars.”¹⁷ The pillars are in odd numbers of i.e. a group of 5, 7 and 9 pillars (*khutas*) usually, “which divide the area loosely into chambers.”¹⁸ Traditionally they were erected with wooden beams supporting an “architrave” over which the roof rests but now these pillars are made of concrete as well. The wooden beams were known as the *chati* and usually have relief carvings with decorative motifs and are painted

making them similar to murals. “At times the false ceiling which is made by joining the *chatis* is used for stocking the large bamboo masks and accessories of the drama performances (at times).”¹⁹ The *Namghar* walls, i.e. the two longest parallel walls, making the longest corridors (Please refer to Fig. 15) are usually left with open spaces or *jails* i.e. the railings, which allow natural light and air inside the space at the same time. It’s interesting to see how form and function are adeptly utilized. A nave is extended all around the central structure to widen the shade, forming the verandah/corridor where the devotees can sit. “The door towards the tope is the main entrance, *mukhduar* - the ones at the side are the *petduar*. Doors with carvings of lion motifs are called *simhaduar* and those with floral patterns are called *phuljalikata-duar*. Sometimes brass doors with floral and figurative motifs are also used.”²⁰ The *Namghar* has painted reliefs, wood carvings on its walls and doors, rich textile banners (in some Sattras) hang from the ceiling, similar to intricately woven tapestry. (Participant Observation).

The areas in a *Namghar* are systematically allocated for its numerous functions. Space is determined by a host of ceremonial requirements - places for offering, place for the asana (wooden pedestal with the sacred scripture), space for the Sattras functionaries to sit, space for devotees and visitors to sit etc. The ‘space’ is highly demarcated on the basis of ‘sacred and profane’. At the time of festivals, which are mainly the *tithis*, the area for performance of the *bhaonas* is also marked out. “Even the seat for the Sattradhikar, who sits against the *laikhuta* or main pillar of the hall, the *Deka Adhikar*, the bhakats, the musicians and lay devotees are all predetermined. The use of space is a formal one and highly ordered. This orderliness is especially helpful since the large *Namghars* are used not only as prayer halls, but also as a place for meetings, discussions, festivals etc. So there is enough space to accommodate thousands of disciples who flock there annually or on select occasions.”²¹ (Participant Observation and Personal Communication with Bhabananda Barbayan on 23 September 2013).



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE NAMGHAR- THE RITUAL PERFORMANCE SPACE (THE KAMALABARI GROUP IN PARTICULAR)

Fig 15

3.3.2 *Manikut*

The *Manikut* is the most sacred space in a *sattra*, located at the farthest corner (in Kamalabari *Sattras*) where the *Guru Asana* (sacred throne) is located. “*Manikut* literally means ‘house of jewels’. It is also here that the other-*Sattra* valuables, wood carvings, metal works, ancient manuscripts etc. are housed. It is a sacred zone and beyond a certain limit lay devotees are not allowed in and in the celibate orders, women are not allowed inside the *Namghar* at all.”²²

The *Manikut* and *Namghar* form a “central complex around which are the large water tanks used either for sacred or utilitarian purposes. Each tank (*pukhuri*) is allotted for a specific purpose such as *saul-dhowa* (rice washing), *ga-dhowa* (bathing) etc. The environment around has a number of flowering and fruit bearing trees, which provide ample shade. The height of the structures does not exceed those of the trees around them. All the areas thus form a harmonious whole.”²³

3.3.3 *Hatis*

In such a hierarchical establishment, the resident *bhakats* move about performing their duties and performing rituals which to an urban eye are various forms of art. “They work and live in the *hatis* where each *bhakat* is allotted his own individual space- *baha*, which are either large or small according to his status in the *Sattra* hierarchy. Most of the huts are of equal size, having a common verandah joining the length from one end to the other”²⁴, except the one of the *Sattradhikar*’s. The *Sattra* as some other stores such as the *dhan bharal*, *caul bharal* etc. which house the *Sattra* property, foodgrains etc. are generally situated close to the quarters. (Participant Observation and Personal Communication with Bhabananda Barbayan on 23 September 2013).

“The construction of *hatis* is simple and made for convenient living. The roof is the common sloping type of thatch and bamboo roof - a prototype of the Assamese village house. The plinth is raised as protection against dampness from the soil below which had a lot of water content. (Materials used are usually those which are locally found such as earth, chalk, bamboo, wood, *ekora* reed (for the walls) straw and these days, tin for roofing etc.”²⁵

3.4 People and the Community

It is necessary to understand the way in which the Sattras as a religio-cultural community is structured and how the structure works governing and managing the traditions. The administration of a Sattras is run by a set of functionaries headed by the *Sattradhikar*. The Sattras inmates can be broadly categorized into four groups which are as follows:

- *Adhikar* (also known as *Sattradhikar*) - The head of a Sattras.
- *Deka Adhikar* - Deputy to the *Adhikar*.
- *Bhakat* - Devotees staying inside the Sattras premises. Among them various official responsibilities are assigned to run the routine and other occasional services.
- *Sisya* - Lay disciples spread over other places that form the larger community in the process of participation.

(Personal Communication with senior *bhakats* at Uttar and Natun Kamalabari Sattras in September 2013)

3.4.1 *Sattradhikar*

The head of a Sattras is known as the *Adhikar* (also respectfully addressed as *prabhu-ishwar* by the laity). The religious head and spiritual guide, it is under his religious jurisdiction and care, all the members practice the neo-Vaishnavism of Assam. All the activities in the Sattras, small or big happen under his supervision. He not only presides over the religious rituals such as the *Sarana*, the “formal initiation ceremony” and the confirmatory *Bhajana*, but also the day-to-day religious and spiritual functions as well as the administrative functions are conducted under his guidance. In some Sattras like Barpeta (the place which is known to be the first established Sattras), the *Sattradhikar* is democratically elected by the *bhaktas* attached to it. Considered to be a person of eminence and erudition in all aspects of traditional knowledge system, the *Sattradhikar* supervises all art practices in sync with the religious discipline. (Personal Communication with Janardan Dev Goswami, *Sattradhikar* of Uttar Kamalabari Sattras on 12 September 2013)

3.4.2 *Deka Adhikar*

The *Deka Adhikar*, the deputy to the *Adhikar*, becomes the head of the Sattrā after the death of the *Adhikar*. This happens in a special ceremony of investiture (similar to that of coronation). The *Deka Adhikar* is responsible for performing all the duties of the head of the institution in the *Adhikar*'s absence. In most of the Sattras, he is appointed during the lifetime of the *Sattradhikar* so that he can be trained amidst the "holy influence of the religious institution from his boyhood."²⁶ There is no uniform rule as regards to the selection or nomination of the *Sattradhikar* or the *Deka Adhikar*. In some Sattras, "seniority of age is taken into consideration subject to certain limitations"²⁷ and in some other Sattras, "merit is the only consideration and seniority is not taken into account."²⁸ However, while selecting or appointing the *Deka Adhikar*, the monk's 'mental and physical fitness' plays a very significant role.

3.4.3 *Bhakat*

Though the term *Bhakat* literally means any devotee, it is popularly used for those devotees who either hold 'ecclesiastical office of the Sattrā or lead the life of a celibate within the Sattrā campus' (especially in the case of the celibate order). Such unmarried devotees are called *kevaliya* or *udasin Bhakats*. The *udasin* or *kevaliya Bhakats* (life-long celibates) are brought to the Sattrā at a very young age (Most of the people I spoke to were brought between 2-5 years of age). They stay and remain under the guidance of the elderly *Bhakats* under whom as pupils they learn various ritual art forms i.e. performing, literary and static, for a number of years. When they are seen to make sufficient progress in the religious life and get acquainted with the monastic order, they are finally ordained. These pupils are to wait personally upon their seniors besides taking religious lessons from them. After the probationary period is over, they are formally initiated into the order' by the *Sattradhikar*. (Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora and P.J. Mahanta)

"There are two types of *Bhakats* (devotees):

- The lay devotees living outside the Sattrā and generally leading a family life
- The inmates- celibate or domestic, belonging to the monastic order, residing inside the premise of a Sattrā. The celibate *Bhakats* known as *Kevaliya* (Sanskrit: *kevalin*).

Considered from the point of the progress made in the path of devotion, the *Bhakats* may again be classified into two sections:

- Those who have been ordained to the order of faith i.e. *sarana*, and remained at that stage.
- Those who have crossed the necessary levels of the necessary learning and are considered eligible for the confirmatory *bhajana*.²⁹

The latter section of *Bhakats* lead a very disciplined and scrupulously religious life and occupy a higher status in the hierarchy of the neo-Vaishnavite religious body. A *Bhakat* of this class is generally addressed as *Atoi* (Sanskrit: *atma*). The term *Atoi*, although looks similar with the *Ata*, they are not however synonymous. The latter is exclusively used in case of religious heads or the apostles only.

“The nature of a *Bhakat* has been elaborately discussed in all the Vaisnavite devotional texts. According to these texts, a *Bhakat* should possess in addition to piety, humility, compassion and good conduct, the following special qualifications which are:

- Faith in the religion
- Indifference to other things like *jnana* and *karma*
- Deep devotion inspite of hindrances (worldly i.e. birth families or any problems with the inmates)
- Joy in the sacred names of ‘*Hari*’
- Paying honour to Vaishnavas (fellow inmates, deceased gurus and senior bhakats)

He should lead a simple life free from ostentation and cultivate indifference to worldly objects and avoid all kinds of luxury.³⁰

However, it is important to mention that the “*Adhikars* are held in the highest respect not only by his *Bhakats* and disciples but by persons of all ranks...”³¹

3.4.4 Sisyas

Lay disciples/ devotees of a Sattras are called *sisyas*. “There are numerous Vaisnava families in Assam are affiliated to the Sattras.”³² According to ‘popular’ custom in these Vaishnava families, every Assamese young man should have his initiation before his marriage. (Personal Communication with a *bhakat* at Uttar Kamalabari Sattras)

3.4.5 Functionaries of the Sattra

All functionaries in a Sattra are essentially *bhakats* in the Kamalabari Sattras, inevitably residing in the Sattra compound. Some of the important functionaries of a Sattra are:

- *Muktiyar*: Secretary to the Sattra and the Sattradhikar. This is a legal position as the Muktiyar is registered under the court of law as in absence of the *Adhikar*, he can sign on his behalf.
- *Deori* or *Biloniya*: Distributor of sacred offerings known as *mah-prasad*,
- *Bharali*: Store-keeper.
- Bar-Bhandari: Chief treasury officer
- Caul-Bharali: Granary keeper
- Gua-Bhandari: In-charge of betel-nuts
- Bar-Aldhara: Head attendant to the *Namghar* and the *Adhikar*
- Bar-Kakati: Chief clerical officer
- Bar-Medhi: Sattra's representative in the villages under the Sattra's land and outside
- Bar-Khataniyar: Representative in the royal court or abroad

Other functionaries of the Sattra (with a special reference to the performance teachers or *adhyapaks*) are:

For the efficient management of the Sattra and for conducting religious services regularly, several officers or functionaries are appointed to hold different branches of the institution. The number of these functionaries vary in number according to the size of the Sattra. In big Sattras, functionaries of four grades are found:

- Bar-Bhagwati: Chief reciter of the *Bhagavata*
- Bar-Sravani: Chief listener
- Bar-Pathak: Chief reciter of the vernacular scriptures
- Bar- Nam Lagowa: Leader of *Nama Kirtana*
- Bar-Gayan: Chief singer
- Bar- Bayan: Chief player of instruments

Most of the above functionaries are held in high honour. Besides the above functionaries of the highest order, there are hosts of other officers working in different branches. The officers in various cadres are responsible to their respective heads and ultimately

responsible to the *Adhikar*. (www.tributetosankardeva.org/satra_officers.htm and Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta)

Over the centuries Sattras have multiplied into some hundreds, and socio-political and other changes have affected this religious-cultural organization also. As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, there have also been differences among the Sattras as evident from the emergence of the four *samhatis* or sects. But the differences are peripheral, and the core of the basic tenets of Sankardeva's faith of bhakti remains unshaken. No matter to what denomination a Sattra belongs, its ultimate allegiance is always to Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and the principles they had laid which have been working as the great cementing forces to have homogenized Assamese society, so much so that sections of the people remaining outside the faith or the Vaishnava order- Saktas, Saivas and even Muslims too are deeply impacted by the above and all look upto these saints as cultural leaders (Mahanta 2007).

3.5 The Fountainheads of Culture

“The cultural history of Assam in respect of fine arts and crafts, of education and learning, and of literature and fine arts since the beginning of the 16th century till the advent of the British [rule more or less continued to be centering around the Vaishnava movement]”³³ This found expressions and an outlet through the Sattra institutions. These institutions act as their repository of the knowledge, beliefs, philosophy and spirituality of the movement. One can say that it “diffused a high degree of ‘enlightenment’ among the people of the Brahmaputra valley. It should be noted that Vaishnavism in Assam is a religion as well as an institution, and even today, it exercises a very great influence on the social and communal life of the Assamese people.”³⁴

The Sattras functioned not only as seats of religious learning in the form of residential schools. The *Bhakats* (monks), live here under the guardianship of the Sattradhikar along with senior monks, responsible for their “temporal and spiritual welfare and progress.”³⁵ The *bhakats* received their education in Assamese language as well as in “Vaishnavite texts and the *Vedic* and *Puranic* lore.”³⁶ Apart from the Sattradhikar, other teachers and functionaries of the Sattras namely the *Bhagavati* and *Pathak*, impart knowledge more in the form of religious instructions, to the monks orally through discussions and occasional debates. The monks are also given “written exercises not only in copying out

manuscripts and illuminating them with relevant pictures, but also in translating Sanskrit scriptures and composing original works in Assamese.”³⁷ After many years of this religious education and rigorous training in Vaishnava faith and discipline, these monks are deputed to take part in the Sattras activities in the capacity of teachers and other functionaries. Initially they were also sent to “various parts of the province for the purpose of preaching and the faith liasoning with the laity and imparting training on various arts in the villages.”³⁸ In course of time, many new Sattras were established at different places spreading across the modern geography of Assam, and “this network of institutions helped the diffusion of education, learning and culture in the entire region.”³⁹ One can say that in this way, the Sattras produced many successful teachers and spiritual leaders, eminent scholars, poets and artists.

3.6 Life in the Sattras

Ferdinand Tönnies, a German sociologist, distinguished between two types of human association: *Gemeinschaft* (usually translated as “community”) and *Gesellschaft* (“society” or “association”) where, “*Gemeinschaft* refers to groupings based on feelings of togetherness and on mutual bonds, which are felt as a goal to be kept up, their members being means for this goal.”⁴⁰ In his 1887 work, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tönnies argued that *Gemeinschaft* is “perceived to be a tighter and more cohesive social entity, due to the presence of a ‘unity of will’.”⁴¹ A. Messing in his article “Panxenos: an Outsider’s Sociology of Self” quotes Tönnies, “that family and kinship were the perfect expressions of *Gemeinschaft*, but that other shared characteristics, such as place or belief, could also result in *Gemeinschaft*.”⁴² “This paradigm of communal networks and shared social understanding has been applied to multiple cultures in many places throughout history”⁴³. *Gesellschaft*, on the other hand, Tönnies described as “a group in which the individuals who make up that group are motivated to take part in the group purely by self-interest.”⁴⁴ But most important he proposed that “in the real world, no group was either pure *Gemeinschaft* or pure *Gesellschaft*, but, rather, a mixture of the two.”⁴⁵

Sattras Institutions combine the role and characteristics of both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschafts* as it is a “society” or association which is bound together by ‘faith’ i.e. the path of *bhakti* followed by the monks. Their unity of will to uphold the tenets of the faith as well as the functions within the Sattras. They all share responsibility to keep up the traditions alive to this day. Alongside, monks remains are there due to their own personal

reason which is his own personal relationship and dedication towards the divine. Where ever in the world they might be, they would always be back in the Sattras to take up the responsibility during the *Tithis* or ceremonies.

The Sattras ritual have a very important ‘function’ i.e. preserving and maintaining the Sattras society as a whole as these rituals are the common expressions of the common interest representing the community. (A.R. Radcliff-Brown) But most importantly, these rituals, ensure the continuity of the community as it helps the development of the “will” and awareness of the shared ideals and interests. (Max Weber, the sociologist) A very important characteristic for any religious “society” or “association” to continue is their unity of will. It is only this unity that leads to “harmonious articulation” of the various functions in a Sattras. The rituals enforces (subconsciously) through its various functions and assured discipline, the unity of will towards a common objective i.e. upholding the religious faith. (Emile Durkheim) And this is the way Sattras have been a living tradition for the past 500 years. For example,

“In the Sattras, the *Nam Prasanga* [prayer services] is generally held three times a day (morning, midday and evening) while in some others, fourteen services are daily held: five in the morning, three in the afternoon, and six in the evening” [this is a general sense of time for an understanding]. This is believed to be in vogue since the time of Madhavadeva. The order of services and songs and hymns recited at a particular time is not uniform throughout all Sattras. In some Sattras, in addition to the devotional texts of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, songs and hymns composed by the originator of the particular Sattras are also recited in these routine services. Besides these daily prayer services, congregational prayers sung in succession throughout the day or night are held on various occasions like the *Pal-Nam* (*pal* literally meaning- in succession) and the *punya-tithi* (death anniversary) of the saints and the apostles of the Sattras concerned. The above list of religious services are always observed collectively i.e. in congregation and with great devotional fervour.”⁴⁶

The role of a Sattra in the propagation of religious and ‘moral’ education and organizing religious-cultural activities is confined not just to the physical boundaries of a Sattra, it goes far beyond into the villages lying far and wide. The nearby villages conduct ritual activities relating to the faith in allegiance to the Sattras through the institution of the *Namghar* or the public prayer hall which also performs like a multi-purpose institution concerning the religious, cultural and social dynamics of the people centering around it. Villagers or members of the laity come to Sattras to attend religious functions and also to listen to religious and spiritual deliberations organized in Sattra *Namghars*. People also used to visit the Sattras for the settlement of social disputes as Sattras functioned as judicial institutions too. (The practice still continues even after prevalence of the present judiciary introduced by the British rule). (please refer to Appendix II) Not just the *Bhakats* or the functionaries, others also take part in all such activities of a Sattra but under the guidance of the Sattradhikar. The Sattradhikar or his representatives, accompanied by some of the Sattra functionaries, pay periodical visits to the villages where followers or *sisyas* of the Sattra live. He stays either in a *Namghar* or in a temporary camp made for the purpose, gives *sarana* to new entrants to the faith and *bhajana* to senior disciples.

3.7 Sattriya Dance

3.7.1 Genesis

Not to be confused with the Sattriya Dance that is performed on the proscenium stage, this chapter explores and investigates into the Ritual Performances which are performed inside a Sattra *Namghar* during the *tithis* of the gurus i.e. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and other apostles. The *caritas* give us description of Sankardeva’s first appearance in his first dance-drama *Cinha Yatra* (one of the *Ankiya Nats*). Sankaradeva, used a unique way to spread the sentiment of *Bhakti* and that was through dance-dramas instead of just writing and giving religious discourses. He created his own styles of dance, music and theatre along with amalgamating the existing folk traditions popular locally at that point of time to perform these plays popularly known as *Ankiya Nats* thus the origin of the ‘Sankarite’ Dances is to be found in the *Ankiya* dramas of Sankaradeva. His chief apostle Madhavdeva, also being a versatile composer, innovated further and introduced newer forms. He worked out an elegant choreography in respect of certain dance numbers of his plays. Six of Sankardeva’s plays and six of Madhavdeva’s plays together built up a large reservoir of dance numbers combination of music, dance and drama embedded in a play

of the kind. With passage of time, the tradition developed and grew along with the development of Sattras and constituted the distinct tradition of dance nomenclature as 'Sattriya Dance' in the 20th century. (Mahanta 2007)

Later playwrights like Ramacarana Thakur, Daityari Thakur, Gopala Ata and others who authored several other plays on other themes, followed the mode introduced by the masters incorporating all elements set by the first set of plays. Thus dance found for itself a wider avenue within the sacred space of religion. However, this study is restricting itself into the development these performance traditions in the Kamalabari group of Sattras following the monastic order of celibacy. (Neog 1998, Sarma 1999)

With the growth and expansion of the Sattria institution, this dance form evolved into a rich and vibrant tradition with a large repertory and other paraphernalia like oral grammar, sinuous texture, intricate footwork and stylization in expressional aspects like facial and hand-gestures. It became a hallowed tradition pursued and preserved within the Sattria circle and hence it was nomenclatured as Sattriya.

3.7.2 *Ankiya Nat*: The Ritual Theatre

The *Ankiya Nat* or *Ankiya Bhaona* is the neo-Vaishnavite religious theatre introduced by Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva. *Ankiya* means 'act' or 'episode' and *Nat* means 'play'. Thus, *Ankiya Nata* means a 'one-act play', however not in the sense of the modern denomination of the one-act play, but a performance without a formal division of acts or scenes, composed in a particular form. Sankaradeva wrote several plays followed by several others penned by Madhavadeva as a means of spreading the tenets of Vaisnavism and reaching out to the large section of people. A notable feature of *Ankiya Nat* is "that to entice and to give the aesthetic enjoyment to the people of different stratification of society, here a particular scene or sequence is described in four ways known as (a) *katha* (prose), (b) *gita* (song), (c) *sloka* (Sanskrit verse) and (d) *bhatima* (panegyric hymn)." ⁴⁷ Similar to the *Yakshagana* of Karnataka, "the *Ramalila* and *Rasalila* of the various north Indian states, the *Bhagavata Mela* of Tamil Nadu, *Krishnattam* of Kerala and the *Prahlada Natakam* of Orissa, the *Ankiya Nat* too is Vaisnavite in content and character." ⁴⁸ It is one of the oldest of its kind. These plays were written in *Brajavali* (Language adopted by Sankaradeva out of Assamese, Sanskrit and Maithili) to be able to reach out to a larger section of people. Themes are primarily centred on the praise of

Narayana (or Lord Visnu and his incarnations especially Rama and Krishna) derived from the episodes of the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Ramayana*. *Ankiya Nat* is popularly known as *Bhaona*, denoting mostly the performance. The plays are usually combine live instruments and singers, dance and elaborate costumes in production.

3.7.2.1 The Initiation/ Beginning of the Play

The play starts with the entry of the *Sutradhar*, marked by a dance - the '*Sutradhari Nac*'. The *Sutradhar* is dressed in a white long-sleeved coat with a full, gathered skirt. He also wears a white turban and elaborate ornaments. After completing his dance, the *Sutradhar* introduces the theme in the play through singing and mimetic gestures. Thereafter, there is a succession of short dances known collectively as *Pravesar Nritya*. First, there is the *Gosai Pravesar Nritya* – dance of the Lord (Krishna or Rama) - and after this dance, there is the *Gopi Pravesar Nach*- dance of the heroine and her companions. The singing of the compositions is done in a *raga* (melodic mode) and the rhythm is provided by a *khol* (or *mridanga* in very few cases). Cymbals and pipes are also used. *Talas* in use are *Ektal*, *Kharman*, *Rupak*, *Visham Tal*, etc. *Bols* on the drums requires a high degree of skill.

The performance of an *Ankiya Nat* starts with benediction in Sanskrit followed by eulogy to God in 'Brajavali'. The play starts with the prelude, or *purvaranga*, a ritual in itself, consisting of an orchestral ensemble with playing of the traditional percussion instruments (*khol*) accompanied by the big cymbals by the singer and musician duo (*Gayan-Bayan*) in a group. The play of instruments is intermediated by hand movements and in series of paces called *Dhemali*. After the prelude, the narrator, or *Sutradhar*, enters the stage and begins the actual performance. *Ankia Nat* was intended to be viewed by the people of all hue- the literate and the unlettered, the high and the low- in medieval Assam, majority of whom was below the literacy level. Thus, an explanation was included at every succeeding stage of the drama. The *Sutradhar* had to attend to various tasks viz. production, direction and delivered commentary of the entire drama. (Participant Observation)

3.7.2.2 Salient features of *Ankiya Nat*

The *Ankiya* plays have some characteristics which are not found in other plays of India, especially the Sanskrit plays, the most important being the presence of the character of

the Sutradhara. Moreover, the entire play is enacted from beginning to end, without any intervening break between the scenes, appear like an one act play although it consists of multiple acts or scenes flowing at a stretch with the Sutradhara filling in the potential gaps with his own brand of dialogues or commentary. The *Ankiya Nat* represents the 'hybridisation of media' i.e. and admixture of various literary and cultural genres such as Music, Dance, Percussion, literature- poetry and prose and a small gamut of plastic arts for which the neo-Vaisnavite Movement is so distinctive.

“The ingenuity of the plot-construction and the culmination of the action in a celebration can be said to be the distinguishing marks of the *Ankiya Nat*. Sankaradeva's plays address an audience ready to witness a *lila*, i.e. an enactment of God Himself to vindicate 'His Divinity' and to establish 'His' absolute authority over the world.”⁴⁹ “In technique, *Ankiya Nat*, follows *nrtta*, *nrtya*, *natya*. Of course, *natya* is the soul of this art form, the primary object of which is to generate the final realization of [*bhakti*] *rasa* in its ineffitable and transcendental state.”⁵⁰ The plays are a re-enactment of a mythical history which has been passed down orally from generation to generation. Sankardeva not only composed plays, but made all arrangements for successful presentation of them. He trained the musicians, dancers and actors, had all the equipments and accessories prepared by the artisans and also planned the preliminaries of the show. Thus he masterminded the entire dramatic process of medieval Assam.

The strength of the *Ankiya Nat* lies in its association and attribution to the religious beliefs of the Assamese people, particularly the neo-Vaishnavites. It has sustained itself for centuries not alone as a ritual form of worship for the followers of the faith, it worked as a powerful medium of healthy, popular entertainment, social cohesion and camaraderie and led to the growth of a theatre movement and emergence of a distinct dance tradition as well. It does not seem to have changed drastically over time, even though the state (itself) has undergone many dramatic changes in its economic and social organization in recent times.

Important features can be summed up and noted as below:

- The plays are written in the Brajawali, a stylized language with mixture of Assamese and Maithili.

- The Sutradhara who introduces the characters of the plays remains on the stage throughout the performance depicting the play and providing necessary links between potential gaps of the plot.
- Dance and music form an integral part in a performance of the play as each movement of a character-entry, exit or otherwise is marked by suitable dance.
- Interspersed with prose-dialogues, the plays are notable for their lyrico-rhythmic appeal with powerful poetry .in the lyrics.

3.7.2.3 Drums, Dances, Music and Masks

All *Ankiya Nat* performances begin with an elaborate ritual of drumming, songs and dances commencing at the *agni-gada* (archway of lights) constructed at the entry point of the actual space for performance, opposite the sanctum. At last, the Sutradhara makes a spectacular entrance from behind a curtain at the archway. “A stately dance ensues during which he offers his humble respects to Krishna before the *Manikuta*. Scenes of conflict between the forces of good and evil highlight an evening of *Ankiya Nat*. Brief songs and dances close the performance in the wee hours of the morning. The description given above pertains to the performance of the dramas within the confines of the *Namghar*.”⁵¹ The *Ankiya Nat* in present times has moved to the proscenium stage and other public places as well. Although the same (elaborate) rituals are followed, certain changes have to be incorporated in the stage-version of the plays in order to adjust to a different space and audience. The content is tried not to be tampered with. In this context, it is quite interesting to note that in the medieval times, many plays were, in fact, open-air performances converting the space to a sacred one with all religio-ritual paraphernalia. Sankaradeva’s first theatrical performance, the legendary *Cihna Yatra*, is believed to be an open performance in an instantly built *Namghar*.

3.8 Components of Performances in a Sattra

Richard Schechner views “performance is an inclusive term. Theatre is only one mode on a continuum that reaches from the ritualisation”⁵²... through performance in everyday life- greetings, emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on-through to play sports, theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude. He further writes, “...these arrangements foster celebratory and ceremonial feelings.”⁵³ He quotes Goffman, “[there is] an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community’ in those spaces where

‘reality if being performed.’⁵⁴ He says more than elsewhere, these places promote social solidarity: one had a religion, roots for a team and goes to the theatre for essentially the same reason

A couple of components as illustrated by Schechner in his *Performance Theory*, can be appropriately drawn here to, identify performance elements of Sattriya Performance inside its place of origin here and keep the same parameters for understanding of the Sattriya Performance on the proscenium stage.

The elements are:

1. Performance Space
2. Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance
3. Performance Rhythms: Orchestrated movements and sounds
4. Transformances
5. Rehearsal Procedures
6. Rasa-aesthetics
7. Ritualising the aesthetic drama
8. Sequences: These direct the sequence which can be re-ordered; the individual movements making up the sequence may become exaggerated; certain movements within the sequence may be repeated more than they would normally be; the sequence may be broken off altogether by the introduction of irrelevant activities, and resumed later. This could be called fragmentation; Movements may be both exaggerated and repeated; Individual movements within the sequence may never be completed and this incomplete element may be repeated many times.

All these elements are found in Sattriya. From the foregone discussions, it appears that the Sattras in entirety presents a huge canvas of performance or performance traditions.

3.8.1 Elements of Sattriya in a Sattra: Various Dances in the Sattriya Dance

The dances of Sankaradeva’s school as it stands today could perhaps be summarised (for the sake of understanding) into three groups according to the *Natyashastra*: -

1. *Nrtta*
2. *Nrtya*
3. *Natya*

The only difference is that they are not to be understood as separate performance structures but are more organic in nature i.e. the *Nrtta* and the *Nrtya* are individual elements in themselves and can be individual dance numbers with their own respective grammars and they also they form a larger composite towards the *Natya* (in this case *Ankiya Nat*).

The larger repertory of Sattriya dances as practiced within the Sattria may also be classified in the following manner:

1. *Nrtta*: Dances performed outside the dramatic performances which again are constituted of various sections with an imbueit repertoire combining *Nrtta* and *Nrtya* elements: -

- *Nadu Bhangi*: *Ramdani (Nrtta)* and *Geetar Nac (Nrtya)*
- *Jhumura*: *Ramdani (Nrtta)*, *Geetar Nac (Nrtya)* and *Mela Nac (Nrtta)*
- *Behar*: *Ramdani (Nrtta)* and *Geetar Nac (Nrtya)*
- *Cali*: *Ramdani (Nrtta)*, *Geetar Nac (Nrtya)* and *Mela Nac (Nrtta)*
- *Rajaghariya Cali*: *Ramdani (Nrtta)*, *Geetar Nac (Nrtya)* and *Mela Nac (Nrtta)*. This dance was specifically devised to perform at the royal court of the Ahom king when he invited the Sattria monks to perform in his court. Since *Cali* was a ritual dance, they could not have performed it outside the *Namghar* so they designed and choreographed a unique dance to be performed in front of the king which had all elements of *Cali* but appropriated to the requirement of an urban audience then.
- *Oja-Pali*: This is a combination of a series of sections having all the above elements.

2. *Nrtya*: Dances performed in the dramatic representations: -

- *Gayan-Bayan*: Dances (in series) by the group of singers and percussionists or the *purvaranga* orchestra
- *Sutradhari Nac*: Dance of the *Sutradhar* (narrator)
- *Gosain-Nac* or *Gosain Bhangi*: Dances of Krishna or Rama.
- *Gopi Nac* or *Gopi Bhangi*: Dance of the *Gopis* (cowherdesses)
- *Rasar Nac*: Dance of Krishna and the *Gopis* in the enactment of the *rasalila*

- *Pravesar Nac*: Dance during the entrance
- *Prasthanar Nac*: Dance during the exit
- *Calanar Nac*: Dances for movement from one place to another (in the theatre arena i.e. the *Namghar*)
- *Yuddhar Nac* : War Dances
- *Kharmanar Nac*: Dance at the closure of an *Ankiya Nat* in which the ‘dramatis personae dance together to the *mukti-mangala* or the closing benedictory’.

Natya, of course refers to *Ankiya Nat*, discussed in detail earlier. (Personal Communication with P.J. Mahanta on 15 May 2012)

As shown above, a modern day Sattriya dance performance invariably has in its repertory dances from both these groups. The former is an intricate pure dance style consisting of grammatical and stylized movements and gestures outside the framework of drama i.e. *Ankiya Nat*. The latter being parts of drama or dances of “dramatic representations which are suggestive and interpretative with every movement and gesture invested with meaning”⁵⁵ contributing to the intense effectuality of a play.

The first three numbers of the first category viz. *nadu bhangi*, *jhumura* and *behar*, were originally distinct parts of Madhavadeva’s plays, which later on came to be performed outside the dramatic context in the Sattria institution and became independent numbers to be performed on various ritual concerts. The Sattria circles distinguish the dances of the *Sutradhara*, Krishna or Rama and the *Gopis* from the other varieties employed in the dramatic representation. These dances known respectively as *Sutra-bhangi* (*Sutradharar Nac*), *Krishna-bhangi* (*Gosai-pravesar Nac*) and *Gopi-bhangi* (*Gopi-pravesar Nac*) possess a tone superior to other dance elements.

[Note: Since the *Krishna-bhangi* and the *Gopi-bhangi* dances are performed at the time of the entry (*pravesa*) of the characters into the stage, they are also referred to as *Gosai-pravesar Nac* and *Gopi-pravesar Nac* respectively]. They also follow an elaborate scheme of movements and gestures and a complicated choreography and occupy each a sufficient amount of time.

3.8.2 The *Ora*

Any dance form begins with an initial standing position. This occupies a very important position in all Indian classical dance traditions and is known as *sthana*. In Sattriya Dance it plays a far more important role, known as '*Ora*', symbolising the 'gender' orientation of the Dance form. Since it emerged from theatre i.e. the *Ankiya Bhaona* having male as well as female characters, the basic *sthana* or '*Ora*' for each of them happens to be gendered with two types: -

1. *Purusha Ora* (the masculine)
2. *Prakriti Ora* (the feminine)

3.8.3 A Brief Note on the some of the Sattriya Dances

All the dance numbers in Sattriya, ritual performance have a special meaning and reason, a separate grammar in which they progress, a designated time, a spatial layout which symbolises the emotions, sentiments, *bhava*, *rasa* and the age of the *bhakat* for why the ritual is performed. We shall take a look at some of the numbers in this section (which throws some light on the complexities involved with performing each and every dance number inside a Sattria)

“Sattriya Nritya continued through the centuries to maintain within its forms the classical exactitude and intricate detail that marks ancient art forms. One positive outcome of Sattriya Nritya’s strict adherence to the principles of the Sattras has been this ability to maintain its pure forms with its distinct style. As the art of music was cultivated with religious zeal and reverence, it had little chance of being debased by novices. The Sattras of all denominations maintain a regular band of vocal musicians headed by an adept, known as *gayan* and a party of instrumental players, the percussionists in particular, headed by a *bayan*. These two parties generally combine together in all musical performances.”⁵⁶

***Dhemalir Nac* (Dances of the Preliminaries)**

The *dhemalis* precede a dramatic performance, include movements with a complicated foot-work. It is primarily an initiation piece with heavy percussion. An interesting feature of these preliminary dances is what is known as *Ariya Nac* (or torch dance), in which men dance with light lamps. The orchestra makes a 'spectacular' ensemble creating

intense feeling of devotion in the audience. Some of the numbers from its repertoire have again been taken and recontextualised to be performed on proscenium stage in the present day. (Personal conversation with Ghanakanta Bora, P.J. Mahanta and Bhabanada Barbayan, please refer to the interview with Bhabananda Barbayan, Appendix IV)

Sutra-bhangi or Sutradharar/Sutradhari Nac

The *Sutradhari Nac* is the dance of the narrator where he initiates and gives a narrative of a performance mostly at the opening of the *Ankiya Bhaona*. “A dramatic performance opens with the Sutradhara entering the stage under the cover of a curtain.”⁵⁷ “The Sutradhara is opens the play in a bowing posture with his head, hands up to the elbows, and knees fixed to the ground”⁵⁸ which is known as the *jin-thak* or the salutation to the Divine and the devotees in the *Namghar*. The Sutradhar slowly rises to stand while the musicians gently start playing upon their instruments. As the play progresses, the pace of the performance i.e. that *Sutradhar’s* and the musician’s pace increases. “The performance of the dance is divided in some quarters into two parts, the first and the gentle part being called *saru-bhangi* (minor postures) and the last and vigorous part, *bar-bhangi* (major postures). This distinction of major and minor postures is however not made in leading Sattras like Kamalabari.”⁵⁹ The dancer goes round the rectangular ritual space i.e. the *Namghar* three times, with his hands open. This is beginning of the play. While singing the *nandi-git* or the *bhatima* he has to act through his *hastamudras* or the gestures of his hands. (Personal conversation with Ghanakanta Bora, P.J. Mahanta and Bhabanada Barbayan, please refer to the interview with Bhabanadan Barbayan, Appendix IV)

Krishna-bhangi or Gosai-pravesar Nac

“*Gosai-pravesar Nac* means the Dance of the Entry (*pravesa*) of the Lord. As the *pravesa-gita* is sung, Krishna (or Rama) enters the stage in the company of such retinue as are required by the drama, with dancing movements.”⁶⁰ This dance is to be performed with a “pleasant agility”. There is a limited use of the *hastamudras* but Krishna’s characteristic ‘hand gesture’, showing the “playing of His flute”, is integral and unique. “It is represented by the placing of two *Kartarimukha* hands (according to the *Abhinaya Darpana*) in a line facing opposite directions as it is done in the Kathakali style, and not by the placing of two *Mrgasirsa* hands as in *Bharata Natya* of Tanjore, or by the placing of *Sandamsa* hands as in the Manipuri style.”⁶¹

Gopi-bhangi or Gopi-pravesar Nac

This is the dance of the “milkmaids’ of the land of *Vraja*. This is also performed to play the role of Yasoda (Krishna’s mother) and other female characters. This number is characterized by subtle but repetitive circular movements. (Personal conversation with Ghanakanta Bora, P.J. Mahanta and Bhabanada Barbayan, please refer to the interview with Bhabanadan Barbayan, Appendix IV)

Cali Nac

“*Cali Nac*, is the dance resembling ‘*Cali*’ or “grace and beauty in the ‘spreading out of tail of a peacock or similar bird’.”⁶² Bargits from the dramas representing emotions and sentiments of women are presented in this dance number. The popular belief is that the word ‘*Cali*’ could have been derived from the “*Natya* term for a kind of footwork known as *pada-carika* or *cari* meant for movement of feet in the ancient treatise which however appears to be farfetched. The origin of *Cali* is thus rather obscure.”⁶³

There are various types of *Cali Nac* such as the *Rojagariya Cali*- according to the oral narrative, the Ahom King had invited the monks from the *sattras* to perform at the court. But *Cali* being a ritual dance, could not have been performed outside the *Namghar* at the same time, it was necessary to oblige the king so the necessary changes were made to the *Cali* number and was made presentable for a much more secular audience outside the *namghar*. This was the first time in the recorded history that the ritual performance was appropriated for a ‘secular audience’. Other types of *Cali* are “*Natuwa Nac* or *Cali Nac*, a dance performed by young monks, dressed as women as in *Gopi-bhangi* which can sometimes be separated from the body of a dramatic representation and danced independently on special occasions.”⁶⁴ I was told that in some of the *Sattras* of Majuli, as many as 12 different types of *Natuwa Nac* exist with a variation in their rhythms. (Personal conversation with Ghanakanta Bora, P.J. Mahanta and Bhabanada Barbayan, please refer to the interview with Bhabanadan Barbayan, Appendix IV)

It is important to mention that the whole range of *Sattriya* dances requires,

“an extraordinary flexibility of the body with soft footedness and a springing of the body requiring a tremendous control and resilience

on the body. To this effect the exponents in the Sattrā, through the years of pursuit evolved an oral grammar subjecting the monks who dance this style have to undergo a thorough training of the limbs through difficult physical exercises called ‘*mati-akhara*’, ‘ground rehearsals’, which may be compared to similar exercises in the Kathakali (*sadhakam*) and other schools and the prescription of them in the *Natyasastra*.⁶⁵

Ghanakanta Bora thinks that these *mati-akharas* or the ground exercises which number upto around 64 were evolved locally as they have vernacular terminologies.

Jhumura

“In some Sattras like Kamalabari, there are a number of dances, *Jhumura*, performed by boy monks in dresses. The songs for the performances are taken from Madhavadeva’s *jhumuras* and a few from Sankaradeva’s plays and from among the Bargits.”⁶⁶

Rasar Nac

“There is one peculiarity in the rasa dances of Assam in that Radha does not play the predominating role among the dancing *Gopis* and does not share the centre of the dancing circle with Krishna. Some Sattras like Auniati and Dakhinpat have their own plays on the subject written by some Superiors of their own.”⁶⁷ The origin of this dance is said to be the *Keli-Gopala* play of Sankaradeva.

Yuddhar Nac

This number is the “representations of fights between hero and hero or group and group with such accessories as clubs and bows (a type that produces a knocking sound as the shooting of the arrows is acted) have a strikingly spectacular appeal, being characterized by a number of swift, revolving and to-and-fro movements.”⁶⁸ Mythical characters such as Narakasura, Mura, Taraka, Marica and other demons and demonesses etc. who have no dialogue or verbal narrative in the performance, perform such a dance.

3.9 A Distinct System of Melody and Rhythm

Like other Indian classical dances, Sattriya Dance also follows some “traditional principles” One can say that these “contain the grammar of the performance pattern with mathematical precision in terms of melodic and rhythmic structure. A distinct system of melody and rhythm has given this tradition a separate entity. Sattriya dance is embellished within a unique *Raga* and *Tala* pattern”⁶⁹ set to a large corpus of compositions of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. *Tala* (time beat) is generally maintained by instrumental play of *khol* (drums) and cymbals. *Talas* employed in singing the ragas include: -

1. *Yati*
2. *Bar-yati*
3. *Saru-yati*
4. *Man-Yati*
5. *Ektala*
6. *Paritala*
7. *Kharman*
8. *Rupaka*
9. *Domani*

“The *talas* mentioned above are in common use. Besides these, there are a few more varieties of *tala* prevalent in different Sattras. Researchers of Sankarite music have pointed out as many as 39 varieties of *tala* prevalent in the Vaisnavite monasteries of Assam out of which about 24 *talas* are in use at present.”⁷⁰

3.10 The Hand Gestures or *Hastas*

“Various hand poses or *hastas* are used by the dancer, in the Sattriya dance, to express the objects and emotions. The *hastas* are classified as *samyuta*, *asamyuta* and *nritya hastas*.”⁷¹ According to almost all old Indian treatises on dance like the *Natyasastra*, *Abhinaya-Darpana* and the *Srihastamuktavali*, the hand, for different gestures, is divided into three broad categories, namely: -

1. *Asamyuta Hasta* (Single Hand)
2. *Samyuta Hasta* (Joined Hands)
3. *Nritya Hasta* (Dancing Hands)

“*Pataka* (banner), *padmakosha* (lotus bud), *ardha chandra* (half moon), *sarpa sirah* (snake’s hood) and *bhramara* (black bee) are some examples of *asamyuta hastas* where

only one hand is used to give the expression. Examples of *samyuta hastas* are *kapota* (pigeon), *anjali*, *swastika* and *marala* (swan).⁷² Besides the *hastas* bearing similarity with those prescribed in the ancient treatises, the Sattriya tradition of dance (and treatise too) employs several other *hastas* with vernacular names which are derived from local cultural expressions.

3.11 Music

The Sattriya dances are attuned to a distinct type of music consisting of *ragas* and *talas* (which are different from that of the Hindustani Classical Music or the Carnatic Music, the two main streams of Indian Classical Music), the main instruments being the *Khol* and cymbal. “Although in earlier days stringed instruments like *Sarengdar* were used. There are more than 40 *ragas* in Sattriya music and about 80 more *ragas* called *Bandha ragas* that came into use afterwards. Likewise about 42 *talas* are present in Sattriya music.”⁷³

3.12 Training and Technique

The basic exercises to impart training in Sattriya, are known as ‘*Mati-Akhara*’ (*Mati*: ground; *Akhara*: exercise). These are also as a basic dance unit in the *Nritya* part of Sattriya Dance. “Most of these (similar with yogic feats) are practised to make the body flexible. Some peculiarities associated with the dance-style are also maintained, which the trainee should strictly adhere to. It is safe to say that this dance style adheres to the principles from the treatises like Bharata’s *Natyasastra*, Nandikeswara’s *Abhinayadarpana*, Sarangdeva’s *Sangita Ratnakara*, and Subhankara’s *Srihastamuktavali* etc.”⁷⁴ which draw the theoretical base of the Indian Classical Dance, along with the principles and techniques gleaned from these texts, it has also introduced some nuances of its own. Drama and dance are thus inseparably linked and in a complete (total) dramatic presentation, there is a generous sprinkling of dances. In the dramas composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, all major characters are made to dance. The dance technique used in his dramas soon became a distinctive style - the Sattriya - capable of holding its own alongside the other classical dance forms of India.

3.13 Summarising the Performance inside the Prayer hall especially on the final day of the *tithi*

- Sattriya dance recital begins with Vandana, followed by a *sloka* or *Ghosa* paying obeisance to Rama in *Rama-Vandana* and Krishna in *Krishna-Vandana*.
- Then it moves to *Ramdani*, the *suddha Nrta* part, items like *Cali*, *Jhumura*, *Nadubhangi*, *Behar* etc, set to intricate beats with rhythmic variation. Sometime *swaras* are also depicted here in various patterns with the rhythm maintained by playing *khol* and *tal* (cymbal).
- After the *Suddha Nac* (pure dance), the tempo of the performance goes down from fast to slow. Now the lyrical aspect is emphasized in *Gitar-Nac*. As the name suggests, the dancer interprets the *sabd*s of the *gita*s. With the help of *Sabda Sanchari* a dancer interpretes some stories.
- The Abhinaya piece comes with the *Gitar-Nac*. These dance pieces are developed from the theme of dramatic representations of Sankaradeva and the other Saint-Poets, like *Parijata-Harana*, *Rukmini-Harana*, *Keli-Gopala* etc. These items are called *Abhinaya Pada* or *Natar Nac*. The last component of the Sattriya repertoire is the *Mela Nac*. ‘*Mela*’ is ‘open’, suggesting the *vistara* (elaboration) of *nritta* or pure dance. There is the use of vigorous *Mati-Akharas* which is the ornamental part of this item. The repertoire or the sequence of the items ends with the *Mela Nac* with a *sloka* or sometimes with a *bhatima*, vigorous dance movements coming down to a slow, soft conclusion in *Bhakti* and prostrating before the audience.
- *Ankiya Nat*: The last performance of the celebration during the *tithis* is the *Ankiya Nat* which culminates the entire ritual process. The *Ankiya Nat* is selected in a roster i.e. on Sankardeva’s *tithi*, a play written by him is performed and the next year it is a different play and there by a particular play’s turn to be performed comes every six year (Sankardeva wrote six plays). The same goes for Madhavdeva’s *tithi* too. (Participant Observation, Personal Communication with Ghanakanta Bora, Bhabananda Barbayan and P.J. Mahanta)

Note: The section on the Sattriya Nritya is not representative of the intricacies that all the dance numbers in Sattriya Dance hold, ritually and grammatically. This was just to give an idea on the complication involved each dance form in its ‘sacred space’ as when these

numbers reach the proscenium stage, they get standardized and lose their individual meaning. This shall be dealt with in detail in Chapter 4.

3.14 Bhakti: The Only Aim of these Cultural Creations

Dance has been described as a ‘suggestive interpretation of man in different moods, accompanied by *bhava*, *raga* and *tala* - all directed to create *rasa* or emotion in the spectators who are *rasikas* (connoisseurs).’ For Sankaradeva, this *rasa* was *bhakti* in essence and the dance was mainly a medium in spite of being an aesthetically devised form of art in itself, adopted by him to arouse devotion to the Lord in the minds of the people. In the context of Indian performance arena, *rasa* can be defined as an emotion inspired in an audience by a performer. They were first said to be described by Bharata Muni in the *Natyasastra*. “*Rasas* are created by *bhavas*: the gestures and facial expressions of the actors. Expressing *Rasa* in classical Indian dance form is referred to as *Rasa-abhinaya*.”⁷⁵ The *Natyasastra* carefully delineates the *bhavas* used to create each *rasa* and presents a large discourse, bring in series of factors of cause and effect relationship in this context. In Indian drama and literature, the term '*bhava*' or the state of mind and *rasa* refer to the emotional flavors/essence crafted into the work by the writer and relished by a 'sensitive spectator' i.e. the audience. The theory of *rasas* forms the aesthetic underpinning of all Indian classical dance and theatre, which are Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Manipuri, Kudiattam, Kathakali and Sattriya.

Bharata Muni enunciated the eight *Rasas* in the *Natyasastra*, written during the period between 200 BC and 200 AD. (*Natyasastra* xvii) Each *rasa*, according to it, has a presiding deity and a specific colour.

“There are 4 pairs of *rasas*. For instance, *Hasya* arises out of *Sringara*. The aura of a frightened person is black, and the aura of an angry person is red. Bharata Muni established the following.

- *Shringara Rasa* (Love, Attractiveness. Presiding deity: Vishnu. Colour: green)
- *Hasya Rasa* (Laughter, Mirth, Comedy. Presiding deity: Ganesha. Colour: white)
- *Raudra Rasa* (Fury. Presiding deity: Rudra. Colour: red)
- *Karuna Rasa* (Compassion, Tragedy. Presiding deity: Yama. Colour: dove coloured)

- *Bibhatsa Rasa* (Disgust, Aversion. Presiding deity: Shiva. Colour: blue)
- *Bhayanaka Rasa* (Horror, Terror. Presiding deity: Kala. Colour: black)
- *Vir Rasa* (Heroic mood. Presiding deity: Indra. Colour: wheatish brown)
- *Adbhuta Rasa* (Wonder, Amazement. Presiding deity: Brahma. Colour: yellow)⁷⁶

3.14.1 Navarasa

“As the tradition of *alamkara-shastra* developed from the sixth through tenth centuries CE, a ninth rasa was contentiously endorsed by certain scholars; this rasa was only widely accepted after an extended philosophical and aesthetic theorization by Abhinavagupta and others.”⁷⁷ Subsequently, the nine *rasas* were accepted by the majority of the aestheticians (*alamkarikas*), and the expression *Navarasa* (the nine rasas), could come into vogue.

- *Santa Rasa* (Peace or tranquility. Presiding deity: Vishnu. Colour: white)

In addition to the nine Rasas, two more appeared later (esp. in literature): Additional *rasas*:

- *Vatsalya Rasa* (Parental Love)
- *Bhakti Rasa* (Spiritual Devotion)

Bhakti refers to religious devotion of a devotee in the worship of the divine. Acharya Abhinavagupta mentions *Bhakti* in his commentary on the *Natyashastra*, as an important accessory sentiment of the *Santa Rasa*, which he strove with great effort to establish. However, just as *Santa* slowly attained a state of primacy that it was considered the *Rasa* of *Rasas*, *Bhakti* also soon began to loom large and despite the lukewarmness of the great run of *alamkarikas*, had the service of some distinguished advocates, including Tyagaraja. It is the Bhagavata that gave the great impetus to the study of *Bhakti* from an increasingly aesthetic point of view. (Rangacharya 2010: 53-63)

And this is the most important element in all the creative expressions in a Sattrā. Needless to say, all these *rasas* are found in the Sattriya Dance for except *thesringara rasa*. It is *Bhakti* towards the divine and towards the gurus i.e. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, i.e. along with *vatsalya* in the form of motherly love of the women

characters in the Ankiya Nats, which are the guiding sentiment and emotion which has led to the evolution, development and formation of his huge repository of dances, music, literature and other visual arts.

3.15 Discussion

Sattriya dance began from the performance spectrum of '*Ankiya Nat*' and has journeyed to develop into a very stylized form. Even though the 'Sattriya' traditions (just like any other tradition) have been under constant change over a passage of time, to be able to deliberate on the recent changes (discussed in Chapter 4), it is necessary to look at the Sattriya performance, how it stands today as a ritual in its original context i.e. in its place of nurture and growth- the Sattras of Majuli. The first diagram i.e. of the 'Static Model representing the dynamic equilibrium between subsystems' (Fig. 2) by David Clarke helps us see things in this perspective as it shows a 'static' relationship between the various components of the Sattriya culture. The various subsystems which are the Social, Religious, Psychological, Economic and Material Culture are in this case intertwined as in the case with all other cultures. The 'social' subsystem i.e. the 'heirarchical network of inferred personal relationships, including kinship and land status' refers to the hierarchy of the rank order in the Sattras between the inmates like that of the Sattradhikar, Dekha Adhikar, other functionaries and teachers, the bhakats and the sisyas (devotees from outside the Sattras). The 'religious' subsystem of course refers to the neo-Vaishnavism that the above functionaries follow as a doctrine which includes a 'sequence of rituals'. Its structure consists of 'mutually adjusted beliefs relating to the super-natural, as expressed in a body of doctrines and a sequence relating to the super-natural, as expressed in a body of doctrine... which together interpret the environment to the 'society' in terms of its own percepta'. The 'psychological' subsystem which constitutes the conscious and the sub-conscious minds of the individuals forming this society is based on the "beliefs induced upon [them] ... by their culture, their environment and their language"⁷⁸, essentially constructing a 'system of comparative values' amidst the existing cultural ecology. Now, it is extremely difficult to separate these three subsystems in any society. These three put together form the cultural psyche of the people living it. Similarly even in this case, the Sattriya culture is embedded in the psyche of the people living it which not only include the celibate monks living in the monasteries but also the lay disciples or the followers of these Sattras. All these three systems are also backed by two more components which are the economic subsystem

and the technology. The Sattras came under the patronage of the *Ahom* kings and were donated huge agricultural land areas which essentially run into a hundreds of hectares. Almost all Sattras in Majuli have these huge agricultural pieces of land which they give to the nearby farming communities on a concept called *aadi* where these farmers give half the cultivation to the Sattras as a part of the land revenue for working on the farms and take half of it themselves as their personal cultivation. Paddy is the main produce but a few varieties of lentils and spices are also cultivated along with vegetables and fruits. Another source of protein is fish which is an integral part of the staple diet of the people in Majuli. The fish not only comes from the Brahmaputra river but also the local ponds known as *pukhuri* inside the Sattra compounds. The Brahmaputra valley is blessed with an extremely fertile land around it, leading it to primarily being organic farming. The main economy of the Sattras depend on these agricultural fields and the nearby residential villages that they own where the villagers have to give a certain amount to these Sattras as a house tax/land revenue. Of course, the introduction of the technology i.e. the introduction of tractors and other modern irrigation facilities have helped the growth of agriculture. Animal Husbandry and agriculture form the micro-economies of the Sattras which are traditionally and completely dependent on these sources. Internally, this produce was equally distributed amongst the inmates living in these monasteries. All these factors together contribute towards the construction of the cultural fabric of Majuli. The material culture subsystem of these Sattras which refers to the ‘patterned constellation of artefacts outlining the behavior patterns of the system as a whole and embody that system’s technology’⁷⁹ is also hugely dependent on the vegetation process around. The abundant availability of bamboo justifies the making of the unique bamboo masks used in the Ankiya Nat. Apart from the mythological characters that these masks and other accessories represent, they are the life size masks (they are not puppets) made by the monks of these monasteries as a part of their religious necessity to make them one of a kind in the world. The colours used on these masks are natural pigments and colours made from the flora around. The wood work and other artefacts such as manuscripts, the inks etc., made in these monasteries are made out of the local vegetation available. Similarly, the costumes are made of the local handloom found i.e. the *pat* (mulberry silk or silk made out of silkworms that grow on mulberry), *muga* (silk made out of silkworms that grow on *som* trees) or *eri* (silk made out of silkworms which feed on the castor oil plants) and cotton grown locally. In the conventional sense of it, Majuli is self-sufficient and had remained like this, isolated from the social-political-economic changes for a

very long time. However, no matter how clichéd it sounds, ‘globalisation’ that is the exposure to these new things and a larger outside world brought in a lot of changes in the Sattra system (discussed in detail in Chapter 4).

Another very important characteristic of the Sattra society (inside and outside its physical compound), is that it is woven together by the ‘sacred-profane’ dichotomy existing at all levels of physical and meta-physical existence. As Durkheim lists with a number of objects of symbolic of being “gods or spirits, a rock, a tree, a pebble” - meaning an object of devotion could be anything- in this case the *Bhagvata* placed on a *guruasana* in the *namghar*. Alongside he also says, ‘rites and rituals’ also bear the characteristic of sacredity. In a society there are there are people who carry out these ‘rites and rituals’ and they have a special position in a community structure. Just as in the Vatican, there are layers of hierarchy in the structure, the Pope being at the helm of things, in a Sattra the *Sattradhikar* is at the helm of things and the respective society followed by the *Deka Adhikar* and other functionaries are chosen and initiated (literally baptized) into their respective positions through rites and ceremonies. These rites and ceremonies help in creating the distance between the sacred and the profane that is all that is sacred like the object of devotion, the rites and rituals, the keepers of the aforementioned elements and the space compositely form the sacred. In this case- the *guruasana*, the Sattriya performances (instituting the tangible and the intangible), the Sattra functionaries and the *namghar*, all together form a composite of the sacred. The levels of ‘sacredity’ start diminishing as we move towards the *batcora* i.e. the entry/exit gate of the Sattra. This inapproachability of a lay disciple or the common man to such a place establishes the social and cultural hegemony in the Sattra system. Monasticism also enforces this control. Based on the logic that “men cannot belong to one except on the condition of leaving the other completely, they [the celibate monks] are exhorted to withdraw themselves completely from the profane world in order to lead an exclusive religious life.”⁸⁰ Monasticism backed by the rites and rituals forms a living structure for any religious life. In a Sattra too, the ‘sattriya performances’ support the unique monastic identity of the *bhakats*, thereby establishing their religious and intellectual hegemony in the Sattra society in Majuli. Another very important factor of this hierarchical system is that the Sattras initially had a very vernacular and internal system of education which primarily was limited to the knowledge of Sanskrit and other religious texts. Of course, all Sattra inmates were literate, but in accordance with the system of the Sattras. The

monks were not allowed to go outside and enroll themselves to schools and colleges for a long period as it would mean contact with the ‘profane’ world. This helped the Sattras to keep their traditions and heritage ‘safe’ and continuing for a long period of time.

As a result, the intangible heritage of the Sattras which includes performances of all kind—dance, instrument playing, oral traditions like the narratives (*carita path*, *kirtan*) all become a resource in this social structure to uphold the hierarchical places in the system. Unlike tangible objects, the intangible heritage is independent of limitations of the tangible. For example, the tangible needs help to be used to interpret meanings whereas, the intangible is ‘a medium of communication, a means of transmission of ideas and values’. Inside a namghar, the Sattriya performances are age bound i.e. the performers need to be of a certain age to perform a certain type of dance. For example, *jhumura* would always be performed by teenage *bhakats* whereas *sutradhari nac* or *gayan-bayan* is performed by the senior *bhakats*. Apart from the necessity of the performance that is the *jhumura* is a robust dance number, basically devoid of *bhav* (emotions) but is very energetic whereas *sutradhari nac* entails not only *bhav* but also is the narrative dance which threads all the performances, conveys its meanings and gives a narrative which cannot be done by young disciples. One has to be a much more senior person in terms of authority and understanding of, not only the philosophy but also, the practicality of various performances. *Gayan-bayan* on the other hand means duality of narrative and instrumentality (in this case percussion i.e. the *khol* and *tal* the cymbals). This is a group performance done by all senior monks offering their prayers to the divine. Theatrically, one can see the spatial arrangement of the monks while performing the ritual in (Fig. 16 a and b). (This is the most important thing that ‘collapses’ on a proscenium stage, but that shall be discussed in the later Chapters). All this is seen and observed by all the young *bhakats* ever since they are brought to the Sattras, so they grow up in this environment imbibing these manners, rules and etiquettes along with the decorum and dogmas (in the view of an onlooker independent of his/her religious orientation) present in the Sattras. The intangible heritage and the ritual form a dichotomy where the notion of their separate meanings fades. It is very difficult to say what a ‘heritage’ is and what more a ‘ritual’ is in a Sattras. Everything leads to a memory coming from the past followed by new innovations made in the present which again become a heritage memory for the next generation. However, the concept of the heritage or *sanskriti* (as it is commonly referred to by the Sattras people), along with the ritual does form a distinct

identity of the Sattra institutions and their monks. The relationship arises from the co-existence of these micro-systems such as the heritage, rituals, the space and its practitioners in a larger eco-system i.e. that of multiple Sattras in the river island Majuli which, even now (in current times) is comparatively untouched by the 'globalised' world, perhaps, due to its sheer physical unreachability for geographical reasons that is the geographical isolation for it being an island amidst a river with violent currents. These dynamics would however change with the change of space and time that shall be discussed in the next Chapter.

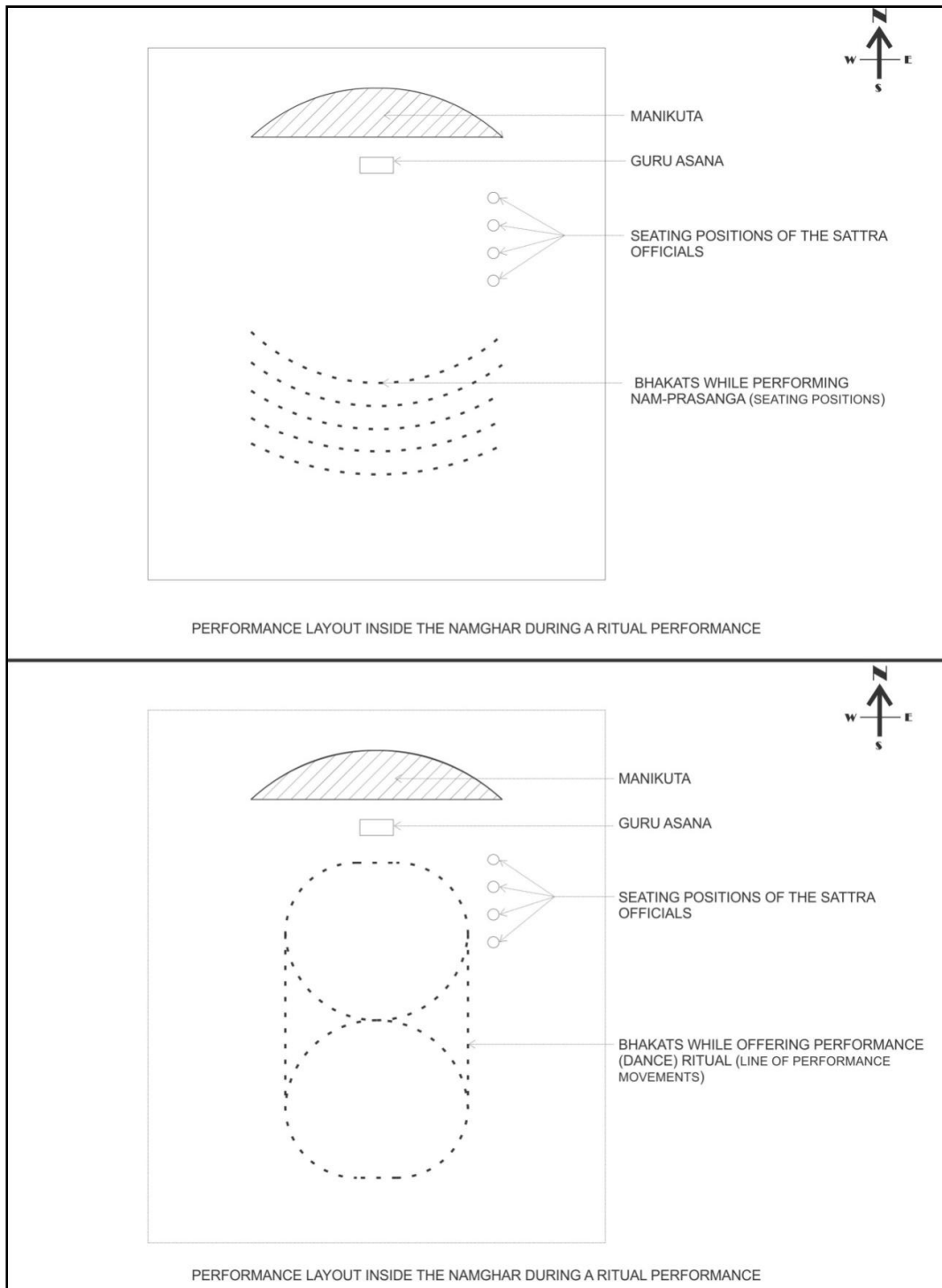


Fig. 16 A AND B



Fig. 17 FERRY- THE ONLY MODE OF TRANSPORT CONNECTING MAJULI WITH THE MAINLAND



Fig 18. RURAL *PATH* (ROAD) IN MAJULI WITH ENVELOPING GREEN



Fig 19. FISHING NET



Fig 20. A WET LAND NEAR KAMALABARI



Fig 21. DEORI LADIES AFTER A DAY'S SALE OF FISH IN THE LOCAL MARKET



Fig 22. HANDLOOM AT A NEARBY MISING VILLAGE NEAR UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 23. *JOTOR*, A TRADITIONAL SPINNING MACHINE BEING USED BY A DEORI LADY



Fig 24. DEORI LADIES WITH THEIR TRADITIONAL HANDLOOM



Fig 25. OUTSIDE A MISING KITCHEN



Fig 26. INSIDE A MISING KITCHEN



Fig 27. BANK OF MAJULI ISLAND FROM THE FERRY BACK TO NIMATIGHAT,
JORHAT



Fig 28. SOIL EROSION, MAJULI ISLAND

[Source: <http://ladyoftheloch.co.uk/the-forest-man-mon-11th-march-2013/> 21 MAY
2015]



Fig 29. *BATCORA*, UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 30. *HATI*, UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 31. *HATI*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 32. *SATTRADHIKAR'S BAHA*, UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 33. ENTRANCE TO THE *NAMGHAR*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 34. *MANIKUT* AND *GURUASANA* (IN FRONT OF THE *MANIKUT*), NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA

[NOTE: EXCUSE THE BLURRED IMAGE, AS I COULD NOT HAVE GONE NEARER]



Fig 35. INSIDE THE NAMGHAR DURING THE MORNING PRAYER SERVICE
DURING A TITHI

(Courtesy: Bhabananda Barbayan)



Fig 36. INSIDE THE NAMGHAR DURING THE AFTERNOON PRAYER SERVICE



Fig 37. AN OLD *BHAKAT*, UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 38. A BABY *BHAKAT*, UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Baburam Saikia)



Fig 39. INSIDE THE *NAMGHAR*, UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA BEFORE THE MORNING PRAYER
(Courtesy: Baburam Saikia)



Fig 40. FROM INSIDE THE *NAMGHAR*, UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA BEFORE THE MORNING PRAYER DURING SANKARDEVA'S *TITHI* IN 2013
(Courtesy: Bhabananda Barbayan)



Fig 41. JANARDAN DEV GOSWAMI, *SATTRADHIKAR* OF UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA INSIDE THE NAMGHAR IN HIS DESIGNATED PLACE DURING SANKARDEVA'S *TITHI* IN 2013



Fig 42. A FOREIGNER IN CONVERSATION WITH THE JANARDAN DEV GOSWAMI, *SATTRADHIKAR* OF UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Bhabananda Barbayan)



Fig 43. NARAYAN CHANDRA DEV GOSWAMI, *SATTRADHIKAR* OF NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA INSIDE HIS OFFICE



Fig 44. *BHAKATS* OFFERING SALUTATION TO THE *SATTRADHIKAR*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 45. SONARAM SARMA BURABHAKAT, KAMALABARI SATTRA, TITABOR
(The Sattradhikar was travelling when I went so he met me instead)



Fig 46. *BHAKAT* GETTING READY FOR ANKIYA NAT, UTTAR KAMALABAR
SATTRA



Fig 47. *BHAKAT* GETTING READY FOR ANKIYA NAT, UTTAR KAMALABAR
SATTRA
(Courtesy: Anthony Pappone)



Fig 48. A YOUNG *BHAKAT* WAITING FOR HIS TURN TO ENTER THE RITUAL PERFORMANCE SPACE DURING AN ANKIYA NAT

(Courtesy: Anthony Pappone)



Fig 49. *BHAKAT* WAITING FOR HIS TURN TO ENTER THE RITUAL PERFORMANCE SPACE DURING AN ANKIYA NAT, UTTAR KAMALABAR

SATTRA

(Courtesy: Anthony Pappone)



Fig 50. *ANKIYA NAT* PERFORMANCE IN A NAMGHAR
(Courtesy: Anthony Pappone)



Fig 51. *ANKIYA NAT* PERFORMANCE IN A NAMGHAR
(Courtesy: Anthony Pappone)



Fig 52. *ANKIYA NAT* PERFORMANCE IN A NAMGHAR
(Courtesy: Anthony Pappone)



Fig 53. A YOUNG *BHAKAT* POSES AFTER HIS PERFORMANCE IN AN *ANKIYA NAT*, UTTAR KAMALABAR SATTRA



Fig 54. *SUTRADHARI NAC*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Natun Kamalabari Sattra)



Fig 55. *TAL GHURUA NAC*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Natun Kamalabari Sattra)



Fig 56. *GAYAN-BAYAN*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Natun Kamalabari Sattra)



Fig 57. *NA-DHEMALI*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Natun Kamalabari Sattra)



Fig 58. *GHOSABAID*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Natun Kamalabari Sattra)



Fig 59. TWO *BAYANS* POSE AFTER THEIR PERFORMANCE, UTTAR
KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 60 AND 61. *JHUMURA NAC*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 62. *BEHAR NAC*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Natun Kamalabari Sattra)



Fig 63. *BHAKATS* POSE AFTER A *BEHAR NAC* PERFORMANCE



Fig 64. *CALI NAC*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Natun Kamalabari Sattra)



Fig 65. YOUNG *BHAKATS* REHEARSE AT NIGHT FOR A *CALI NAC* TO BE PERFORMED THE NEXT DAY, UTTAR KAMALABARI SATTRA
(Courtesy: Bhabananda Barbayan)



Fig 66. OLD *BHAKATS* OFFERING *NAM-PRASANGA*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 67. *BHAGAVATA PATH*, NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA



Fig 68. VARIOUS *HASTAS* USED IN SATTRIYA DANCE
(Courtesy: Mathias Coulange)



Fig 69 AND 70 *MAATI AKHORA* (FLOOR EXERCISES), UTTAR KAMALABARI
SATTRA

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