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**CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE SATTRAS OF NAGAON:  
A STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BARDOWA**

**A thesis submitted in part fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Vaisnavite monastery or Sattras as popularly known, is one of the central institutions that grew up in the late sixteenth century in the wake of the Bhakti Movement flourishing in Assam. These have attained popularity as institutions of culture and religion amongst the Vaisnava followers since then. Vaisnavism is an institutionalized religion and the Sattras are institutions leading to the continuance of Vaisnavism in the whole of Assam and its history and culture. In the present study emphasis is laid on analyzing the nature and function of these institutions basically focusing on rituals, economy and heritage also bringing the factors of social or community participation. These components are essential for the growth and development of any institution. And since the Sattras represent socio-economic, cultural and religious aspects of the Vaisnava faith, it is believed that a study of them will help in understanding its present status in the context of fast changing Assamese society. In recent times however, these long-established institutions have undergone considerable changes, and such changes have also wrought decadence in many of them. In the present work, it is observed how these institutions still manage to survive in an era of globalization and whether they could sustain with their traditional values. The study also emphasizes on the relations of power, ideological differences and ways of representation which are distinct in any institution that involves human. The Sattras are in no way exception to these questions. It involves the community and has an impact on the society as well. The present work is divided into seven chapters together with the Introduction and Conclusion. The present work has made a detailed analysis of some selected Sattras principally situated in the district of Nagaon in central Assam being the focus area of the present study. For the accomplishment of the present work, data and information were collected from the members of the Vaisnava community residing within the premises of a Sattras and the laity as well mostly from Nagaon district. As such the study involved an informal way of interviewing

individuals (both insiders and outsiders). The methodology on which the study is based induces a cultural history perspective emphasizing on the notions of representation, knowledge, practices and power with a collective and individual approach. The key terms used in this study are cultural history, memory, representation, heritage, ritual, economy, power, practice, knowledge, Sattras, Vaisnavism etc.



## DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that the thesis titled “Cultural History of the Sattras of Nagaon: A Study with Special Reference to Bardowa” submitted by me to Tezpur University in part fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Cultural Studies under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, is a result of my own study and research on the subject and that it has not been submitted to any other institution, including this University in any other form or published at any time before.

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All help received by her from various sources have been duly acknowledged.

No part of this thesis has been submitted elsewhere for award of any other degree.

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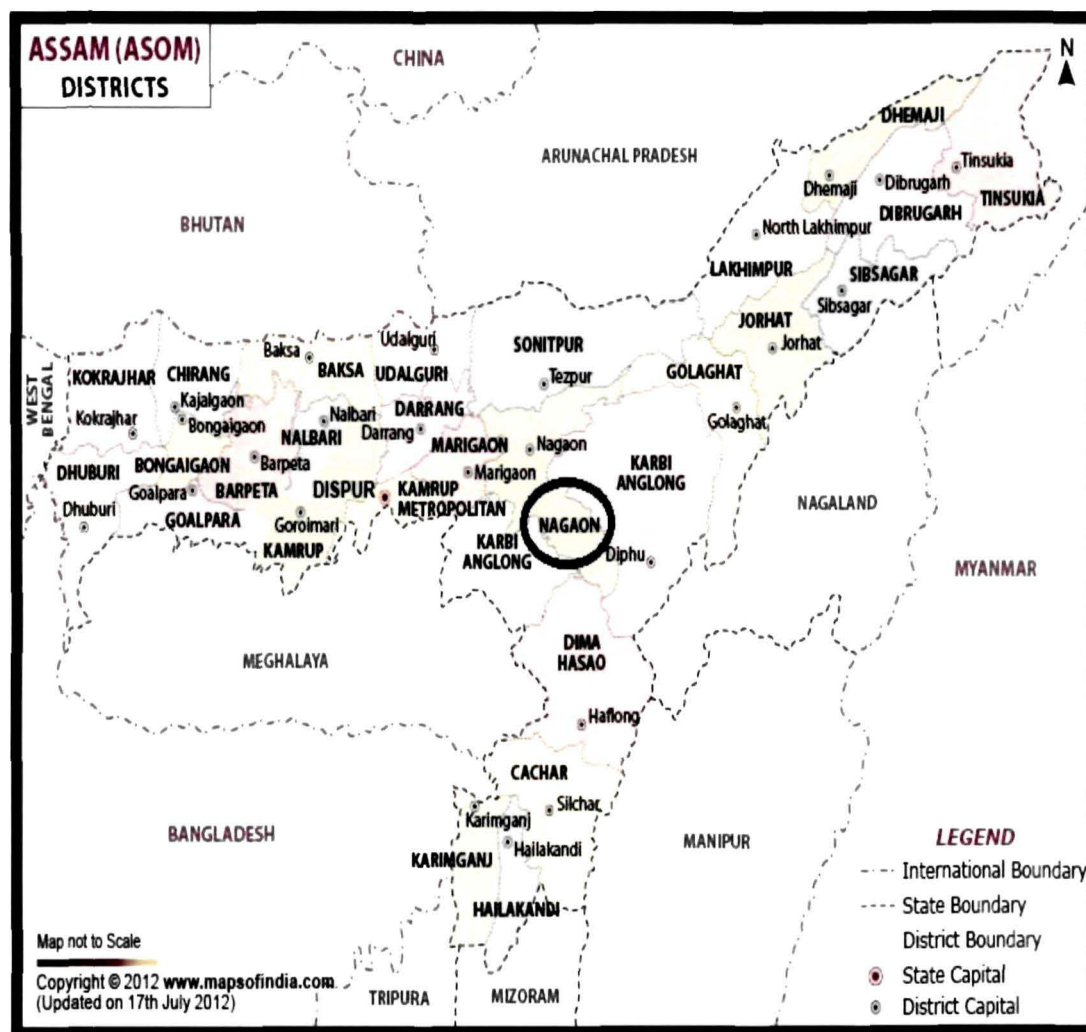


Figure: 1 - Map of Assam.

Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com).

NB. The study area is demarcated by a circle in the map.

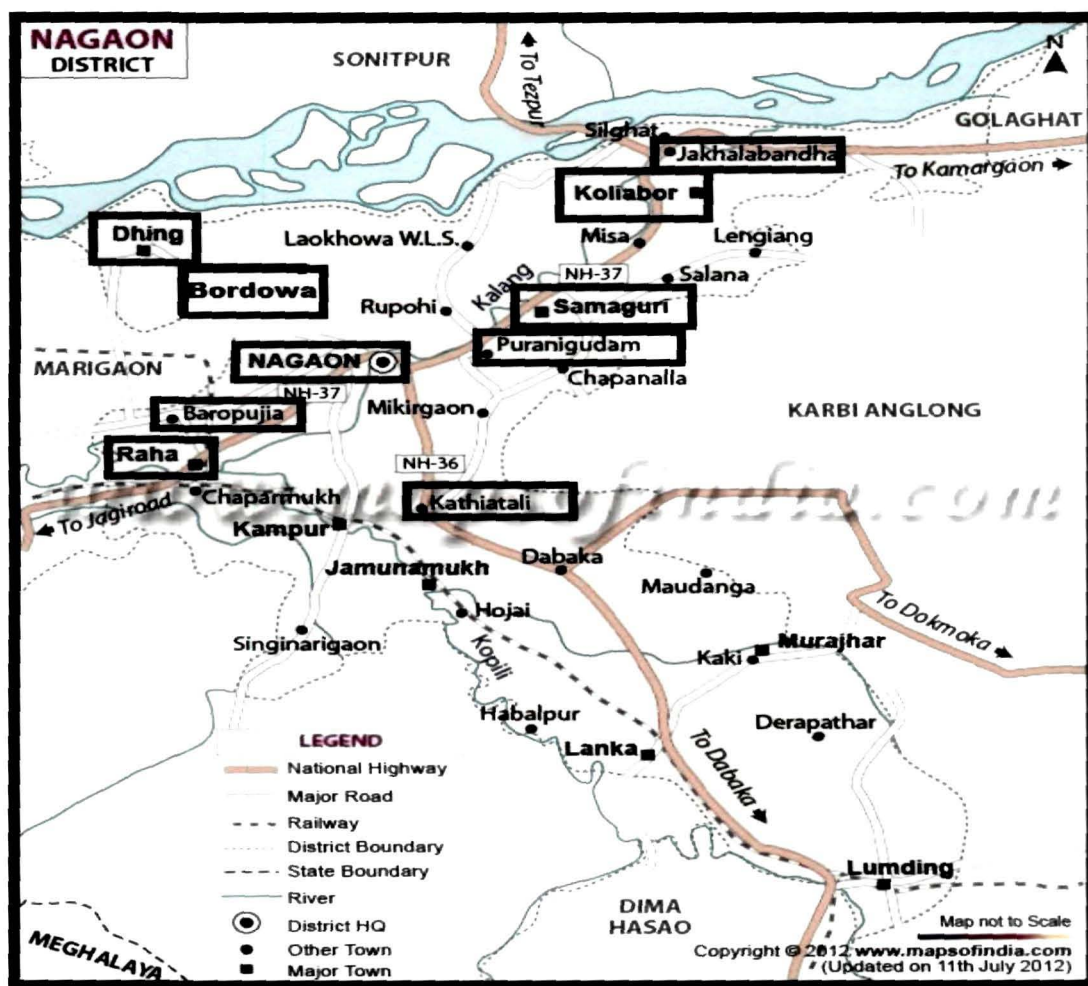


Figure: 2 - Map of Nagaon district.

Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com).

NB: The boxes marked in the map indicate the selected surveyed areas in the district.

## **A BRIEF PROFILE OF THE DISTRICT OF NAGAON:**

### **1.0. Historical Background:**

The present district of Nagaon is one of the historically famous districts in the state of Assam of north-east India. It became the easy target of the Burmese during their invasions in the state in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the year 1826, after the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo<sup>1</sup> this part of the province came under the British who made it a separate administrative unit in the year 1832. The British took some years to finally settle it down on the bank of the river *Kolong* and to declare Nagaon as a district headquarters in 1839. It gradually emerged as a town and later became a municipality in 1893. The district was earlier known as Nowgong which later changed into Nagaon (*Na* meaning new and *Gaon* as village in Assamese). Hence the name Nagaon stands for a 'new village'.

### **1.1. Organization of the District:**

Situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, the district is divided into three distinctive civil sub divisions, Nagaon, Hojai and Koliabor. There are around 7 towns in the district, Nagaon topping the list with a majority of population constituting both the rural and urban areas. It has around 10 revenue circles, 18 development blocks and 240 *grām* (village) panchayats. There are a total of 6 urban areas namely, Lumding, Hojai, Lanka, Dhing, Raha including Nagaon. Koliabor, a sub-divisional town of the district is situated at a distance of 48 kms. approximately to the east of Nagaon. This place is historically famous as initially it was the headquarters of the *Barphukans* during the *Ahom* rule and in the later period several battles were fought against the Muslim invaders here. Dhing is a small town located at a distance of 25 kms approximately, to the north west of Nagaon town. Under the Assam Panchayat Raj Act, 1959, Nagaon too has a panchayati-raj system at the rural level. It has a *Gaon Panchayat*, *Anchalik Panchayat* and *Mahakuma Parishad* at the village, block and the sub-divisional level respectively. These have

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<sup>1</sup> A peace treaty signed between the British and the Burmese which ended the first Anglo-Burmese war. It was signed on February 24.1826.

been instrumental in formulating plans for rural development of the district. There is also an urban statutory body i.e. the Municipality Board in Nagaon catering to the urban needs.

### **1.2. Geographic Features and Boundaries:**

Nagaon, a district centrally located in the state of Assam in North-East India, is estimated to be one of the largest districts in the state. It extends at a latitudinal stretch of 250-45' to 260 -45' North and 920 -33' -6" East longitude. It has covered a total geographical area of 3,831 sq. km approximately.<sup>2</sup> Mostly covered by thick forests and fertile lands, the mighty river Brahmaputra flows along the northern border of the district. Its major tributaries flowing through the district are the *Kapili* and *Kolong*. Kolong, the major tributary divides the district into Nagaon and Haiborgaon. Nagaon is bounded by the district of Sonitpur and the Brahmaputra in the North, West Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills in the south, East Karbi Anglong and the district of Golaghat in the east and the district of Marigaon to the west. The National Highways 36 and 37 intersect the district.

### **1.3. Demographic Profile:**

Nagaon has a population of a heterogeneous nature. According to 2011 census report, the total population of the district is 2823768 with sex ratio 962/1000. The density per square kilometer is 711. While the majority of the population in the district comprises Hindus (the Vaisnava community being a majority within it), there are several other groups belonging to different religious denominations. There is a sizeable number of illegal settlers migrating from the erstwhile East Pakistan and now Bangladesh, strewn mostly in Hojai, Kampur and Dhing circles of the district, who have been a major issue of concern for the original inhabitants. They have gained access to the district at different periods of time. The tribal population comprising communities like Tiwa, Bodo-Kachari, and Karbi has made a considerable presence in the district. Majority among them are Hindus, while some groups adopted Christianity.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Government of Assam, Land Utilization Statistics (2007-08), Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Guwahati, Assam.

#### **1.4. Religion and culture:**

Bardowa, the birth-place of the Vaisnava saint and reformer is situated in Nagaon. It has been attracting a quantitatively large number of the population and has become a major tourist spot in recent years. This may be another reason of housing a good number of Sattras- the seat of Vaisnava learning and cultural development which are scattered in almost whole of the district except Hojai<sup>3</sup>. In recent years it has become one of the culturally affluent districts of Assam centering round Vaisnava religion and heritage. However religious traditions belonging to other sects of Hinduism as well as Islam and Christianity have also sizeable number of followers in the district. There is a remarkable presence of the Assamese Sikh community in some areas like Chaparmukh and Lanka. Several other institutions born outside the ambit of Sattriya tradition which have grown prominence in the district recently are the Ek-Saran Bhâgavati Samaj, Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva Sangha, Krishnaguru Sewâshrama etc.

#### **1.5. Human resource development:**

The district is a semi-urban conglomerate of mainly an agricultural population. After independence development in the sector of education starting from the primary to higher education substantially increased in the district with the establishment of colleges in the urban as well as rural areas. Simultaneously schools for both secondary and primary education are there in all parts of the district to cater to the growing needs of the population. Schools and colleges at private initiatives have also been set up in different areas. While these educational institutions have been serving the purpose of spreading education, they are creating employment opportunities for the people in the district and are creating an environment for education and knowledge dissemination. There is no university so far to have been set up in the district and people mostly go for higher education to the universities in Guwahati, Tezpur and Dibrugarh. Preparations are afoot to start a university inscribed in the name of Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva, the great saint, preacher, poet and philosopher of medieval Assam under the aegis of Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva Sangha, a religious and socio-cultural organization of the state.

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<sup>3</sup> As per the survey, there is no evidence of any Sattras in Hojai division. The local inhabitants are mostly the Bengali-Hindus and minority Muslim population, as such I found more Hindu temples and mosques scattered in the area than any Vaisnava Sattras.

People inhabiting the rural areas of the district are mostly the farmers and cultivators making the optimum utilization of the human resource. Small scale business enterprises are gradually cropping up in the rural areas. However, influx of illegal immigrants and encroachment of lands have become a major issue in the district in recent years.

#### **1.6. Agriculture and economy:**

Economically considered to be rich, the district has fertile alluvial lands suitable for cultivation. According to the statistical record of 2007-08, the permanent pasture and other grazing land is estimated at 5966 area in hectare (equal to 10,000 sq.mts). The Muslim population is concentrating more on agriculture and land based activities rather than the indigenous Hindus. Apart from agriculture, cottage industries such as handloom and weaving, pottery, jute, cane and bamboo are developing at a rapid pace and have been validating a major boost to the market-economy. While a majority of the population is concentrated on agriculture mainly cultivation of rice, there are other sectors which have generated a wholesome economy. These include pisciculture, apiary, sericulture, tea cultivation, poultry farming etc. Moreover, almost every Assamese house-hold, particularly in the rural front of the district traditionally has handloom apparatus and is engaged largely in the art of weaving. Of late wood carving and wood-cut work have taken a place in the modern economy. This has engrossed into the export and import business replenishing the economy of the district.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Every community or institution has, in the anthropological sense, a culture. Culture principally is about ideas, values or attitudes as well as the normative or expectant rules of behavior. Culture is intricately connected to a society. The concept of culture as an institutional sphere producing meanings is based on a postulation that the social structures in a society are composed of a cluster of institutions devoted to specialized activities. These clusters most conventionally cater to the sphere of culture. The study of culture engages with the activities that takes place within these institutionally distinct spheres and relates to the meanings produced in them. "Culture is an independent variable that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces and this emphasis on the relative autonomy of culture entails a bracketing-out of wider, non-symbolic social relations" (Alexander 2003, 12-14). The concept of culture does not merely stand as a way of doing things and understanding as a patterned set of belief and practices, it also includes habits which are persistent through time. As such we may define culture as an institution conforming to the forms of thought, belief and actions to a pattern of familiarized repetition. In our present context of study, we define culture as an instituted force. The various cultural forms within its paradigm have a historical mode of existence and these are embedded in the social and economic apparatuses belonging to a group of people adhering to identical values, beliefs and practices, giving them a specific shape and relationality.

The realm of culture can never be separated from social or economic relations which finally make up the infrastructure of the institutions we are

referring to in this study. Culture hence, is given a particular shape by grounding its value in formal or informal institutions on one hand, while on the other it is conveyed as 'material' in the sense that it cannot be thought as disembodied set of ideas. In relation to this, Ann Swidler (2001, 82) puts forward the argument as, culture not being a process or results of symbolic behavior, but a set of rules which gets embedded in the regular practices. These rules are reproduced not as a result of people's direct knowledge on the set of rules. As a whole culture causes action and the cultural practices are the organized actions. This demonstrates the fact that "culture has to do with the schemata employed in practice at least as much as it has to do with 'representations *of or for* practice' " (Biermacki 1999, 75). This idea levels culture to be regularly in use rather than a being a repertoire of stored materials. The study will try to map the changing boundaries within which the discourses of culture have taken place, particularly paying attention to the significant mutation of culture in practice and representation taking distinctive form of cultural analysis.

A society is characterized by its own system of opinions, beliefs, attitudes, values, customs, institutions, material as well as other practical ways that it adopts. These systems are handed down from one generation to another and constitute a kind of accumulated experience which provides guidelines for the community and a base for its behaviour. And these systems are usually characterized as part of the tradition which a community follows. When the community develops, the culture too reaches a newer height. The character of the community and the role of the individuals involved with it depend on the social configurations, strength of their members as well as economic pursuits at large. And sometimes such,

A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized. The making of a community is always an exploration, for consciousness cannot precede creation, and there is no formula for unknown experience. A good community, a living culture, will, because of this, not only make room for but

actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need. We need to consider every attachment, every value, with our whole attention; for we do not know the future, we can never be certain of what may enrich it; we can only, now, listen to and consider whatever may be offered and take up what we can(Williams 1966, Reprint, 320-21).

The present study seeks attention to the traditional flagship institution of Assam known as the Sattrā, which has developed over the years giving a new shape to the cultural horizons and institutional features that the Sattrā reflects<sup>1</sup>. It not only fulfills the cultural aspirations of the community but has also been catering to the socio-economic and religious lives of the individuals in the Vaisnava community of Assam at large.

Institutions develop in a society to cater to the needs of the people in a collective way as well as that of the individuals. The intellectual growth of an individual depends on how one connects himself to the community and imbibes the values through such institutions. And these individuals with similar thoughts, values and ideas form a community. The community in the words of Ogburn and Nimkoff (1979, 247), is the total organised social life of a locality. Communities imply settlement in a single locale sharing a continuously evolving social norms, history and heritage. “Communities are imagined through a complex of institutions that guide and shape thought and behaviour” (Mgijima and Buthelezi 2006, 796). Even though the term community invokes a sense of homogeneity and continuity, we find individuals not considering themselves to be always homogenous. As such the institutions and their internal and external relationships keep changing constantly. The present study is informed by involving one such institution which is homogenous in nature but has constantly been in change since

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<sup>1</sup> The Sattras defined as institutions embodying a self-contained identity with symbolic norms and conditions of life have been elaborately discussed in Chapter 3 based on the premise of its genesis and development.

its inception. Durability or enduring relevance of an institution depends on a number of factors such as,

- a) Involvement of the community and public participation in the affairs of the institution is essential for its growth and development and in taking shape into an organized initiative. All the relations which develop within the structured paraphernalia of the institution rest on the basis of participation which is expected from the community in general. Direct or indirect involvement of the community is anticipated while seeking postulations from its socio-cultural reserves,
- b) Institutions determine economic performance. They provide incentives to expropriate the resources which already exist without leading them to stagnation and decline. The individuals connected with the institutions are the key actors whose performances determine the institutional changes. The management of the economy thus, lie at the base of such institutions. Here we understand the concept of institutions as a constructed means to analyse human behavior at the cost of transaction which takes place between the material objects of economic stature and the level of individual attributes. When combined, both transactions and human endeavors can affect the institutional growth. And this helps in determining the role played by both of them in the functioning of societies.
- c) The notion of power and knowledge is important in institutional growth and development. The power we discuss here is not the one we generally understand but is generated as a way of gathering knowledge through various performances, be it societal, political, cultural or economic. Knowledge in this context must relate to the power of performance. The relations of power in such institutions should be such that they cater to the

power of knowledge rather than the power of inheritance, space and identity,

- d) Another factor which helps in the longer durability of an institution is the religio-cultural edifice on which it develops. The Sattras represent religious philosophies of the saints who preached Vaisnavism in Assam, as well as pursuing various art forms. As such, a relation has developed between the various practices of art and religion in the Sattras. The pursuit of art integrated with the pursuit of religion is integral for the development of such institutions. The religious sentiments of the people are delivered through such forms of art like dance, music, drama etc. This connects the individuals and a constant interaction at different levels takes place through it. Religious rituals and customs therefore, convey a meaning and such meanings get reflected through the performances. The cultivation of varied forms of art as part of all cultural elements of the Sattras integrated with religious proceedings further helps in their sustenance.

The Sattras, as referred in our study are also leveled as religio-cultural institutions catering to diverse fields drawing an attachment with the people through various religious acts. Apart from being a socio-cultural institution, the Sattras also adhere to the religious sentiments, beliefs and values of the community. They cater to a religious system and religious attitudes shape the lives of the people involved with it. As such, these institutions also conform to certain rituals, rites and ceremonies attached with religious feelings, which are of a permanent nature. There grows a relationship between the individual thoughts and action and the institution. This relationship on the contrary helps in the growth and sustenance of such institutions. A connection is developed between the performer who enacts such performances and the performed acts. This involvement is not only physical but also spiritually connective one. Even if it is

understood that nothing attains permanence, it is deliberately through such religio-ritual relationship that the Sattras have been trying to interpret so far. Such a relationship helps to give these institutions a permanent stature to a considerable extent.

Moreover the religio-ritual continuum is important in the sense that these institutions are set by some rules and principles. The individuals are habituated by way of adherence to such rules which have a psychological effect on them and thereby acquire a temperament to engage in certain previously adopted forms of behavior. This particularly corresponds to the concept of habit, which is a key element in the understanding of rules which are embedded in the social life of an individual belonging to the Sattras as well as for the long term sustenance of such institutions. Walter Hamilton's definition of an institution as "a way of thought or action of some prevalence or permanence, which is embedded in the habits of a group or the customs of a people" (1932, 84) is preferable as long as habits and customs are interpreted as an outlook to understand things as they are rather more than mere behaviors. From a religious point of view habit can thus be termed as a repeated set of actions performed by an actor (individual) in any religious setting, be it a ritual act or a performance of any art forms held inside a Sattras. The habits nurture not only the growth of the self but also the nature of the institution. And as such institutions function by means of an interaction with the individuals who act as agents, their habits and beliefs which indirectly help in their spiritual and intellectual growth.

The present study will try to seek answers to the question of knowledge and power relations, the way of representation of the self, permanence and transience, identities and differences in relation to the institution of Sattras. And for that matter, the Sattras considered to be a vivid representation of the history and culture of the Assamese community, requires a comprehensive analysis.

With the same considerations, we introduce Sattra or Sattras (as they exist in multiple numbers) as an important component of culture in the present context of study. The whole way of the Assamese society is incredibly linked with the Vaisnavite monasteries in Assam known as the Sattras. The Sattras are public institutions drawing a whole of social, economic, religious, political and cultural influences in the life of an Assamese Vaisnava in particular, and the larger society in general. The Sattras have been instrumental in preservation and sustenance of multiple traditions of art and literature of the state along with their social-cultural and religious contributions towards the growth of the society since the days of their inception. These are the living repositories of Vaisnava heritage and culture. The cultural history of Assam is unique in the sense that they add pristine features with these institutions. The cultural traditions of the Vaisnava movement initiated by the great saint Śaṅkaradeva and his disciple Mādhavadeva during 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries have been preserved by the Sattras in most parts of the state. But with the changing time many of the Sattras, which played a very influential role earlier, have come under the bleak of dilapidation and many have even vanished from the scene. For centuries the cultural history of the state got enriched in respect of various expressive forms like dance, drama, plays, music, literature, crafts, sculpture and social education which got institutionalized through these Sattras. This apparently brought about a socio-religious and cultural awakening in the state since the days of their establishment in various corners of the state. It also did not confine its manifestations to these boundaries alone. In course of time it went beyond to reach the laity in far and distant places and attracted crowds from far and wide. It reached out to people irrespective of caste, creed or religion shuffling all barriers. Born out of a completely different ideology of believing in the concept of one God and discouraging sacerdotal practices prevalent at a time, Vaisnava philosophy still has its roots survived through the institutional order of a Sattra. It is the Sattras which have been able to unite the Vaisnavas as well as

those outside the fold of Vaisnavism in Assam with its multilinear cultural practices.

Since their origin, these institutions have however undergone many changes. The changes are seen in the way of their operation, the involvement from the community as well as their sustenance. This invariably raises questions in the mind whether in a fast changing world these institutions will be able to maintain their traditional values and bind the community. The present study will explore ways to understand the perplexities that the Sattras and the Vaisnava community are confronting and analyze the present state of participation and involvement of the community through which their own history was represented. The Vaisnava community is comparatively larger in Nagaon, a district in Assam, with a large number of Sattras situated here. The involvement of the community in the affairs and activities of the Sattras which strengthened the institutional set up will also be a determining factor of the functioning of the Sattra as a vibrant socio-cultural institution in future.

### **1. 1. Statement of the Problem**

The Sattras, as mentioned earlier, have been very influential in the cultural and social life of the entire Assamese community. Even now, their importance has not diminished. Though in the changed context of time and space, certain problems have crippled many of these flourishing institutions. Earlier trends in the study of Sattras by different scholars focused mainly on a general notion of the great Vaisnava saint, Śaṅkaradeva and his contributions towards the growth of the Vaisnava religion and culture. The Sattras have not been discussed in detail in terms of changing circumstances and challenges they are facing in the changed environment especially the ones included in the present course of study. There is very little information about the Sattras of Nagaon and no detailed study has been conducted so far. Hence, a systematic study of the Sattras of this district with an



analysis of its different variants merits a challenging subject of study informed by the notions of cultural history as understood today. The primary objective of the study is to make an attempt to get insights into the developmental characteristics of such institutions, the loopholes where attention is sought and formalization of the socio-economic and cultural impact on the society at present. In addition, the study also focuses on how these institutions will sustain in the long run amidst diversities in thought and action.

The study makes an attempt to answer questions as to how rituals performed within these institutions act as a means of communication binding the community, why there is a need to preserve and protect the cultural practices and artefacts regarded as quintessential for the growth of these institutions, how religion, culture and performances are interconnected with the economy of a community and under what circumstances the Sattras locate themselves on the edifice of these three important aspects interweaving them in their regular pursuits.

The Sattras are born of a religious and socio-cultural resurgence in medieval Assam. Since these are institutions primarily viewed as contributing to the growth of Assamese culture in general and the Vaisnava community in particular, hence a study on its multifarious functions needs an understanding of the concept of cultural history. Moreover, a distinction can be clearly perceived in respect of the process of enacting rituals, the economic prospects and status and heritage aspects of these institutions relating to their location and participation. This distinction which is especially drawn between the ones situated in the villages and the other in the towns needs a closer examination. Needless to say, the Sattras lying in the rural is dissimilar to the ones in the urban in terms of their institutional features. In addition the study also focuses on their representational characteristics keeping in view the religious sentiments of the individuals since these institutions foster a faith in the community.

### **1.1.1. The Sattras as Institutions**

Institutions shape human interaction. They form incentives to human exchange of thought and behavior through social, political and economic rules. The change that takes place in the institutions conform to the ways in which societies evolve through time. The institutions help in the understanding of historical changes and are reflections of the past, present and future since the continuity of the society's norms and conditions are attached to it. However organizations like institutions also shape human interactions. They refer to a group of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve certain objectives. To draw a distinction between the terms institution and organization, we understand them by these simple definitions: Institutions are systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions. "Organizations are special institutions that involve a) criteria to establish their boundaries and to distinguish their members from nonmembers, b) principles of sovereignty concerning who is in charge, and c) chains of command delineating responsibilities within the organization" (Hodgson 2006, 18).

Following this definition, institutions construct social interactions by forming form and consistency in individuals. The individuals' thought and action are ruled by the institution. They put constraints on human behavior by enforcing rules and also enable the behavior by soliciting a matter of choice. By way of structuring, enabling and constraining the behavioral aspects of the individuals, institutions can mould the society and also the individuals in a collective manner. Also institutions provide an agency and structure within which individuals act and their actions are determined. Moreover the individuals assigned to institutional roles possess varying degrees of discretionary power in relation to their actions. These powers are utilized by the individuals at different levels. The structure of the institution is "both constituted by human agency and is the medium in which

human action take place. This seems to mean that structure is nothing other than the repetition over time of the related actions of many institutional actors” (Giddens 1976, 121).

The study refers to Sattras as social institutions rather than organizations. These institutions act at the disposition of individuals on the basis of the interactions with a shared pattern of thought. Institutions can be understood as “the outcomes of human interactions and aspirations without being consciously designed in every detail by any individual or group, while historically given institutions precede any one individual” (Hodgson 2006, 8). It provides a platform to place an individual’s thought and ideas, to interact and follow certain dictums which are deemed essential for the institutional growth. Within a given institutional framework, the skills and knowledge of the individuals are cultivated and utilized. As such institutions acts as a kind of catalyst in human interactions through some shared set of values and ideas. The Sattras are the finest examples of such institutions. The shared values of the institution constitute a culture of its own and such culturally acquired values relate to the kind of communication that takes place within or outside the institution. As a technical term in social science, “an institution is a regular and continuously repeated social practice” (Edgar and Sedgwick 1999, 129). The Sattras are defined as institutions since they adapt to human behavior and thought. They have a long history of mobilizing individuals and the community on behalf of its social and moral cause. They also act as ‘mediating structures’ in the Vaisnava community of Assam. These institutions have given a dent to the religious identity of the Vaisnavas and thus, have continued the culturally normative religious traditions. They assemble individuals from different sections of the society and structure interactions amongst them. Certain rules and norms are followed within these institutions conditioning the lives of the individuals attached to it. The norms involve mutual beliefs among the members of the groups which are the followers of the same faith. Since institutions monitor the individual habits of thought and action, the Sattras as

institutions too, have the power to mould the capacities of individuals and bring about transformations. If at all, these institutions cater to regularities of human behavior, concordant habits are passed down from generation to generation corresponding to belief and faith, then the institutional structure is assumed to have sustained. This view is also adaptable to the institutional structure of the Sattras with self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing characteristics. The Sattras stand on the edifice of individual involvement be it social, economic or cultural; they cannot refrain individuals from participation and interference often involving material artefacts. They depend on the individuals or groups for their existence, their interactions and shared pattern of thoughts. Thus, concisely we may relate Sattras as institutions rather than phrasing them as organizations, adopting Douglass North's views. North (1990) defines,

Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. In consequence they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social or economic. Institutional change shapes the way societies evolve through time and hence is the key to understanding historical change (3).

Institutions are rules of human behaviour that provide incentives under which rationale people act. They are "accepted modes of behaviour protected by culture" (Powelson, 2000). These institutions are interchangeably used as meaning organizations though both organizations and institutions are not the same. The institutions may include certain social rules and conduct, laws and procedures, set of a popular belief system and traditions, and other similar rules of human behaviour. They provide a platform directing all human activities which include both social and economic. And the organizations operate only within a set of institution. Thus, Turner (1997, 6) provides a whole definition on institutions as "a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organising relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in

reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.”

## **1.2. Objective of the Study**

A study on the cultural history related with an institution like the Sattras, enables us to understand particularly the ideological differences and the concept of power amongst their partakers or beneficiaries, the role it plays in the society today, its economic development, norms and conditions which it sets for the individuals and their consequences, preserving the traditional values as a heritage asset in the continually changing context of modern thoughts and ideas.

The broad objectives of the study can be identified as under:

- a) To understand the cultural and historical significance of an institution like the Sattras in contemporary times,
- b) To analyze the present status of the Sattras in terms of its three basic components; the ritualistic approach, economy and heritage management,
- c) To relate the concepts of power and representation in describing the role of these institutions and their influences in the society today,
- d) To examine changes that have been reflected in the practices as well as management related to these institutions.
- e) To describe the Sattras as an institution catering not only to the socio-cultural aspects but also for the intellectual development of an individual.

### 1.3. Review of Literature

With reference to cultural history which forms the major focus in the present work, several scholars have put forward arguments and analyses related to it. The trend of a new cultural history has evolved as an important area of study in recent years and has attracted the attention of many cultural historians and allied disciplinarians. The present thesis is informed by such views and approaches and has adopted a few theorists' interpretations on cultural history. Literatures on the subject have been surveyed and the theoretical concepts taken into consideration in conceptualizing the framework of the present study.

Raymond Williams in his book, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1966, Reprint) traces the idea of culture as it has developed in the West especially Great Britain from 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Considered as one of the seminal works in contemporary times, Williams has made a social and historical approach to culture with new social nuances. The author explores the notion of culture as it developed responding to the Industrial Revolution and the social and political changes that came in its wake.

Anna Green in her book *Cultural History: Theory and History* (2008) provides a coherent introduction to the major theories of the study of cultural history. The volume explores the conceptual and imaginative world of human consciousness as reflected among the elite intellectuals and aesthetic works as well as everyday social beliefs and practices.

In Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), Geertz presents his vision based on extensive empirical studies, of what culture is, what role it plays in social life and how it ought to be studied. This collection of essays addresses interpretive theory of culture (thick description), the growth of culture and the evolution of human societies and consciousness per se. It also analyses religion and ideology as cultural systems, rituals and social

change and the politics of meaning. The author presents a valuable resource for understanding how individual and social values, their formation, definition and maintenance are culturally determined.

Peter Burke's *What is Cultural History?* (2008) gives a brief description about the rise of cultural history in recent times, placing it in its own cultural context. The author also discusses the 'classic' phase of cultural history associating the likes of Jacob Burckhardt and Johan Huizinga to Marxist interpretations of Frederick Antal and Edward Thompson. The book provides a critique to the diverse fields of cultural history with major theoretical strands.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Émile Durkheim goes on to discover the enduring source of human social identity. To understand the religious nature of man as an essential and permanent nature of humanity, he studied the religion of the Aborigines of Australia. Durkheim explored the idea that individual's thought and actions are socially related to each other and that religion embodies the belief which shapes the moral discourse of humanity. The volume also deliberates on the intriguing origin and nature of both religion and its impact on society.

Eric W. Rothenbuhler in his book *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony* (1998) provides a theoretical explanation to the meaning of rituals, rites and ceremonies as symbolic social actions in everyday life of an individual accentuating a powerful and special form of communication. The author examines the uses of the term ritual in various aspects, from mediated form of ritual to political, rhetoric and civic rituals and cites some problems in the study of ritual.

*Heritage Studies: Methods and Approaches* (2009) edited by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and John Carman describes the concomitant relationship between heritage and culture. Heritage as a symbolic representation has been useful in

describing culture. The book also mentions about the techniques, methods and approaches for preservation of both the tangible and intangible aspects of culture.

David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985) is a classic study of the highly varied and politicized construction of the meaning of heritage. He explores historically how the past creates patterns of meaning in the present. Drawing examples from arts, humanities, social sciences and popular culture, the author argues that the past (including tangible and intangible remnants) is manipulated to meet specific social, cultural and political requirements and relate them to historic and contemporary societies.

Apart from the thematic approach of cultural history included in the present study, the researcher has added some views of scholars working on the Sattras citing them as institutions of culture and enhancing the overall development of an individual and the society at large. The Sattras regarded as institutions of Vaisnava learning in Assam have been very influential since the time of their inception. Bearing this in mind, many scholars of literature and culture have published numerous books on Vaisnava philosophy and the development of Sattras in the state.

The most important among these are the books entitled, *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (1996, Reprint) by S.N. Sarma and M. Neog's, *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam* (1998, Reprint) which give comprehensive accounts of the Vaisnavite movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva with its many fold contributions towards the Assamese society giving it a whole new genre of polity, economy and culture. These books mention the growth of Sattras in the shape of a monastery giving it an institutional character in the later part of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sarma compiles a detailed account of the genesis and development of the Sattras mentioning its contribution to the Assamese society after attaining a formal shape while Neog has detailed out the historical



antecedents that gave rise to the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiating a spiritual bent of mind amongst its followers. Both the authors throw light on the socio-cultural renaissance brought in by the Vaisnava movement thereby developing various forms of art, literature, language and religion.

Pradip Jyoti Mahanta in his book, *The Sankaradeva Movement: Its Cultural Horizons* (2007) discusses the philosophical background in which the institution found its growth and sustenance, the administrative set-up it had built and the wide contours of the institution at social, religious and other cultural levels which came to be associated with its existence in succeeding centuries.

Dambarudhar Nath, in his book entitled *Satra Society and Culture: Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garamur Satra* (2012) makes an approach to one of the most influential Sattras of Assam, Garamur in Majuli, making perceptive comments on its economy and administration. Written from the perspective of a modern analytical historiography, this book provides an insight into the Sattriya way of life and its contributions towards the society and culture of Assam.

In the book entitled *Abibhakta Nagaon Zilar Sattra Darpan: A Mirror of the Sattras of Undivided Nagaon District* (2005) by Tilak Mazumder, the author provides a gist of all the Sattras available in the two important districts of Assam, Marigaon and Nagaon. The author also mentions about their contributions towards the society and lays emphasis on the need for preservation of these institutions from further decay.

#### **1.4. Methods and Methodology**

A structured methodology is an important component of a good and valid research. The paradigms covering the interdisciplinary subjects of both cultural

studies and cultural history are taken as an approach to the present study. And since the work relates to studying the institution of Sattras from different directions- religious, artistic, heritage and economic- it has been approached from diverse theoretical premises for which formulations from respective domains have been drawn. Concepts of cultural heritage, methods of representation through the notions of power relations and practices, are the premises corresponding to the present study. With regard to this methodology on which the study is based, various methods, both primary and secondary have been employed to get authentic data and information from the source.

The primary source of information that have been collected for the study, are various Sattras located in several areas of the district of Nagaon; the target groups being the individuals directly involved with the Sattriya tradition and culture and the ones indirectly involved with it. During the course of the survey, a field visit to Majuli, acclaimed as the heart of Sattriya form of art and culture, situated in upper Assam, has been carried out by the researcher for the purpose of making a comparison between the Sattras of both these places. However main emphasis is on the Sattras of Nagaon district.

Techniques like interviews and observations have been adopted to make the work more purposive. Since the study is based on surveys, unstructured interviews were conducted with various representatives from the Sattras as well as the ones not directly involved with these institutions at various points of time during field visits. The concentrated areas of the district are Bardowa, Kampur, Raha, Dhing and Koliabor. From the variety of research methods available for collecting data, the researcher has applied both participant and non-participant observation methods and the induced natural context method for gathering required information. These techniques were mainly applied to analyze and interpret the multifarious functions and roles played by these institutions at present times. Application of field data collected from similar study areas are also

taken into consideration as models for our present study to make it more convincing and providing a wider canvas to the study.

Since the present study makes an attempt to analyze the Sattrā institutions combining the ritual forms, heritage and economy and interpret them from various perspectives, multiple theoretical postulations in relation to the disciplines of cultural history and cultural studies have been referred and cited to understand the realities of the Sattrā institutions and analyse them from different standpoints.

Secondary sources have been adopted for collecting information from different reference materials like books, e-journals, articles, newspaper, magazines and related websites. Following the phase of collecting information, several libraries and various academic and other institutions were visited to be informed of the available works related to the present study.

### **1.5. Chaperization**

The present work is divided into seven chapters, including the conclusion, keeping in view the major objectives of the study. Following is a brief account of all the chapters.

The first chapter introduces the present work with a brief on the statement of the problem, methods applied and the methodological aspect of the study, aims and objectives and a review of the literature surveyed and a gist of the chapters integrated in the thesis.

The second chapter deals with the theoretical perspectives on cultural history with its present day reference to change and development. The theoretical understanding and criticism of some eminent scholars on the developmental aspects of cultural history have been borrowed and analyzed.

The third chapter gives a general notion of what Sattras are and how these have been playing an important role in endurance of the tradition and cultural life of Assam. The genesis and developmental aspect of these institutions have been discussed in detail along with the drawing of a general perception on the Sattras concentrated in the present district of Nagaon. It includes a general comment on the Sattras of Nagaon laying special emphasis on its type and nature based on field investigations.

The following three main chapters of the thesis are based on the primary source of data collected from institutions and individuals at various points of time. It has been tried to sequentially put in all the necessary informations gathered from these sources during the course of the survey.

The fourth chapter entitled “Rituals: Forms and Practices in the Sattras” discusses rituals in its variant forms and act of performances to be an important component of cultural history. It analyses rituals from two distinct features, one as a communicator and the other as action-oriented performance. The Sattras administer innumerable rituals related to special occasions and festivals accompanied by traditional values and practices. It also emphasizes on the different types of rituals involving the community at large, especially the ones being performed in the institutions as observed in the district. The chapter is also an attempt to understand the meaning of rituals with growing popularity and how these are connected with the lives of an individual member from the Vaisnava community. To make the study of rituals more expressive, a comparative note on a festival accompanied by rituals in two most revered places of historical and cultural importance for the Vaisnavas of Assam, notably Bardowa and Barpeta is made.

The fifth chapter under the title “Economy and the Sattra Institutions” details out the various facets of economic influences of religion as well its institutional character on the community in general and the individuals in

particular. This draws a link between the schemas of religion, economy and culture. Moreover the chapter discusses the crisis presently experienced by the community under social and demographic changes. It has not only shattered the base on which the economy ascended at the time of their inception but has also disintegrated the self identity of the individuals due to many unscrupulous agencies posing a serious threat to these institutions.

The sixth chapter entitled “Heritage Dimension of the Sattriya Culture in Recent Times” observes the need felt by the society at large for protection and preservation of both tangible and intangible resources of the Sattras. The cultural heritage of the Sattras has been discussed as an important element that demands association of individuals, so that the cultural edifices could be preserved and passed on for the future generations. At the end of this chapter the researcher tries to situate the Sattras of Nagaon in particular in the process of preservation and also throws some light on the problems underlying during the course of its preservation action.

Before proceeding to the concluding chapter, a case study on Bardowa as the nerve center of socio-cultural and religious activities, has been made to make the study on Sattras more comprehensive. It analyses the discourse between tradition and development in this old institution.

Lastly the seventh chapter being the “Conclusion” provides a summary of the whole work and specifies the findings that evolved from the previous chapters.

### **1.6. Limitation of the Study**

In the present work, being a PhD dissertation the researcher has delimited its study due to various constraints. One major reason is the stipulated time frame within which the work had to be completed and the other being the vast field of

survey involving certain restrictions. The Sattras are often referred to as major religio-cultural institutions in Assam, commendable right from cherishing religious values to fulfilling various societal requirements. These are scattered in different parts of the state of Assam. So for an easy understanding of the role it plays in the present day Assamese society, we have included only those Sattras lying in the district of Nagaon with a detailed analysis of their influences in the lives of the individuals as a whole. Considering the immense contributions of a Sattras to the Assamese society in terms of religion, literature and various art forms like dance, music and drama, the researcher has also restricted the study by including only the forms and phases of the various rituals undertaken, their economic contributions towards their growth and development and the diverse means and conditions of preserving it as a heritage property, covering almost all the Sattras of the district. As such aesthetic appraisal of diverse art forms, their performance analysis and aspects of their continuity and change, form an integral part of the Sattras way of life, which have not been taken up for consideration in the present study.

It is hoped that this research work will prove useful and serve as a source for further study and research in this field.

### **1.7. Conclusion**

This chapter in brief has stated about the research problem, the aims and objectives of choosing the present work, the various methods and methodologies adopted, review of the literature surveyed and organization of the chapters. The researcher has also set the limits of the study. The following chapter will give a theoretical perspective to the study of cultural history with reference to the present study area.

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## Chapter 2

### CULTURAL HISTORY: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Men do not make history, they tend to follow what has already been existed. This gets transmitted in course of time. Culture and its forms, undoubtedly, emerge from history. Cultural history, as studied today, implies a broad spectrum in terms of both its subject matter and theoretical perspective. The contours of the subject vary. Over the years it has covered different fields and has generated diverse historiographies. Its approaches are unique and eclectic, not only confining itself to the study of the disciplines of history alone. It is interdisciplinary in the sense that it embraces other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, economics, cultural studies and very recently literary studies. Thus in this way cultural history has provided a meeting ground for a variety of interests and methodologies. Since the late 1970s and 1980s it has acquired an irreplaceable place in the historical arena as an important academic discipline. In recent years the theme of cultural history has gained much prominence giving it a whole new dimension. It is at the cutting edge of both historical and cultural studies. Looking at various definitions and debate thereof, it has been tried to draw a link between the past and present and also understand the modes of cultural history in the following lines for facilitation of the present study.

#### 2.1. Cultural History: Meaning and Definition

Cultural history is no new term in the historical parameters of culture. The parameters of defining cultural history are manifold. Several scholars have viewed it from different standpoints and have aptly put forward theoretical dimensions ranging from the social and political dominance of culture to those associated with aesthetic and literary discourses. Every culture belonging to a

society has its own history. The society that adopts or follows a culture through inheritance too, has a history. Cultural history, a new development in history, meets the different nuances of culture. Peter Burke (1997, 1) argues on the definition of cultural history to be like defining culture on its own. It is difficult to reach an overarching interpretation as culture has so many meanings and definitions put forth by many. So also it is difficult to define cultural history. According to him, cultural history is something not in shape, it is constantly changing and this change has an insubstantial nature. The emergence of cultural history in the 1970s and 1980s and its subsequent dominance was in part a response to the perceived limitations of the social history perspective of the previous historiography. In describing the behavioral tendencies of social groups and emphasizing normative behavior, often in the abstractions of numbers and charts, social historians had moved beyond an elite-dominated political paradigm, but had ignored both the uniqueness of individual experience and the ways in which social life is created through politics and culture. And their attachment to group categories and social structural explanations had begun to deaden history as an exploration of contingent experience. Cultural historians sought to bring some life back into the exploration of the lives of ordinary people and to open them up to arenas of freedom and choice. "By the mid 1980s, cultural historians were drawing upon beliefs about the agency of ordinary people that social historians such as Herbert Gutman and Eugene Genovese had emphasized, but drew away from the way agency was attributed to participation in predefined group activities" (Fass 2003, 39). Cultural history in this context is a new term in understanding the concepts of culture in a broad perspective drawing an interrelationship between culture and history which has etched a space of its own.

The beginning of the era of seventies to the twenty-first century witnessed the study of the domain of cultural history gaining newer heights gradually changing the discourse of historiography. This transformation has interested historians to work on a wide range of diverse themes and sources. The history of

representation and practice offered important themes which cultural historians sought to investigate. There are many theoretical interpretations on the evolution of the terms in contemporary times. Culture as we understand is connected to a society's development. As Raymond Williams defines "culture to include the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate" (Sardar and Loon 2010, 5).

Since culture is broadly defined to have embraced both high and low, elites and the ordinary, conditioning human endeavours, its history would redefine ways in which the human past relate to each other. Cultural history involves both representation and practices, as to why it is connected to the historical agencies. Peter Burke has undertaken a parallel reflection to the study of cultural history giving dent to more theoretical aspects. In one of his writings in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (2009), Burke suggested,

Cultural historians might usefully define themselves not in terms of a particular area or field such as art, literature and music, but rather of a distinctive concern for values and symbols, wherever these are to be found, in the everyday life of ordinary people as well as in special performances for the elite (18-19).

Cultural history attained popularity and emerged as a major variety of history only in the last three decades or so. It was more frequently practiced in the German speaking nations before gaining grounds all over the world. It was looked in part as a response to the broad spectrum of social history under the previous historiography. Now cultural history has become one of the important domains of history defining culture and its formations. Jacob Burckhardt and John Huizinga, two founding figures of the discipline emphasized on the fact that cultural history should include both the ordinary and the popular. It should include the lives and perceptions of the ordinary people. "It is in the sphere of culture that human contemplation can perceive that spiritual *continuum* which....gives meaning to all

history. The vision of both past and present is what distinguishes human beings from the animals” (Burckhardt 1998, 12). Burckhardt lays emphasis on intuition, perception and empathy and regards these as influential in historical representation.

Cultural history is important to understand the cultural edifice of a particular community, an institution and the region. It has invariably been related to cultural studies since it talks about cultural space and identity. For many anthropologists and historians cultural history has a fascinating task to accomplish in defining the cultural milieu of a particular community or locality. It is essentially a history of culture. To trace the importance of the new representation of cultural history we need to relate some of the influences made by some eminent theorists in this field. Mention can be made of the work accomplished by French cultural critic Michel Foucault, American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, contemporary historians Natalie Z. Davis and E.P. Thompson. The common concern with certain cultural phenomenon such as rituals, ceremonies, texts and discourse have now been deviated with modern concepts accumulated from cultural anthropology and literary criticism. “Cultural history presented an opportunity to plunge even deeper into the lives of ordinary people, offering the potential for a richer study of human experience in the past” (Crone, Gange and Jones 2007, 2). By this notion of culture we can ascribe it as a symbolic representation of important events and practices taking place and also to denote the objects codifying cultural values. Thus culture, in abstract has become one of the major components defining the social, political and economic life of an individual.

However the main direction of cultural history in the twentieth century is on the issues of representation as a way of expressing the spirit of a society, the meaning and values articulated through such social practices. As a result of this, by the end of 1980s a confluence took place between social and cultural history, where social historians started drawing insights from cultural history. Elaborated

broadly the field of cultural history has evolved from three distinct unifying strands. The first being a stress upon human subjectivity, second the holistic approach to culture seeking unifying patterns or structures and third, an interpretive, hermeneutic method of analysis.

The Sattras, as we understand them from the cultural history perspective, ponder on the issue of agency focusing primarily on the human subjectivity, through the cultural practices, which have laid an impact on the whole Assamese society, particularly the Vaisnavas. This has also an impact on the social norms and conditions upon which the society revolves. The individuals act as agents drawing upon the ideals and traditions of these institutions.

From the mid-nineteenth century emphasis upon the collective modes of thought was laid as one of the holistic approaches to culture. Émile Durkheim while establishing a science of society gave priority to the study of a social group or a community than the individuals concerned. He believed that human behavior rests on the moral, religious and social principles rather than concerning individual lives. According to him, 'rituals and ceremonies that accompanies at the social level plays a vital role in creating social cohesion and stability' (Green 2008, 56). This metaphor reveals the fact that society is not an individual entity and that all aspects of the society are interrelated. The influence of Durkheim can be contextualized with the present study since we generalize the Sattras as social institutions catering to the needs of the society than giving an individual outlook. This is more visible when we link collective memory as one of the concepts of cultural history in understanding the Sattras.

Natalie Zemon Davis and E. P. Thompson's views on community and legitimacy where the integrated focus is laid on the community with an analysis of power borrowed from Foucault's concept of power that ultimately brings about a reformation. Roger Chartier's views on power have also been included in our present study where he points out that power is not bimodal but a spectrum. Based

on his ideas and concepts, the present researcher has analyzed the Sattras locating the dichotomy between the one who possesses power or the control and who does not but produces a spectrum of how the individuals related to it use the existing resources available to them to assert themselves in a variety of contexts.

## **2.2. The Concept of Culture**

Culture is a term that carries multiple meanings and is understood in very many ways. For some it is considered to be social behavior but it is not. It abstracts behavior from its connotation. Culture, as we all understand, is at the threshold of every developing society. The idea of culture goes back at least as far as the eighteenth century and was spurred in the nineteenth century by the nationalist impetus. Culture may be defined best in the words of Edward Said (1983, 89), “culture is used to designate not merely something to which one belongs but something that one possesses, and along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture comes into forceful play.”

The notion of culture is absorbed within cultural history. Understanding culture as the quintessential part of cultural history, we try to establish its various parameters through theorizing some concepts and ideas. When communities regularly interact with each other to create a cultural network, they tend to share similar ‘clusters of common concepts, emotions and practices.’ Culture is the basic premise on which the study of cultural history revolves. The term ‘culture’ has been defined from various perspectives by different scholars. The notion of culture is not always the same and it changes with variations of how we foresee culture. Since it has been used in several distinctive ways, the concept itself fascinates and often confuses the individuals. This was cited by Chaney (1994, 2) in one of his writings on culture. In another sense, “culture may also be defined as

the socially and historically situated process of production of meanings” (Barrett et al. 1979, 10). This definition connotes culture as a productive enterprise through the notion of representation. Raymond Williams has pointed out that modern meaning of culture essentially appeared only in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and not before that. Earlier it simply meant as its original Latin root word *cultura* meant cultivation of the soil.

The concept of ‘culture’.....became a noun of inner process, specialized to its presumed agencies in ‘intellectual life’ and the ‘arts’. It became also a noun of general process, specialized to its presumed configurations in ‘whole ways of life’. It played a crucial role in definitions of ‘the arts’ and ‘the humanities’, from the first sense. It played an equally crucial role in definitions of the ‘human sciences’ and the ‘social sciences’, in the second sense (Williams 2009, 17).

The concept of culture as an institutional sphere devoted to the making of meaning is based on an assumption that the social formations are based on certain clusters of institutions devoted to specialized actions delivering a meaning. These institutional spheres cater to different conventional spheres like politics, economy, society and culture, of which culture specifies production, circulation and use of meanings. The locus of cultural sphere may further be subdivided into sub themes of literature, music, education, religion etc. The study of culture, “if culture is defined in this way, is the study of the activities that take place within these institutionally defined spheres and of the meanings produced in them” (Bonnell and Hunt 1999, 41).

By the late twentieth century culture came to have a different connotation. Its meaning grounded on three important points, “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general [and] ....the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Green 2008, 2).

Because culture, as broadly defined, embraces both high and low, conditions all human activities, its history offers a way of understanding how different spheres of human pasts relate to each other. Hence, culture may well be defined to lie at the heart of historical agency, since cultural history involves both representation and practice. A coherent culture is based on the notion that it produces a system of meanings. “Culture consists of learned and shared systems of meaning and understanding, communicated primarily by means of natural language. These meanings and understandings are not just representations about what is in the world; they are also directive, evocative, and reality constructing in character” (Roy 1990, 65). These systems of meanings are understood as schema, referred to as knowledge structures specifying how certain elements like objects, situations, events and actions relate to each other under varied circumstances.

### **2.2.1. Representation and Practice**

The idea of representation is central to cultural history today. The concept of representation has come a long way to determine the values, practices and assets of culture. Roger Chartier has redefined “cultural history to be concerned primarily with two aspects, representation and practices” (Bennett and Frow 2008, 111). It is connected with the basics of the implicit rules that an individual undergoes while performing the role assigned to him in appropriation of cultural forms. The study of representation became quite popular amongst the cultural historians since the idea of representation started reflecting not only the reality but also constructed it. Historical evidence, as well as “the historian’s own account of the past, should be understood as representations, rather than reconstructions of reality” (Green 2008, 9). As an important form of representation, both memory and lived experiences share an intimate relation with a capacity to transform the present and the future.



When members of a particular community interact and share thoughts, representations are then used for message construction and comprehension. Communication helps to consolidate conventional beliefs and ideas related to a culture. When individuals communicate they represent their respective cultures. In the words of Sperber (1996, 88), “those representations which are repeatedly communicated and minimally transformed in the process will end up belonging to the culture.” The fundamental and common knowledge can be understood as an embodiment of certain activities in a structured environment, which procures interaction with individuals or members of a group. Likewise, considering the Sattras in this context we can understand that the practices of rites and rituals, routine or occasion specific, are forms of a practical understanding and knowledge.

Practices are fundamental to human lives. “Practice will always in some measure elude representation, because it is so multiple in its meanings” (Dewald 1998, 234). Even though they escape from each other, yet both are at the heart of cultural history. The study advocates a view on culture as a complex phenomenon with a socially produced and socially set values cherished by individuals or a group of individuals which undertake a form of ‘community practices’. The cultural artefacts as we consider here act as mediating devices where joint activity is co-ordinated. Practice implies a system and this system is embedded in culture. Through the repetition of practices through the medium of ritual, economy, heritage, the Sattras foster their own cultural identity. And acquiring a common cultural background, these institutions share a common and collective memory and identity which is understood through its various socio-cultural forms in practice. The reading of the sacred texts on every singular occasion is also a kind of practice undertaken here and such practices provide meaning to the reader as well as the listener. It also develops a sense of harmony and concordance in all such practices.

### **2.2.2. Knowledge and Power**

The concept of power forms an important part in understanding the interdisciplinary aspects of cultural studies. The inter-relationship between power and culture needs no insisting. And it is due to the influences of power that culture changes. Culture is generally constituted through meanings and representations which are significant mechanisms to invoke human practices. “The construction of representation is necessarily a matter of power since any representation involves the selection and organization of signs and meanings” (Barker 2004, 161). Whether political or cultural, people attain the capacity to resist the forces of power. The discourse theories as proposed by Michel Foucault treat culture to have an equal significance for all. The present study not only focuses on the Sattras as the primary subject matter but it puts emphasis upon the representations of Sattriya culture and the ways in which these representations go through the institutional arrangement of the Sattras. These discourses on power and knowledge hold sway in the society. They provide scope for communication by relaying messages with meanings and also indicate the relationship that develops between individuals. Thus to understand the relations of power, it is important to explicate the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault’s conception on power is determined as, “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.....there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations” (Foucault 1978, 93).

In our present study we approach the concept of power through knowledge which is transmitted through practices and human endeavour. It does not necessarily deal with the concept of ideology, which generally refers to the organizing and justifying ideas held by individuals about themselves. Power, in this context is understood as a concept which enhances knowledge rather than associating the ideals of subordination and a terrain of conflict and struggle where

individuals crave for authority. Michel Foucault in an article *The Subject and Power* (1982, 789) defines power relationships as, “a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future.” He also stressed on power as a productive force which circulates through all levels in the society. The power which is circulated further helps in the growth of the institution since knowledge implicated with power develops into a relationship which cannot be dissociated. Émile Durkheim mentions in his *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915) a sociological view of knowledge in which categories are socially constructed and the rules are socially sustained and interpreted. According to him, interactions take place when individuals gather experiences and these experiences are sustained and reinforced through continued interactions. Knowledge and competence, as we understand in the present context, are carried by a distinct group of individuals who expertises in relevant fields based on experiences.

The Sattras, in our present study also undertake the question of power regime. But it has been observed that most of these institutions are not coercive in terms of authority of power. The culture of these institutions functions in an organized and participatory way shaping the social life and concentrating on the conduct of the individuals involved with it. We may say, “culture is not just a matter of representations and consciousness but of institutional practices, administrative routines and spatial arrangements that are manifestations of power” (Barker 2004, 162). Moreover these institutions follow a disciplinary order of their own in terms of organization and selection of administrative heads. The practices and discourses related to them are also interpreted by a disciplinary character through which a rationality of efficiency and productivity is expected.

The discourses of power can never reach the static domination to which they tend, because they are repeatedly upset by the practical resistance of ordinary

people. Nor can practical resistance ever triumph fully, for new norms of dominance always emerge (Dewald 1998, 225).

Co-ordinated actions produce a commonly shared knowledge. Through rituals and commemorations knowledge can, to a great extent build up a history just as history creates common knowledge. Such actions and performances are common in the Sattras involved in our study where knowledge gets repositied and disseminated through the above actions. Knowledge depends on how people choose to communicate. The Sattras can thus be grouped as centres for disseminating knowledge which gets percolated down to the community. Through the initiation process, use of sacred texts in manuscripts, each and every session of ritual performances, an act of knowledge-gathering and knowledge dissemination takes place among the Vaisnava followers. The Sattras also function as non-formal institutions of learning. Through their multilinear tasks they share knowledge with the people belonging to the Vaisnava community and it gets transmitted from one generation to another. In such conditions, we refrain from using the Gramscian hegemonic structure of power. The variety of knowledge-spreading devices is intimately connected with the lives of every individual.

### **2.3. Engaging Cultural History and Cultural Studies**

Since the methodology applied in the present research is interdisciplinary, we try to identify certain problems from the perspective of both cultural history and cultural studies. Particular established disciplines have various methods and approaches that bring them closer to the interdisciplinary domain of cultural studies. Apart from the major disciplines of sociology and anthropology, other generative frameworks for providing an agenda for data analysis lie in the disciplines of cultural history, while the sociology of culture, cultural geography and the new historicism in literary studies. An engagement with history is like

gaining experiences from the sacred, secular and the mundane or popular. It is popular in the sense that it is spread widely. The development of popular interests vests on how history is represented. It involves activities which redeems the past. The continual process of diverse interactions between now and then is vital to cultural studies as history provides a broad set of resources to construct the past and represent the present. Engaging with history within cultural studies has two major strands: “doing cultural history in a way that is informed by general theoretical and hermeneutical issues, including those informing cultural studies; and developing critical analysis of contemporary uses and manifestations of the past in contemporary culture, including media presentations of the past and versions of the past in vernacular traditions and conventions of everyday life” (Pickering 2008, 194). To deal with this idea, in the present work the researcher has moved between social and cultural history with both contemporary and historical forms of analysis. The notions of cultural history and cultural studies supplement each other. So combining cultural history and contemporary cultural studies, develops an understanding of the past in the light of the present. Hence, our study of the institutions coils them together into a closer intellectual relationship which develops into an understanding of a long term cultural process. By way of doing this, we also perceive a notion of the dynamics of cultural traditions evolved out of this, patterns of continuity emerging as a result of the social changes that has taken place over the years. The speculation of engaging cultural studies with history is to historicize the popular experiences and negotiations of the past.

The perspectives which the researcher has drawn while studying the cultural history of the institution, recognize that there are always diverse beliefs, practices and actions represented in understanding a community. Since these institutions also cater to religious beliefs and practices, the individuals are morally responsible too. As such moral discourses intensify unity and identity which are equally and essentially important to a community.

#### 2.4. The Trajectories of Memory in Cultural History

The social framework of memory took shape under the French anthropologist and sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. According to him, memories are constructed by social groups and it is these social groups which determine what to remember and how it is to be remembered. “There is too often a facile mode of doing cultural history, whereby one picks a historical event or a vehicle of memory, analyzes its representation or how people perceived it over time, and draws conclusions about memory (or collective memory)” (Confino 1997, 1388). Memory can be assigned as articulating the cultural, the social and the political connections. It draws a link between social practices and representations. The individuals of a rational group identify the events and relate those to their group. It can be assigned as a collective effort to remember the past. Memory consigns to that faculty which connects individuals mentally and by way of which the individuals preserve and also recover their pasts and subsequent events. “Memory is central to understanding cultural life, not because it is the past, but because it is the modality of our relation to it” (Terdiman 1993, 7). The notion of memory has occupied an important place in the study of cultural history. It denotes the representations of the past with a shared cultural knowledge that passes on from generations to generations.

Collective memory is much more important when we talk of the shared memories. Perhaps collective memory has been so useful to think about how people construct pasts because of its open-endedness, because it is applicable to historical situations and human conditions in diverse societies and periods (Confino 1997, 1387). The temporalised experiences are individually or collectively stored in as memory and this concerned with our representation of the past and social experiences. It acts as the central modality of all human experiences and draws a link of the past with the present. The approach of collective memory is to determine the notion of shared identity within a distinct social group whose

members have different interests and choices. More consequential to our present study is the approach of cultural history through representation of memory in the form of rituals and cultural artefacts, thereby analyzing the values, ideas and practices embedded in them.

The complex form of cultural history has concentrated on the materiality of memory, on the preservation, restoration and interpretation of the heritage sites. Memory is thus central in constituting both individual and collective identities. As a matter of fact, material objects and places play a mnemonic role in perpetuating and establishing collective identities. And as we proceed with a discussion on heritage resources of the Sattras, we try to draw a causal link between heritages and memory as a distinct form of collective as well as individual identity. Their heritage acts as a form of objectivised culture conforming to texts, ritès, buildings, majestic art forms preserved for long by the particular community asserting collective uniqueness in the society.

Identities and memories are highly selective, inscriptive rather than descriptive, serving particular interests and ideological positions. Just as memory and identity support one another, they also sustain certain subjective positions, social boundaries, and, of course, power (Green 2008, 107).

Actions transmit memories as they transmit skills, from master to apprentice for example (Burke 1997, 48). This can be appropriated with our discussion on rituals where rituals are assigned as re-enactments of the past which involve both individual and collective memories to perform. They also interpret the past, shape memory and construct a social identity. The rituals as performed in the Sattras are thus collective representations. The events that take place in such institutions involve individuals, their shared notion of individual as well as collective experiences. On the basis of these knowledge and experiences, memory acts as the vital tool in understanding the modules of change and development in

these institutions. The lacuna between history and memory has helped in shaping the perceptions of the past and as an important component of cultural history, memory attends to the social relations between individuals and all public forms that involve memory. These may include the heritage sites, ritual practices and popular festivals as discussed in the present work. This recognizes memory in all cultural form and practices that take place in such institution.

“Memory is considered in a holistic sense, not just an individual faculty but as socially and culturally constructed and communicated” (Pickering 2008, 192). Thus the relationship that exists between the individual and the collective in terms of memory reflects the past to be mutually interdependent and reciprocal in thoughts and actions. In summary, memory is a reflection of our past understanding, be it a social, economic or cultural phenomenon in relating with the present. Thus the relationship between cultural memory studies and other forms of cultural enquiry especially cultural history is such that both memory and history cannot be separated and they are intimately connected to each other.

The present study focuses its concern with an investigation of memory in cultural sphere as it is enacted by the individuals in both individual and collective manner. It sums up the variations involved in their ways of actions and performances, the social commitments etc. Underlying this research is to explore the idea that memory, on both individual and collective levels, is one of the key ways in understanding the day to day human experiences and make sense of the experiences they gather. Memory can be studied with an empirical approach putting emphasis on the lived experiences of memory as modes of temporal consciousness and action. The sites of memory, as in our discussion in relation to the heritage sites not only conform to the inherent textual historical potentialities but also includes the manner these potentialities engage individuals every day. Thus, in the words of Emily Keightley (2008, 185), “the investigation of cultural



memory as an object of study rests on the shared assumption that memory is a key site through which the lived experience of time can be examined.”

Thus, the distinction between culture as a theoretical category and culture as a determinate body of beliefs and practices is “crucial for rethinking the place that ‘culture’ as a category of social life and determinant of history has held since the rise of cultural history and its displacement of social history as the focus of historical analysis” (Sewell 2005, 76). Apart from understanding culture as a system of symbols and meanings, it can also be approached as a sphere of practical activity. Culture is grounded in the lived experiences of the individuals and practices. Culture is understood as a realm of meanings often been produced and reproduced by individuals who are juxtaposed as historical agents.

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### CHAPTER 3

#### THE SATTRA INSTITUTION

The cultural history of Assam itself is unique and variegated with multiplicity of communities. Within this large canvas over the last five hundred years it is to a large extent intertwined with the Sattra institutions spread over the entire range of the Brahmaputra valley in the region. The unprecedented current in the religio-cultural history of the era started from the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Śāṅkaradeva (1449-1568). The movement brought about a cultural resurgence with all forms of arts- literature, music, dance, drama, painting, sculpture coming under a spell of revival along with religion.

In less than two hundred years of its inception the movement could sow the seeds of the Vaisnava faith in the entire valley relocating the people of the land who were under the impact of the Sakta or Tantric beliefs acting as a dominant cult till the advent of Neo-Vaisnavism. According to the *District Gazetteers of Assam* (1905), eighty percent of the total Hindu population of Assam constituted the Vaisnavites, scattered mainly over the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. The implication of the Bhakti movement in other parts of India during that era was so affluent that it inspired Śāṅkaradeva to recognize and reorganize his own turbulent society at the grass root level using the Vaisnava faith as an effective tool. The awakening is manifest in different cultural and religious practices as well as artistic forms which together are an integral part of the popular and the eclectic in Assam. The spiritual obligations gave the people a balanced and conscious view on life and made them elevated with a new and comprehensive outlook on life. There were many bitter moments in the history of Assam where interferences in religious ways by

adopting unholy practices prevailed. But it came to be subdued in course of time with the invoking of Vaisnava faith with its ramifications.

The movement celebrating the ideals of unity and love (in an age of internecine wars) harmonious coexistence and equality among people irrespective of caste and creed and thereby granted a sense of identity to all including the socially depressed in pursuing the religion of devotion (Mahanta 2007, 7).

The native population of Assam comprises mainly the Vaisnavite Hindus. The rise of the Neo-Vaisnava movement in the wake of the sixteenth century has added more richness to its socio-cultural, religious history and brought about a renaissance in the entire land. The Sattras or the Vaisnava monasteries as the content of this present study is concentrated on are an outcome of this movement, which in later years reached the pinnacle of glory with its multi-faceted characteristics. This chapter is an attempt to discuss in detail the genesis and development, structural features, organizational set up and the socio-religious and philosophical role of the Sattras and to give a comprehensive overview of the Sattras in general. The establishment of these institutions exercised and continues to do so even today, a great influence on the cultural and social moorings and community life of the Assamese Vaisnavas in particular and the community in general.

### **3.1. The Sattra Institution of Assam**

The new movement in Assam bears similarities being a part of the pan-Indian resurgence of Bhakti with other parallel Vaisnava movements in other parts of India. It became popular as the *Mahapurusiya Dharma* regarding Śaṅkaradeva as *Mahapurusa* or the fountainhead of the faith. At his initiative it began to be propagated as the *Ek saran nām dharma* meaning complete surrender to one God. This movement in the initial phase ushered a new era of socio-

cultural awakening in Assam, which can be stamped as completely devotional as well as humanist in form and popular in content.

The Sattrā institution envisaged by Sankaradeva and his apostles, is the high watermark and consummation of the Bhakti movement in Assam. Designed on *democratic norms and solidarity of the preceptor and the laity*, the Sattrā was conceived as a source of life, verve and vigour for sustenance of the tradition of religious learning, the pursuit of art and the new social order born out of their resurgent milieu (Mahanta 2007, 3).

And over the centuries the Sattras took a definite shape and started growing under the tutelages of a few disciples of the reformer. The chief among them was Mādhavadeva (1489-1596), under whose initiative the Sattras became heartland of the Assamese Vaisnava tradition. The era of Neo-Vaisnavism is reflected in this distinctively unique institution which is to a large extent connected to the social, religious and cultural life of the people of Assam. The importance of a Sattrā cannot be thus overemphasized. It has enabled the continuity of Vaisnavism in the cultural-historical context by performing multifarious functions and institutionalizing the Vaisnava philosophy in the heart and minds of the Assamese people so that it could go beyond time and space.

The Sattras in Assam are of both monastic and semi-monastic orders. The monastic Sattras are strict in their rules of conduct and follow a monastic order and are a prototype of the Buddhist monasteries or *gompas*. The *bhakats* or the devotees remain celibates throughout their lives and lead an extremely devotional and dedicated life within the campus of a Sattrā. They are known as *kevaliyās*, meaning lone or unattached. The semi-monastic Sattras have devotees who can lead a normal house-holder's life and perform all ecclesiastical roles under the Sattrā. In recent times however the number of celibates in the monastic Sattras has diminished though initially they out-numbered the non-monastic Sattras in the

region. It is very interesting to note that the types vary with a reference to the order or sect they are affiliated to.

### 3.1.1. Sattrā: Meaning and Significance

The term *Sattrā* is originally a Sanskrit word having two broad usages, firstly it meant a charitable institution lending alms and secondly meaning a sacrificial session lasting for several days. The word *Sattrā* was earlier used in the *Satapatha Brahmana* in the sense of a sacrificial session. The *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* explicitly denotes the word *Sattrā* for the sacrificial sessions in the form of a recitation and congregational reading of holy text, performed by the sages in the forest of Naimisa for a long period of thousand years, where Suta- Ugraśravā recites and explains the *Bhāgavata* to the sages. This act of listening and reciting greatly influenced the great Vaisnava saint to have perpetuated the new faith. The part played by Śaṅkaradeva probably reminded the listeners of the same role played by Ugraśravā in the assembly of holy sages (Sarma 1996, 143). This concept is also to mean the session of the discussion of the Brahman (*brahma sattrā*), being the Divinity, as also the performing of a sacrifice (*karma sattrā*). The Bhakti movement in Assam drew its inspiration from the *Bhāgavata* and likewise the term *Sattrā* came to be more acceptable as people began to understand it as a way of expounding the holy text and acted as a pious association propitiating the movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva and other apostles in later eras. Instead of the sacrificial part as the word *Sattrā* actually denoted, the *Bhāgavata* began to be sung, recited and discussed in many forms and ritual contexts in almost all of the *Sattras* thereafter to understand the concept of Bhakti as being influenced by the saint himself. The etymological meaning of the term *Sattrā* as a sitting or session or an instrument meant for liberating the good added a reasonable meaning to the term and in later phases different biographies of the saint gave different meanings to the *Sattrā*. The *Sattrā* may thus be defined as the



abbot of the monks of different orders following a disciplinary order and residing with solace. Vaiṅṭhanātha Bhaṭṭadeva in his *Saran Malika* defines Sattras as an institution where devotees pursue nine forms of devotion (*nava-vidhā Bhakti*).

O Vaiṅṭavas! that place is a sattras, adorable of gods, where the sole devotees of the Lord perform pure religious rites, where ninefold devotion to the Lord always prevails. All Vaiṅṭavas who live there are ever engaged in the chanting of the names of Hari (trans. Mahanta 2007, 99).

### 3.1.2. Genesis and Development

Since the time of their inception the Sattras have come across different stages of development. The genesis of a Sattras can be ascribed to the days of Śaṅkaradeva whose philosophy of *Ek saran nām dharma* set ideals to the Sattras institution. The Sattras grew as centres of developing culture through various art forms, language, literature and traditions of maintaining the religious order in the society. The first phase of which began with Śaṅkaradeva even though it could not take a permanent seat during his times. The Sattras as an organized institution with its paraphernalia took a concrete shape only with the help of two very important disciples of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva (1486-1596) and Dāmodaradeva (1488-1598), one of which was a celibate and the other a widower. “There are definite references in medieval biographies of saints to the part played by Mādhavadeva and Dāmodaradeva in giving a definite shape to the structural as well as organizational side of the sattras institution” (Sarma 1996, 146).

The Sattras took a monastic form at the initiative of Varṅsī Gopāldev, another scholarly mind behind the establishment of many important Sattras in the state. He introduced many changes to the structure and content of the Sattras towards the third decade of the seventeenth century. In the later phase of the

growth of the Sattrā institution, some of the Sattras received patronages from the Ahom kings as a result of which it provided the basis for a sound economy to several among them. Initially the Sattras were designated as only religious centers with a regular congregation reciting verses from the *Bhāgavata* and other texts written and set to music by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. But with time the Sattras took a definite shape, enriching the Assamese life socially and educationally and also contributing to the development of various forms of art and literature from within the literary and musical corpus that the two saints left behind.

### **3.1.3. Socio-Cultural and Religious Contributions**

Besides serving as the seat of religion in propagating the philosophy of Bhakti to its adherents, the Sattras have contributed a lot to the growth and development of the whole of the Assamese identity, through its cultural and literary engagements. The last few centuries of its establishment in different regions in the state saw the unprecedented rise in the social as well as cultural aspects. Hence the importance of these institutions does not only lie in its religiosity, it contributed much to the cultural development of the Assamese community. It is notable that the cultural manifestations grew up in the midst of its religious consciousness.

The Sattras are probably the best examples of providing distinctiveness to the Assamese community in general and the Vaisnavas in particular. Their contribution in every sphere of life is remarkable. One of their most notable contributions to the social life of the Assamese community is the inclusion of people from the sub-stratum of the society such as the underprivileged and backward classes. This has been continuing till date in most of the Sattras. Moreover the people from the tribal belt of Assam, who were for centuries outside

the portals of Hinduism, were also brought into the fold, which reduced the rigours of caste system to a considerable extent. Individuals irrespective of their caste, language, sect or creed were incorporated into the Vaisnava faith through the institution like Sattra.

The literary and educational contribution of the Sattras is commendable. They are the living centers of tradition and heritage. It has been serving as an important educational centre imparting not only the knowledge of the scriptures and holy texts but also involving the community in all literary forms like composing dramas, prose, religious texts (*kāvya*s) and devotional lyrics. Some of the prominent Sattras voluntarily took up the responsibility of establishing a primary school known as *tols* in the precincts of a Sattra for imparting education for the benefit of the community. These schools imparted formal education to the young and the old. The Sattras also served the purpose of a library where rare indigenous manuscripts of epics, dramas, hymns, theological treatises written by apostles of the movement and biographies of the saints (*carit-puthis*) and satra chronicles (*satra-vamsavali*) are preserved.

Sattras have marked a distinction in the cultural sphere too. The various art-forms such as music, dance and drama gained a tremendous surge in these institutions which includes *bhāonās*, *bargits*, *sattriya nāc*, *ankiya nāt*. Apart from it, other forms of art like crafts, sculpture and mask making came for popular practice. Mask-making or *mukha-śilpa* as commonly understood, is an exclusive art form practiced in a few Sattras of the district. It has served as a medium to integrate the commoners. Even to this day, the masks used in *bhāonās* are prepared with utmost care by the Sattra and village artisans. Since *bhāonās* form an important component of the cultural manifestations pursued in the Sattra circles, the art of mask-making has been further utilized as a useful economic resource. On many occasions only grotesque masks for sub-human figures and other mythical characters used in the *bhāonās* are prepared to serve the purpose.

However, now a days the artisans have started making masks with other decorative motifs on commercial basis. Some people adjacent to the Sattras, especially, the young generation are involved in this art-form, thereby getting engaged in a commendable manner. This is growing as an avenue of self-employment to a considerable extent. An example in this regard can be cited from the Samaguri Sattra in Koliabor sub-division of the district where *bhāonā* has been accepted as a major theatrical form and reciprocally the art of mask-making and the use of masks have attained much attention and appreciation from the theatre loving public. This can be accepted as a two way process; where on one hand it demands a participation or engagement from the community while on the other it creates a space for the development of economy. From the informed sources it has also been found that some of these masks are even sent outside the state for display and sometimes for use in other Sattras of the district and the state as well. This has contributed considerably to the growing popularity of the art and also to the socio-economic sphere.

#### **3.1.4. Division of Sects in the Sattra**

The post Śāṅkaradeva era witnessed schism within the Vaisnava order. As such, the *Mahapurusiya Dharma* got divided into four main branches or sects. These were popularly known as *samhati* or *samprada* meaning integration. This division took place only after the demise of Śāṅkaradeva and his immediate successor, Mādhavadeva. Since Mādhavadeva did not find any appropriate successors to succeed him, there continued a rift amongst the other contemporaries of their times. These differences in connection with the veil of leadership led them to segregate from the main sect. And hence the division took the form of new episodes in the history of Vaisnavism in the successive years. Though not any such major difference is seen in the fundamental practices and doctrines, yet a degree of difference is observed in respect to the four elements or

*cāri-bastu* viz, *guru*, *nāma*, *deva*, and *bhakat* or *bhakta*. One notable aspect of Assam Vaisnavism is the inclusion of individuals from both *Brahmins* (priestly) and *non-Brahmins* (non-priestly) into the faith. Śaṅkaradeva being a non-Brahmin, engaged Dāmodaradeva and Harideva to propagate his faith amongst the Brahmins. As he chose Mādhavadeva as his successor to lead the Vaisnava order, Dāmodaradeva and Harideva broke away and founded the *brahma samhati* and introduced some Brahmanical ritualisms into the otherwise simplistic religious order. Each of them including Mādhavadeva anointed twelve *dharmāchāryas* or preachers to carry on with the task of expanding the faith to every nook and corner of the state. Two other disciples of Mādhavadeva founded separate sects within the order and assumed responsibility to carry forward the gospel. All these resulted in the formation of four distinct sects, namely *purusa*, *brahma*, *kala* and *nika* respectively.

While all these apostles founded institutions called Sattras in different areas, they too anointed their disciples to go on expanding their institutional network which led to the growth of a large number of Sattras spread over the valley. These sects and their features may be characterized as follows:

*Purusa*, derived its name from the elder grandson of Śaṅkaradeva, Purusottama Thakur. “The followers of Śaṅkaradeva who accept the guru and deva or the worshipped God as the same, have given the epithet *Mahapurusa* to Śaṅkaradeva and since Śaṅkaradeva is regarded as the ‘Adi Purus’ or the father of the sect, they also claim, the name had its origin from that” (Rajkhowa 2012, 88). Hence of the *cāri-bastu*, namely *guru*, *nāma*, *deva* and *bhakat*, the *guru* is given the priority. Apart from the regular *nām-prasargas*, certain Brahmanical rites appropriating idol worshipping are done by the Sattras belonging to this sect.

*Brahma* sect came into vogue at the initiative of Dāmodaradeva and Harideva, who were appointed by the saint himself to propagate the faith among the Brahmins in Kamrupa. The main preachers of this sect were Brahmins and of

the four elements, the followers stresses emphasis on *deva*. Hence they worship the image of *Visnu* or *Narayana*.

*Kala* sect has Sattras established by the offshoots of one of the twelve preachers appointed by Mādhavadeva was Gopāla Āta. He had very cordial relations with Mādhavadeva and so initially it was felt that he would succeed the later. Emphasis was laid on the position of the *guru* who the followers considered as the representative of God. Gopāla Āta too annointed twelve disciples, six of whom were brahmins and the rest non-brahmins for further spread of the faith. They moved to different directions and established Sattras of this sect for religious propagation.

Susceptible to a rigorous code of conduct and unattached devotion, the *Nika samhati* Sattras were established by three important disciples among the twelve, Padma Āta, Mathurādas Burha Āta and Keśava Āta. The followers of this sect completely adhered to the *Ek saran nam dharma*. They lay importance on the worship of sacred scriptures rather than the practice of image worship.

The Sattras created by the heads of these principal sects spread to almost whole of the Brahmaputra valley influencing a majority of the population to shift to Vaisnavism. Throughout the history of Vaisnavism in Assam, however there have been a co-existence among all the four major sects without jealousy or enmity among them and they continue to flourish side by side.

### **3.1.5. Functionaries in a Sattra**

The functionaries in a Sattra consist of three principal categories of persons who are intimately connected to the management and functioning of each Sattra. The chief or head of a Sattra is known as the *Sattradhikāra*, who resides in the precincts of a Sattra. He acts as the spiritual guide and religious head of the Sattras. He supervises the initiation process of a novice and conducts all the

rituals. “His position is similar to that of the mohunt of medieval mathas or the abbot of the Christian monastic system” (Sarmah 1996, 141-42). However, the *Satradhikāra*'s performatory role in administration and other related duties in a house-holder Sattra are quite different from the monastic Sattra. In the absence of the *Satradhikāra* or at his demise, the immediate successor selected either hereditarily or democratically elected known as *deka-adhikāra* takes over the duties of the head.

The *bhakats* or the *bhaktas* mean the devotees who hold priestly positions in the Sattra or the one who spends the life of a celibate throughout. As mentioned earlier these *bhakats* have a stricter life in the monastic Sattras than the non-monastic ones. They are recruited to the Sattras at a very early age and under training under the vigilance of all elderly *bhakats*. They are initiated to the faith when they attain a matured age and acquainted with the religious teachings and practices. The devotees of the non-monastic Sattras could marry and have a family life rather. They play concurrent roles at a time. Even the head of such Sattras could have a family and simultaneously perform the liturgies in his Sattra.

The lay disciples from the laity are known as the *śiṣya* who make the majority of the functionaries of a Sattra. It is also important to note that every house-holder in Assam till the recent past was associated with one or the other Sattras in the state. And according to customs, each house-holder belonging to the Vaisnava faith has to undergo the initiation process in the Sattra he/she is affiliated to, before the start of his conjugal life. Earlier this was considered as mandatory for all disciples but now flexibility is noticed in many of the Vaisnava families. These *śiṣyas* play a major role in disseminating the ideals of the Vaisnava faith to a new horizon. It is generally the *śiṣyas* who take active part in the regular congregations accentuating the ethos attached to it.

Apart from these three important functionaries, there are other individuals who take care of the Sattras holding different positions within a Sattra. They are

known by different titles complementing the posts they are assigned. Each one has specified functions, be it administrative, financial or ecclesiastical. Examples are *medhi*, *bharali*, *āldhora*, *pujari*, *muktiār*, *deurī* and many others. They take care of the management of the Sattras along with the *nāmghars*. There are even instances when these office-bearers continue to serve the Sattras at the behest of the *Sattradhikāra*. Though their posts are temporal yet they are keen on performing the same in the name of God.

### 3.1.6. Structural Features of a Sattra

The aesthetic nature of these Sattras can very well be understood from the pattern of structure of the religious place as well as the place of stay of the monks. There were no permanent structures in the Vaisnava Sattras in Assam earlier than the eighteenth century. The Sattra became the nerve centers for learning and sustaining the traditions of religion and the social life of the people at large.

The Sattras have unique architectural patterns built with the available indigenous goods in the state, such as bamboos, timber, thatch grass etc. but with times the use of these products have been stopped. Concretized structures have replaced the chief architectural model of the Sattras, and most often the *nāmghars* have undergone such changes. Though this has been the case in most of the prominent Sattras yet the relics have not been removed from the original sites. The non-availability of indigenous products, natural hazards, lack of proper preservation etc. are other reasons which has brought changes to the architectural structures of a Sattra. An elaborative account on the structural elements of a Sattra has been made which are cited as under:

#### (a) *Nāmghar*:

The institution of *nāmghars* or prayer hall located in a village or in an urban setting is the central structure of a Sattra. Most of the *nāmghars*



are situated either within the boundary of a Sattrā complex or at a very close proximity to the Sattrā. It is the place where regular hymns *kirtana* brought the faith of Bhakti to the doors of the remotest villages and people thronged into accepting the comprehensive preaching of the saint. These are also known as *kirtan-ghar* in many places. The gathering in these institutions were kept open to all sections of people irrespective of caste, creed and class which in later period greatly ushered in a social upheaval which left its imprint credibly on the Vaisnavite society in Assam as a whole. The central periphery of the Sattrā is built on the main prayer hall which is important to every Sattrā. It is a wide rectangular hall meant for holding regular prayers (*nām-prasangas*). It also serves the purpose of undertaking all religious discussions as also act as the ground for staging dramatic plays on occasions. Even in some village it acts as the central ground for holding the village *panchayats* (local self-government at the village or small town level in India) at short intervals. The *nāmghar* of modern times are mostly built of concrete to protect it from the natural calamities and other shortcomings. It is a common feature in every Assamese village to have a *nāmghar* close to a Sattrā or to have one or two at a distance. However the size of a *nāmghar* depends on the resources available and the number of disciples of a Sattrā. All people from the village laity are generally welcomed to the *nāmghar*, not being specific on a particular day or an occasion. In recent times, however the *nāmghars* in an urban setting have also showcased what an ideal prayer hall in a village delivers. As observed by B. Kakati, “the *nāmghars* as central religious institution in the village combined the functions of a village parliament, a village court, a village church and a village school. He also added that these institutions served as

sheet-anchors of Assamese society in the midst of continually shifting political circumstances” (Chaliha 1998, 31).

**(b) *Maṇikūta:***

The second most important feature of a Sattrā is the *maṇikūta* which houses the valuable properties of a Sattrā. It is referred to as the *sanctum sanctorum* where mainly the idol of the deity, particularly in Sattras where idol is worshipped. Apart from these all other valuable manuscripts and scriptures used by the early saints are also preserved. This structure is built perpendicularly to the main prayer hall. “In many of the Sattras in the Barpeta district of Assam it is named as the *bhaj-ghar* because of the bent or arched roofs with drooping ends or the *bharal ghar* (store-house)” (Mahanta 2007, 101). Literally known to be the house of jewels, the *maṇikūta* is not open to all except for the clerics inside the Sattras concerned.

**(c) *Relic- shrine or the pada-śila:***

The *pada-śilas* are important components of a Sattrā which preserves the foot impressions on slabs or foot wears of the saints or religious heads. There is however only a few notable Sattras in Assam like the ones in Barpeta, Bardowa, Sundaridiya, Patbausi in Assam and Madhupur Sattrā in Kooch Behar which preserve these relics. Though they are not direct modes of worship even then they are kept as objects of veneration in the Sattras. Apart from these foot imprints of the saints, the *pada-śilas* also contain the articles of their daily use. On rare occasions these are taken out for the public and devotees throng in large numbers to have a glimpse of these relics as part of their regular obeisance to the great reformers.

**(d) Hati:**

The cloisters of huts known as *hatis* are normally built adjuncts to the main prayer hall for sheltering the monks or clerics of a particular Sattrā. Depending on the number of monks and also their status and needs the residential huts are built in four rows and sometimes in two to accommodate the same. These *hatis* are however meant only for the celibate monks who generally stay in the precincts of a Sattrā. Separate huts are also made available for the married and the general devotees outside the Sattrā premise known as the *bahir-hati* or *asramii hati*. The hut normally consists of one or more rooms depending on the consistent number of monks.

**(e) Bāṭcarā:**

The main gateway to a Sattrā is termed as the *bāṭcarā* which is very relevant to almost all of the Sattras of Assam. It is like a miniature replica of the *torāṇa-grha* of a Hindu temple. The entrance is marked by a small opening in the type of a roofed house. It is also known as the *karāpāṭ*. The chief dignitaries are first being received at the *karāpāṭ* and then escorted to the interior of the Sattrā on many important occasions. The *bāṭcarā* often confirm the presence of a Sattrā in a village or town. It acts as a gateway or corridor to the interior of any Sattrā. It is invariably a two roofed structure without any walls on the side.

**(f) Thān:**

Another remarkable feature of a Sattrā is the *Thān*. It is more than a place of worship for a Vaisnava devotee in Assam. It is generally the place where either the place where the chief apostles have worked and died or their relics have been preserved. As for example, Bardowa in Nagaon preserves the relics of the saint, Śaṅkaradeva in the form of his

foot-print and hence the name Bardowa *Thān*. The ones which have been preserving the relics of the early saints of the faith are also remarkably known as *Thāns*

### **3.2. The Sattras in the District of Nagaon: A General Perception**

Unlike all other prominent Sattras of the state, Nagaon is also the home to many Sattras of repute. Although there are no such elaborative accounts on the Sattras established in the district yet inferences have been drawn from all available sources as important content for the present study. These include the available source texts, historical accounts, and the narratives. The present study is an effort to draw insights into the multifarious functions of the Sattras lying in this district.

According to the primary sources available for the research there is an estimate of around 159 Sattras in the entire district combining all the four major sects or *samhati*. However the present study holds the fact that out of these nearly half of them are in a very dilapidated condition and the rest have come under the cover of extinction. The reasons are many. These aspects are elaborately discussed under different heads in the chapters of my research work.

Nagaon, as according to the historic evidences and available sources is the birth place of the fountain-head of Vaisnava faith in Assam, Śankaradeva. As such the Sattras established in this part of the region are unique and have played an indomitable role in spreading the message of Vaisnava philosophy since long. It also has a record of accommodating Sattras of all the *samhatas* together, thereby binding people from all sections in the society. They are mostly scattered in the three important sub-divisions of the district, viz, Dhing, Koliabor and Raha, apart from the main town, Nagaon. The survey has also added to the fact that most of them are located on the banks of the river *Kolong and Kapili* which is another

reason for growth and development of any institution. The history behind establishing these Sattras is unique. At various phases the chief apostles of the faith who had been appointed for further propagation and proliferation of the Sattras arrived and settled down in different parts of the district and established Sattras. The first of its kind is said to have been set up at Bardowa, after Śāṅkaradeva started propagating his new set of ideologies here. The apostles, at the initiation of whom the Sattras were established in Nagaon contributing to the socio-cultural and religious dimensions are mentioned in the chart below (*fig. 3*). They began to propagate in the whole of the state and once for a while made one of their bases in Nagaon. Being centrally located the district provided good grounds for establishing Sattras on the basis of the sect they adhere to. The number of disciples from the *purusa saṁhati* is however more compared to other sects. A serious note of concern is that amongst these, many Sattras have lost their integrity in the process of time and few have completely become extinct. The multi-sided reasons behind this non-operational status of the Sattras are discussed in detail in the following chapters emphasizing on the social-cultural, ecclesiastical and economic relations.

### **3.2.1. The Type of Sattras in Nagaon**

The Sattras lying in the district are all of the non-monastic order, where the head of the Sattra is married and runs a family. Simultaneously he plays the role of a *Sattradhikāra* where he hereditarily acquires the title and sometimes he is chosen on being the senior in the family when no immediate successor inherits. Most of the Sattras even have heads who is a celibate but the devotees are householders. There is no such prominent Sattra in the district now following a pure monastic order, but the ones belonging to *nika saṁhati* brought under the survey is under the threat of extinction, once having an influential role. A majority of the

Satras are either offshoots or branches of the main Satras established by the apostles in Majuli or the ones by the successors of the saint himself.

### 3.2.2. Satras of Nagaon under Various Sects

Another important content of the study is the division of sect in the *Mahapurusiya* order, which is popularly named as the *samhati*, a Sanskrit word and a synonym to *saṅgha* meaning cohesion or an association. By the end of the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, after the demise of the two main apostles of the Neo-Vaisnava faith, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva ideological differences simmered out amongst the various apostles of the Vaisnava movement. It resulted in the creation of various sects or divisions amongst them. The Satras ordained by the chiefs of the sects seemed to have settled mostly in the western part of Assam at the time of their inception. But at later stages they shifted their bases to many a place in central and eastern Assam. There is, in fact, no fundamental difference among the sects in matters of religious philosophy and theology (Dutta 1990, 50). Classified under four main heads, the *samhatas* have their own unique features and a history related to its origination. Furthermore, the sects became like an umbrella under which various clusters of Satras got instituted with an apostle as its head, most of whom were relatives or in some way or the other associated with the two main Gurūs, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. Corresponding to the divisions and strength in the number of disciples, Nagaon has Satras of the *purusa samhati* more in number than the rest. The number of Satras affiliated to this particular sect was higher, when they originally shifted their base from the initial stage itself. Regardless of the divisions, the Satras however have contributed a lot in terms of cultural, religious and socio-political considerations. Each Sattra in the district is affiliated to one *samhati* and accordingly they have been carrying the works of ordination as well as other associated activities of religio-cultural nature.

All the major Sattras of Nagaon are directly or indirectly linked up with one sect or the other. The following diagram is an extended division of the Sattras on the basis of the four major sects which got further expanded with many large or small Sattras led by the grandsons and great grandsons of the saint, disciples of the main apostles and other members of the *Ajnapar* Sattras<sup>2</sup>. All these Sattras gave a new direction and a constructive reorganization to the movement started by the saints.

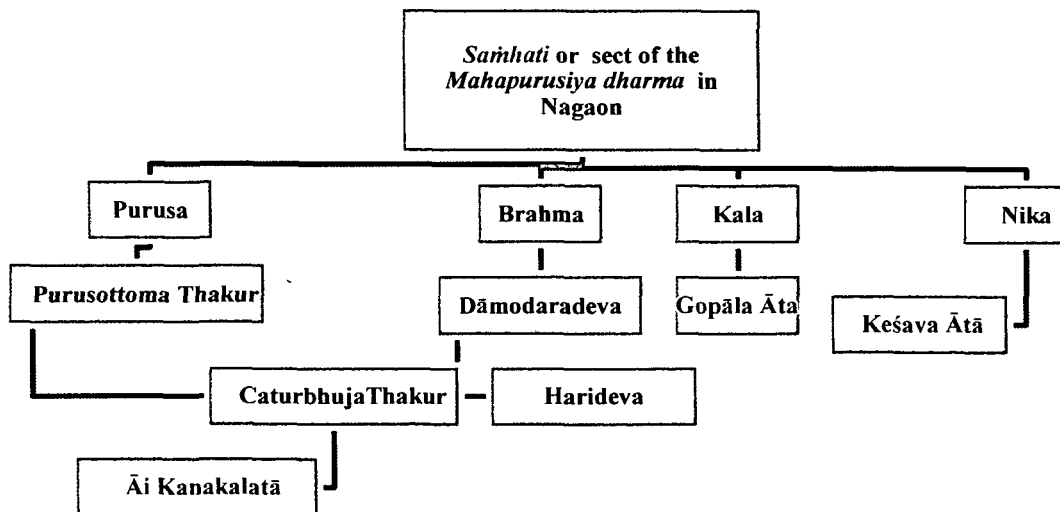


Figure: 3

An elaborative description on the *sāṁhati* division with reference to the ones scattered in the district will provide a lucid understanding of the Sattras affiliated to the sects or sub-sects.

<sup>2</sup> Sattras founded under the orders of the preceptor. Also known as the 'branch' Sattras.

### *Purusa Samhati*

Accommodating the largest number of Sattras in the entire district till date, *purusa samhati* is the most prominent amongst the four. It occupies a unique position amongst the Vaisnava of Assam. Originated under the leadership of Purusottama Thakur, a direct descendant of Śaṅkaradeva and whom Mādhavadeva acclaimed as the real successor. It was under the tutelage of Mādhavadeva that Purusottama attained his education. As chief protagonist of the sect, he appointed a set of twelve disciples as apostles to initiate adherents into the faith. In the subsequent years they set up many Sattras disseminating the teachings of the sub-sect, mostly in the eastern and central parts of Assam. Centrally located, Nagaon houses the maximum number of *purusa samhati* Sattras. It acquired its name '*purusa*' from the term *Mahapurusa*, the honorific title given to Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva too. The principal Sattras of this sect can be categorized as *bar-bārajaniyā* that is established by the twelve disciples of Purusottama Thakur; *saru- bārajaniyā*, established by the twenty-four disciples each of Caturbhuja Thakur, younger brother of Purusottama and his wife Kanakalatā Āi; and *Nāti Sattras* established by the grandsons of the saint.

After Purusottama's death, his legacy was further carried down by his younger brother, Caturbhuja Thakur and later on by his wife Kanakalatā Āi. Having a strong religious and organization acumen, Kanakalatā with another set of twelve apostles and her nephew, Dāmodara Āta rediscovered and reclaimed the main seat of the Guru, Bardowa. After a gap of almost 140 years Bardowa revived its lost glory with her untiring efforts. The descendants of this sect established two main Sattras of the sect- Narowa and Salaguri, which branched out into many new Sattras in the district at different phases. In the later years the Sattras got disseminated under the able leadership of many apostles, many of which had their branches in Nagaon like in other parts of the state and popularly known as the *Ajnapar Sattra*. Amongst them the Sattras of Karcung, Nācanipār, and Kobāikota



(see Appendix I) are the most important ones in the region. Moreover it has been observed that a few Sattras which have an anonymous origin also claim to have affiliated under the *purusa samhati*.

Emphasizing more on the concept of *nāma*<sup>3</sup> the disciples of this sect are more inclined to singing and reciting congregational prayers in praise of the Lord. That is why the Sattras under this sect in Nagaon are into the practice of conducting rituals accompanied by *nām-prasangas*. But in some Sattras Brahmanical rites are also followed in addition to adhering only to the chanting of prayers. In one or two prominent Sattras located in the region, the images of *Viṣṇu* are also kept as a seat of veneration. One distinctive feature of the Sattras affiliated to it is that the head belongs to both Brahmin and non-Brahmin community. As such there are some Sattras in Nagaon as mentioned in the Appendix-I where the initiation is given to the Brahmins by the non-Brahmins as also rituals are two-fold. On one hand the Sattras distinctively perform *nām-prasangas* as acts of special value, while on the other they perpetuated the Brahmanical rites within the fold. Most of them, according to the recent survey, have been able to retain the originality of Śaṅkaradeva's faith and pass it on to the younger generations. A special mention may be made of the initiation process of the women. In many of the Sattras it is equalized with men as a majority of the Sattras was established by the descendants of the saint from the female line. The *Mahantas* (heads) were mostly selected hereditarily but they were not necessarily Brahmins.

### **Brahma Samhati**

Based on the number of disciples affiliated to the sect and its popularity, it is the second important one in Nagaon housing approximately thirty-three Sattras. Originated from Brahma, the creator as the name suggests the Sattras under this

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<sup>3</sup> According to Vaisnavism in Assam as propounded by Śaṅkaradeva, one of the fundamental rudiments in devotional practices is *nāma* meaning chanting and recitation of verses in different ways and procedures. The other three are *deva*, *guru* and *bhakta*.

sect are strictly headed by Brahmanas, who basically pursue the cult of Bhakti and practice the Brahmanical codes. This sect evolved under the tutelage of Dāmodaradeva, an apostle of Śaṅkaradeva and the founder of the Dāmodariya Panthā and Harideva, another close associate and one of the four apostles appointed by the saint. Of the four major elements of Vaisnavism, this sect lays emphasis on *deva* i.e. God. To keep the images of *Viṣṇu-Narayana* in the form of *sālagrāma-sīla* in all the Sattras and also in every household is an important feature of this sect. Dāmodaradeva (1488-1598), born in a village near Bardowa was an egalitarian in spirit and in all admiration for Śaṅkaradeva. Śaṅkaradeva too elevated him to the apostolate order to initiate the Brahmins in particular. Moved by the reverence of the saint he inducted many Brahmins into the Vaisnava faith. He is said to have introduced worship of the image of Lord *Viṣṇu* with Brahmanical ritualism and observances of other Vedic and Brahmanical rites. Even though the *Mahapurusiya* order does not encourage idol worship, yet there are no differences between the two sects at the basic philosophical level, the *Mahapurusiya* and the *Dāmodariya*. Observing a ritual in a Sattrā of this sect in Nagaon, it was experienced that there is a huge assemblage of people for regular congregations, be it in the Sattrā or even in the village *nāmghar* belonging to the laity. Many of them also got special land grants from the Ahom kings during the Ahom regime in medieval Assam. The four affluent Sattras of eastern Assam popularly known as *cāri-sattras*, namely Āuniāti, Dakṣiṇapāt, Garamūr and Kuruwābāhi have their branches in Nagaon. The Sattras established by Varṁsīgopāladeva and Yadumaṇideva, the two important visionaries intensified the number of disciples of the sect by proselytizing in almost in all parts of the district. In the later stage these Sattras gained momentum under the tutelages of their descendants. The Kuruwābāhi Sattrā and Māhorā Sattrā having their lineage to the aforesaid apostles of the sect respectively (*see Appendix I*) are affluent ones amongst all. Moreover there are many branched-out Sattras affiliated to this sect by the same apostle in the district at various locations. It was observed that a few

of them have been influential since the time of their inception and is continuing since then. The rituals of *śaraṇa* and *bhajana* form an important feature of the Sattra institution in entirety administered by the Sattra chiefs of these Sattras also. Generally the members of families of laity affiliated to a particular Sattra including that of the *brahma saṁhati* are ordained *śaraṇa* by the *Sattradhikāra*. However, now a days individuals from other sects are also seen to receive initiation from Sattras to which they do not belong. And the practice is regularly going on in the Sattras of Nagaon affiliated to the aforesaid sect. A notable feature observed in the Sattras of *brahma saṁhati* is that the rituals observed by these Sattras are very much similar with those of the *purusa saṁhati* and thus, there is a mix of them, between both the sects. There is a propensity of initiating disciples from all the tribal belts surrounding the district and as such they constitute into a large unit adhering into this sect. In most cases, apart from following the daily devotional practices and rites, the Sattras perform rituals related to the Brahmanical fold.

### **Kala Saṁhati**

Considered to be the most liberal and heterodox in religious practices, the followers of this sect owe their origin to Gopāla Āta, one of the chief apostles appointed by Mādhavadeva who acclaimed him as the supreme religious head and successor of the order. The name of the sect is connected to the original abode of the preceptor, Kālijār. After his demise, his twelve apostles ordained by him, started propagation by building Sattras at different places of the state. He appointed six Brahmins and six non-Brahmins as disciples who took to the position of an *Adhikara* or *Mahanta* (heads of a Sattra). Among these twelve apostles mention may be made of Bar- Yadumaṇi, Saru- Yadumaṇi, Śrīram Āta, Nārāyana, Rāmāchandra descendants of whom, at later stages proliferated into many Sattras. The notable ones which have their off-shoots in Nagaon are the Dihing, Māyāmarā, Gajalā and Āhātāguri Sattras. Each of the above had at least

one prominent Sattras in the entire district under different sub-divisions. (*see Appendix I*). But there are no Sattras in Nagaon established by Gopāla Āta himself. The ones brought under survey are established either by a few amongst the twelve apostles or his sons and grandsons. The Dihing and Āhātaguri Sattras have the largest number of followers in Nagaon. The collateral branch of the Dihing Sattra in the district owes its origin to the days of the illustrious saint-poet, Bar- Yadumaṇi and later on it was made popular by one of his sons, Sanātana. This Sattra received grants from the kings and hence flourished under the royal patronage. In course of time it became one of the richest Sattras in Nagaon.

Among the four fundamental elements the *guru* plays an important role in this sect and it lays no emphasis on the Brahmanical order. They consider Śaṅkaradeva to be their only revered leader and assumed him to be the human representative of God. This sect has a history of initiating individuals belonging to different tribes and other socially backward classes into this fold. These features are also available in the Sattras affiliated to this sect in Nagaon. The major Sattras of *Kala samhati* in Nagaon have not only been instrumental in converting the Assamese caste-Hindu population such as the Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalitas into their fold on diverse occasions, but they have also included the tribal population, the Tiwas, Kacharis, Kaivartas<sup>4</sup> inhabiting the rural belt of the district.

### *Nika Samhati*

The Sattras under this sect originated after the formation of the other three sects of Mahapurusiya Sattras. The founders of the sect led by Mathurādas Burha Āta, Padma Āta, and others following the footsteps of Mādhavadeva took a path of ritual rigour and cleansing the faith from all other interpolations that appeared to creep into it. Hence a set of rules was set to purify a Vaisnav's mind and body. The followers of this sect strictly adhere to *Ek saran nām dharma* (devotion to

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<sup>4</sup> As mentioned in the list of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) population inhabiting in the state of Assam. Source: Census of Assam, 2001.

only one God) with a rigorous code of conduct with complete devotion. The three main apostles, namely Padma Āta, Mathurā Āta and Keśava Āta who were the close associates of Mādhavadeva evolved certain rules which were considered to be favorable for the followers then. The word *nika* meaning pure and clean is an important feature of this sect. The worship of scriptures is an important characteristic, while image worship is totally negligible.

Barpetta, Kamalabari and Madhupur are the prominent Sattras of this sect. There is a close association of these Sattras with the ones in Nagaon. The rituals and festivals connected to this sect are performed accordingly. The affairs of these Sattras are taken care of by the authorized officials at regular intervals. There are around six Sattras affiliated to *nika samhati* in Nagaon. The one which has been surveyed is the Barjahā Sattra founded by Keśava Āta, Upar-Doomdoomiyā and Nām Doomdoomiyā. The other Sattras which had once been established by the off-shoots of the above three apostles at different phases are Lāiāti- Barfāl, Sarufāl and Majufāl, Doomdoomiyā. But now the administration of these Sattras is in a negligible state. The prospect is quite different in Nagaon from the rest of the Sattras affiliated to this sect. Out of the six Sattras which were established in Nagaon at various times, one or two now wears a desolate look in its regular devotional practices. The Doomdoomiyā Sattra owes its origin to the days of Mathurādas Burha Āta, a chief apostle of this sect and it is only after his demise that the *nika samhati* Sattras became known. The lands which were bestowed upon by the kings in the name of religion are now encroached by the illegal immigrants, which is a major state of concern for many of the Sattras in Nagaon alone.

The various Sattras strewn within the hub of the Nagaon district, belonging to different sects and sub-sects of the Vaisnava culture in Assam have been playing an important role in integrating the whole Assamese society. Housing nearly 159 (approximate estimate) Sattras in the district of all sects, they

have been successful at appropriating the socio-cultural and religious uniqueness in the individuals. But the recent study of the Sattras has undergone certain anomalies which has greatly affected the consistency of these institutions of learning and culture. The causes and reasons for the irregularity in their functioning would be discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters. However, the *samhati* division in the Sattras is so far not been the lone cause of their decline. The existing Sattras with their collateral branches in and around the district have made successful attempts to retrieve the lost cultural heritage of the Sattras and the Vaisnava community in general but the schemas of religious proceedings have fluctuated over time, irrespective of the sects and selection of the heads of the concerned Sattras. Since the time of their inception these Sattras have more or less assimilated the larger Assamese population through conscious religious preaching constituting the Vaisnava fraternity in Assam. But now this prospect is slightly diminished to a considerable extent.

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Figure: 4 –The main entrance (*bārcarā*) to Rupnārāyaṇ Porābheti Sattra premise.

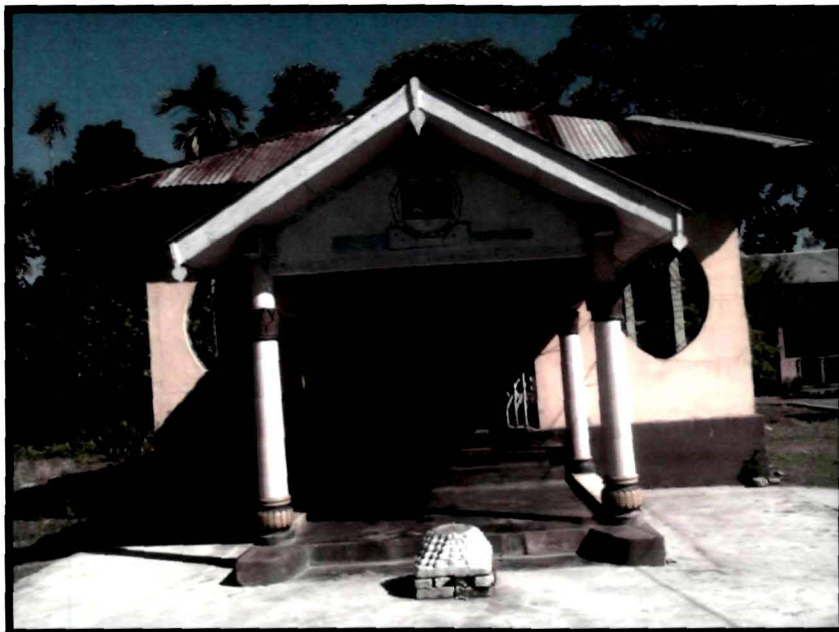


Figure: 5 – The main prayer-hall of Narowa Bālisatra, Dhing.





Figure: 6 - Important functionaries (*bhakats*) in their traditional attire.



Figure: 7 – A village *nāmghar*.



**Figure: 8 (a) – Relic-shrine inside a Sattrā.**



**Figure: 8 (b) – Srimanta Śaṅkardeva's foot-wear made of eight metals.**



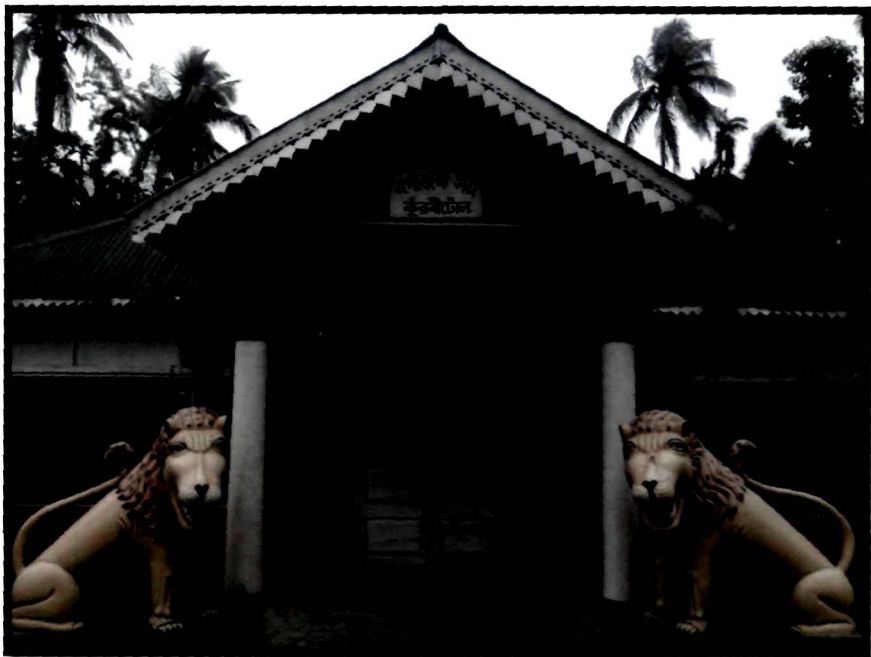
**Figure: 9 – A prayer hall with some important artefacts.**



**Figure: 10 - The entrance to the *Paduka thān* of Samaguri Sattra.**



**Figure: 11 – Sri Sri Brahmachārī Sattrā.**



**Figure: 12 – The premise of the *nāmghar* of Karatipār Bogajon Sattrā.**

## CHAPTER 4

### RITUAL: FORMS AND PRACTICES IN THE SATTRAS

Throughout human history, rituals have always been playing a significant role in spite of the fact that they vary in their content, form and context. While normally rituals are performed on specific dates and occasions, there are some which are practiced at random intervals in compliance with laid down canons. A ritual refers to “a predictable and regular observance of some act or procedure, which has a symbolic element resulting in the inculcation or reinforcement of shared values and beliefs” (Coyne and Mathers 2011, 74). Individuals in the society are often bound with certain elements and values necessary in day to day lives. And for the well being of the society, it is important to understand how rituals connect our ways of life. A ritual is not something one is audience to but something one is participant in. Likewise it is not something that can happen to someone but something one chooses to be a part of (Rothenbuhler 1998, 125). While discussing rituals in the context of socio-religious institutions, it becomes vital to understand why rituals are important in the socio-cultural life of an institution and how it contributes to the overall health of a particular community based on its ritualistic performances. “Ritual is often explained by anthropologists and sociologists as a means by which communities define, cement, and justify social relations” (Gazin-Schwartz 2001, 273).

#### **4.1. Rituals in the Context of Sattras in Assam**

To interpret rituals in the context of Assam Vaisnavism as observed in the Sattra institutions, an understanding of the varying contexts of such observances is necessary. Rituals are an important component of religion and this perspective is quite popular. Cultural precepts and practices take tangible forms of expression through various ritual actions. It is always possible to consider a ritual in terms of



'latent' social goals or the explicit religious meaning of ritual symbolism, bearing in mind that ritual acts do endow culturally important cosmological conceptions (Green 1997, 735). To have a first hand information or understanding of the above several field surveys were undertaken, as often anthropologists and historians of religion do, for interactions with the laity of various Sattras, scrutinizing the actions adopted during such rituals and observing them as distinct cultural texts practiced through ages. For the purpose of this study, the researcher presents a survey of the rituals concerning the essential features or identifying marks of the rituals in the Sattras of Nagaon in particular. In general the Vaisnava followers in Assam engage in a wide variety of collective and individual ceremonies, practices denominating the term ritual. As suggested by Michel Mohr, (in Heine and Wright 2008, 205), "the rituals serves as a prism to view various images provided by Zen institutions in the past and the present, to connect different periods of history and to bridge concepts and practices." We can look at the day to day rituals or the same observed on account of the festivals within the Vaisnava community specially the ones practiced in the Sattra institutions and the *nāmghars* of the district today. The rituals which are continuing for several centuries apart from impacting the religious mind of the people, are working as a means of communication and dialogue among various layers of people and thus contributed to the understanding and harmony of the society for ages which is why the Sattras in the district continue to be vibrant institutions or centers of social communication. And the institutions as well as their rituals help us to 'connect different periods of history'. Moreover my interest in understanding the rituals in the Sattras is to examine the lived dynamics of how the rituals been undertaken and how people create, communicate and change themselves through the ritualized behavior. "The historical approach is mainly centered on the role that ritual plays in the process of transmitting the cultural and religious knowledge and symbols and in the formation of the identity and invention of the past of the society, community, or group" (Green 1997, 736).

Governing the religious belief and worship, the rituals are at the nucleus of a Sattrā and in most cases they are the repositories attaining a canonical status. Prompted by such an intent, the study sets to examine the ritual observances of the numerically small but culturally rich Vaisnava community, seeking to explore its distinguishing features and epistemological foundations on which these rituals are based. One of the most notable features in the performance act is that the *Sattradhikāra* or the chief of a Sattrā is amongst the few chosen ones responsible in handling all ritualized behaviors in his own Sattrā and sometimes outside it. From the perspective of a cultural transmission taking place in a Sattrā, the privilege of the chief heading the Sattrā is nonetheless of great social importance. Therefore practice of certain rituals by more participants assembling in the institution is a rule for the community. It is interesting to draw a formal link between the institutions and the ritual process. With respect to ritual, the potential for institutional advantage is obvious. And it happens so periodically that the institutional actors or the mediators get a notion to invent a particularly practical ritual and attach themselves for a practical purpose giving meaning to an already established and authentic ritual.

The rituals such as the initiation rites in the Sattras create a special bonding between the individual and the one who initiates him into the faith and also draws the communion between him and the spiritual world. These rites can be described as the traditional patterns of religious activity embedded in the cultural consciousness of the individuals which in most cases are founded on religion and religious precepts. Many of such rituals in the Sattras, as discussed below, emerging even from mundane or natural reality seek to relate it with the divine or trans-natural and thereby in a state of sacred-secular continuum.

The Sattras operating as platforms all ritual actions are more often through an endeavour to conduct the rituals in a specially designated location like the *nāmghar* using specific materials and involving regulated motions to perform the act drawing similarities from Turner (1967) in demonstrating the case of the

Ndembu rituals. He further adds in his analysis of rites of passage that a ritual often constructs and reaffirms social relationships in part by inverting the everyday relationships among people, and between people and objects. This creates a relationship between the designated actors who perform the rituals and the people who are participants in the ritual process. Moreover as stated by Renfrew (1994, 49), rituals as social and communal activity, involving specific actions are carried out in special ways at special places, on special days and at special times. This view can be adopted in the case of the Sattras where we consider the roles played by various ritual acts in establishing and maintaining social relations amongst the members of the community and they allow us to examine the ways different ritual sites and items express different social relations. For example the Samaguri Sattra in Koliabor houses the *guru-paduka*, a symbolic or relic representation of the saint's feet. A new initiate at the end of a formal ceremony is led to it for another simple ritual of paying obeisance to the relic. Also, once in a year especially during Bihu this item is exhibited for public display as mark of veneration as also as part of the ritual. This draws a link between the individuals and the members of the Sattra in establishing social relations by way of participation. It also 'incorporates the individuals into a larger social entity' (Islam and Zyphur 2009, 114). And this is an essential feature of rituals.

#### **4.1.1. Ritual as Forms of Communication**

Rituals are an important means of communication and communion amongst all concerned individuals in these institutions. Hence, by nature all forms of rituals are communicative. As mentioned by Rothenbuhler (1998, 4-5), "rituals are types of symbolic behavior in social situations." It often accompanies a voluntary performance by the individual in a perpetuated form. Emile Durkheim's notion of rituals as communal means by way of which the beliefs and ideals of a culture are communicated to the individual members of a particular



society is taken into account while discussing the Sattras from the lens of building a communicative process. From this premise rituals of all forms in the Sattra institutions in Nagaon or elsewhere can be viewed as a part of a communication involving both the members of the laity, the practitioners as well as the performers. The rituals thus connect the Vaisnava ideals to the practitioners and vice-versa. The interactions that hold place within the rituals acts as a way of communicating with each other. It may be appropriate “to adopt the term ‘ideologies of communication’ with reference to culture as a whole set of ideas about how information flows between people and the natural and super-natural worlds” (Robbins 2001, 599). Through prayers one finds the sacred communion with the Almighty and in most cases we find the *Sattradhikāra* acting as mediators between God and men. He acts like a mediator. Sometimes it so happens that the rites performed by others are not compatible for many, as marked very often in the case of urban dwellers than the rural folks. In their act of participation the individuals fail to communicate with the ritual procedures since by virtue they keep distance from these. They are mostly occasional visitors to the Sattras. No doubt, the best way to come to understand “the point or power of a ritual is to engage in it oneself, even if only empathically” (Wright 2008, 10).

#### **4.1.2. Ritual as Action-Oriented Performance**

All rituals commence with a performance. The aesthetic component of the performatory nature of a ritual determines two important characteristics. One, a ritual is an action with a pre-conceived notion. This notion is shared by the members of the group as always being a part of the performance. Secondly, a ritual is always a performance for someone. “Ritual is performed, performance being an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (Bauman 1989, 262). An essential form of a ritual is the bodily movements of the one who is involved in

the process. This makes the ritual more accommodating in their deliverance. The rituals in the Sattras certainly accompany actions which are regulated and confirmed by the performer. The individuals' lives are structured by way of communication through these performances.

Ritual as a category of action is characterized by predictable structure over time, a structuring that is commonly labeled repetitive. A ritual may be defined as a combination of the actions called rites (socioreligious ceremonies following specific traditional patterns), which in their turn, may be divided into smaller ritual units in the structure of a ritual (Green 1997, 734).

It becomes the duty of every individual within the community to collectively attend to a ritual performance. Most of the ritual ceremonies as discussed in this chapter involve the entire community. The collective well being of the community (Rappaport 1968, in Schechner 1976, 211) is fairly dependent upon a common body of performance related to ritual activities. With this Turner (1982, 31) attested that the "whole community goes through the entire ritual round." In the ritual phase of aboriginal society of Australia, Durkheim (1912, 217) wrote, 'the population comes together concentrating itself at specific places....' The concentration takes place when a clan or a portion of the tribe is summoned to come together" (Alexander 2004, 535). In a Sattras in the present context, participation in any ritual act is contingent on both the participant and the observer. Participation in such acts are determined by the individuals concerned or the entire community. It is considered to be a natural and necessary dimension of the ongoing ritual process upheld in a particular Sattras.

Ritual performance not only symbolizes a social relationship or change; it also actualizes it. There is a direct effect, without mediation (Alexander 2004, 537). The 'actors' ordained in our discussion are the chief heading a particular Sattras or the members indirectly involved with the Sattras participating in any of the ritual act within the demarcated areas can be cited as the insitutionalized

masters of a ritual performance. The *Sattradhikāra* perform the rituals in a particular place and assures the transmission of meaning of their performances to the observing audience which is the relevant community at large. The success of any ritual act upheld by them depends largely on their skills and these skills by and large are intertwined with other characteristic dimension that allow the entire process of performing the particular act to be fused in simple social organizations. Both the participants and the observers of the rituals lay claim that they have an outstanding force to act and enact in the performance. As protagonist of the whole process of rituals pertaining to these institutions, the performers have to transform their interest to a level which could propel a persuasive symbolic form. Therefore, “the challenge confronting individual and collective symbolic action in complex contemporary societies, whether on stage or in society at large, is to infuse the meaning by re-fusing performance” (Alexander 2004, 548).

#### **4.2. The Historical Record of Rituals in the Sattras: A General Overview**

The general consensus among the Vaisnava followers in Assam is that the rituals practiced according to the conventional Vaisnava ideology and propagated by the two propounders, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva had been enacted with a combination of practical necessity and compassion for the common people. With the proliferation of Sattras in the later half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the rituals found their way in Vaisnavism spreading to the lay population. A set of ritual activities were disseminated among the masses through these socio-religious institutions and most importantly concentrated in the *nāmghars* regardless of the ritual space. The *maṅikūta* serves as the *sanctum-sanctorum* representing a sanctified ritual space with placement of the sacred text, the *Bhāgavata*. Moreover it infuses religious significance and the prayer hall serves as the powerful venue for the ritual performances, in addition to the regular ordinations and the spread of principles of the faith. As formal modes of conduct, the Sattras lying in different

locations of the state has been going through different acts of rituals, ceremonies and festivals at different points of time. And it holds good in respect of the Sattras in Nagaon, the area of the present study. For an easy understanding of the daily as well as occasional conduct of ritual performances in the Sattras, a description of various kinds of rituals, accompanied by religious ceremonies and festivals which are exclusively observed by a Vaisnava individual are narrated in brief below. Apart from the regular ritual practices there are certain festivals accompanying the rituals which imply their performative nature.

The Sattras are invariable unique models to establish various rituals as a pre-contained set of acts constituting an essence of culture. The Sattras of Nagaon mostly cater to the calendrical rites and the rites of passage. Calendrical rites are periodic, recurring, and form a clearly distinguishable group of their own (Green 1997, 735). These rites occur regularly in the lives of the community. The rites of passage includes the initiation process, the death and birth anniversaries of the saints. These rites highlight the social position of an individual in the community. In the Sattras too, these rites are held only once in the life of the individual.

The important components of any socio-cultural institution are the performances related with a ritual process. And so thus we see a constant mode of interaction through the ritual performances in the Sattra. So before going into the foray of ritualistic aspects of these socio-religious institutions, it is important to take a note of the various rituals and occasional practices held from time to time. Among the rituals regularly performed in the Sattras there are two distinct varieties: those practiced on a daily basis (*nitya*) and other periodic rites (*naimittika*) which are performed at a particular frequency and in some ways more meaningful. Associated with it are the annual rituals which include the beginning of the Assamese New Year (*fig.13*), remembrances of the saints' birth and death and commemorating the founder(s) of a particular sect of the Vaisnava order, rituals of initiation and prayers in the form of *nām-prasangas*. Most of the

rituals thus observed are calendrical and are repetitive in nature. Every year certain rituals accompanied by ceremonial observances and festivals are held in these institutions. They form an array of actions along with religious performances. The major forms of rituals conducted in the Sattras are cited as under:

- a. **Initiation and allied ceremonies:** This is an important ritual in a Sattra. Once an individual takes up this faith s/he has to undergo a process most commonly known as *śaraṇa* and *bhajana* to confirm their entrants into the faith. The head of a Sattra often performs this rite, while in his absence it is done by somebody entrusted with the responsibility. In many a case it is found that this ceremony is held in a communal form, wherein an individual belonging to a family with which the Sattra is traditionally connected or is initiated into the faith through certain strictures, deemed necessary for anyone ordained into it for the first time. The initiation ceremony along with the rituals of a new disciple or devotee being accepted into the faith is also accompanied by the rites of installing a new *Sattradhikāra*. As in the Buddhist monastic order and Christian Benedictine order, a novice has to undergo a probationary period of at least a year or two, so also in Assamese Vaisnava order a newly initiated member in the Sattras of celibate order has to spend a few months in probation and training before formally being taken up into the community. But this is not so rigorous in the case of the member of a house-holder Sattra. Once the newly anointed head or sometimes his immediate successor and other intermediaries go through a period of basic training in each ritual practice, they begin to specialize in the act. The formalization of the initiation rites of the role of the head takes the form of a ceremonial performance that takes place either in the Sattra or the village *nāmghars*. The formal staging of this spectacular event highlights the hierarchical stratification embedded in appointing the head or abbot of a Sattra.

- b. **Daily prayer services:** A performance based ritual is held regularly in the premises of a *nāmghar* or in a Sattrā continuing from morning to noon. On several occasions they continue till late at night. There are basically three distinct divisions of regular prayer-service, at morning, forenoon and evening services respectively, but now we find only two services and sometimes four commonly known as *dū-prasanga* and *cāri-prasanga*. In the village *nāmghars* also normally two services are held, one in the forenoon and the other in the evening. *Nām-prasanga*, a common coinage for this contains a set of prayers in the form of recitals from the sacred texts, the *Kirtana*, the *Nāmghosa*, the *Bhāgavata* and the *Gita*. The chanting of prayers is accompanied by the beating of drums, cymbals and clapping of hands. Everyday at least one fascicle from the *Bhāgavata* text is read by each *bhakat*. Normally there are fourteen such services to be performed from morning till evening in the three *Mahapurusiya* orders of the Sattras while twelve are followed in the sects of Dāmodaradeva and Harideva. On the contrary, in several Sattras where there is a lack of devotional pursuits due to lesser number of devotees participating in the act, the number of prayer sessions is also less. Rituals cannot be performed without bodily participation (Rothenbuhler 1998, 62). Likewise this ritual of offering prayers also demands a bodily participation from the congregation. The performative aspect of the bodily participation is an index of the position of the performers as well as the meaning and form of the practice. More frequent during the month of *bhādra* (July-August) are the prayer services in the Sattras particularly belonging to the *Mahapurusiya* order because of the anniversaries of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva's death. And it carries great significance to women as a set of such rituals in the form of prayer services is solely performed by them. Since the Sattras of Nagaon do not, at all, restrict women from entering

the premises, the evening services of prayers are generally conducted with the laity in attendance. This is one of the key events in the Vaisnavite calendrical rituals that bring together the entire community.

Moreover on several occasional ceremonies in the Sattras, special rituals are inducted to the daily routine of prayer services. These special rituals accompanied by performances are notably the *ojā-pāli*, *natuwā-nāc* and *uthā-nām*. These are frequent in most of the Sattras, each depicting the different forms of prayers along with some performing acts. Performance here is marked as 'an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience'. Borrowing this idea from Bauman (1989) such rituals in the Sattras are seen as performances attracting an audience and having an aesthetic component. The *prasangas*, as observed in many of the *nāmghars* in both rural and urban setting, is practiced at least twice each day, mostly the morning and evening service, always at the same time and at a prescribed manner. In addition to this there are other rituals like chanting of verses from the sacred texts or scriptures, singing of *bhatimās*, *gunamala*, *nāmghosa* etc. that follows the same frequency. The fourteen agendas of prayer-services known as *chaidhya prasanga* were common in the Sattras belonging to the *nika*, *purusa* and *kala samhati* but now due to constraints of time and space, this has eroded to a great extent. However, on special occasions, Bardowa still performs this congregation of prayer-services from morning till night. On many instances, *ojā-pāli* and *natuwā-nāc* are performed through singing and dancing along with the clapping of hands and cymbals.

- c. **Conferment of rosary:** This is another important ceremony held high in many Sattras of Assam. A devotee confirmed into the faith is ritually bestowed with a string of beads carved out of basil plant or sandal wood. The process of confirming a rosary to the devotee undergoes the same

ritual procedures as in initiation. Only a devotee passing through the complete process of initiation and ordination, ie. *śaraṇa-bhajana* may be invested with a rosary. The act of conferring a rosary is more prevalent in the Sattras of both *purusa* and *brahma samhati*. The act involves a strict procedure for each member from the community reflecting their status and rank accordingly. In certain Sattras of Nagaon like Narowa, Salaguri, Letugram, Karcung, Nikāmul (Uriāgaon), Puranighar, Māhorā (Dimow), the ceremonies of initiation and conferment of rosary are normally performed at the *nāmghar* and sometimes outside the campus of the Sattra according to convenience of time and place.

- d. **Rituals related to worship:** The relationship between worship and ritual is important in a Sattra. It involves both prayer and bodily movements and these are reflected in the iconography or images of the deity being worshipped. Though image worship is not very popular in the Sattras yet the worship of the image of Lord *Viṣṇu* is common to the Sattras of *brahma samhati*. It forms the most important item of daily services. Apart from this, several Sattras also have the *śalagrāma* as an item of daily worship. Relic worship is an important phenomenon associated with the ritual practices in a Sattra. The foot impressions and footwears of the Gurus and different apostles of the faith, known as *padaśila* and *paduka* respectively, kept in many of the Sattras as replicas to be worshipped. The places sanctified by these relics are known as *thāns*. In addition to the conventional ritual ceremony, are also included the readings from the sacred texts, chanting of hymns in the form of *mantras* and invocations to the established deity or images.
- e. **Daily rituals by the devotees:** There is not much difference in the daily rituals to be performed either by a house-holder devotee or the celibate



monk. Each has a similar set of rules of conduct. The individual, as soon as he is ordained to the faith has to observe certain rites and practices, which are essential for maintaining the status quo social order. Repetition of prayers in the form of chanting is another phenomenon in all the Sattras. They join together for the congregations. “In all activities, whether religious or secular, sacred names of the deity should be uttered or remembered” (Sarma 1996, 181). This daily congregation symbolizes the unity amongst the members of the community and also the resident monks.

#### **4.3. Interpreting Rituals of the Sattras of Nagaon**

The Sattras in the district have always featured rituals in a more sophisticated and elaborate way. In the major branches of the Sattras under the three prominent sects, with the efforts of a few activists maintaining the traditions the rituals are made more relevant in a rapidly modernizing society. Though not much in a collaborative way, they have been popularizing the faith and transferring ideas through its variant forms of rituals. The regularity is observed more in the celebration of important festivals integrating more people into the faith and also contributing largely to the socio-cultural and religious life of the Assamese community. The performance of the rites varies among different sects and order of Sattras scattered in the region and has provided instances of change in the ritual forms. These rites and rituals have identified the ways of life of each individual in the community. In most cases the rituals have become the tool of worship for them. There is no such irregularity in the performances and pursuit of the rituals. And if any, those are at an individual level. Collectively rituals have followed a social order. These are more of a collective action and a communicative process in these Sattras.

A survey of almost a dozen of these institutions reveals that many of the Vaisnavite ritualists have taken the form of initiation and ordination (*śaraṇa-bhajana*) and the regular conduct of prayers (*nām-prasanga*) as a model for ritual practice and sought to encourage all the members of the community to carry on these acts further. By this act of getting involved in a particular ritual with a long tradition, the individual feels connected and the process necessitates a sense of belongingness.

#### 4.3.1. Episodic Festivals Conducted in the Sattras

Rituals and rites differ not only in terms of its occasion but also in terms of its subject. The community life is often seen to be punctuated by a series of events and celebrations. The Sattras are in no way an exception to it. Ritual acts as an element to all of these. Warner (1959) illustrates the sacred reunion and symbolic form of the celebrations. Unlike all other Sattras in the state, the ones in and around the district observes certain festivals and ceremonies corresponding to the faith. Often we see festivals have particular ceremonies related with them. For some activities such as the initiation process as discussed above, the day specified for the particular occasion is only hypothetical. Even special devotional functions such as *pāl nām*, *Bhāgavata-pāth* are supposedly held in one part of the year and sometimes not even performed in many of these institutions. Other similar activities such as reading verses from the sacred texts or scriptures occur daily and are not included in the monthly services. More often some other activities occur as indispensable ones like the *tithis* and they do not usually occur as monthly or regular as dates reasonably vary. One fine example is cited from the daily conduct of prayer services in the Sattras and most often in the *nāmghars*, being the focus of the events of a Sattra. There are significant variations in the manner of *nām-prasangas* between the four major sects or *samhati*, Sattras or even accompanying different periods of celebration round the year. But not any

particular variation undercuts the fact that the regular prayer services especially held in the month of *bhādra* as the most frequently associated rituals of a Sattra is still at the centre of the contemporary Sattra rituals as has been continuing for many years. As understood from the previous discussion, each village in the district is affiliated to a sectarian order of the Sattra or *samhati* as most popularly defined. The rituals vary at different times irrespective of the sects. As mentioned already, Nagaon houses a majority of *purusa samhati* Sattras (see Appendix I). Speculations are that only if these festivals and ceremonies accompanied with all socio-religious practices and cultural forms are preserved and practiced, the Sattras can excel in all spheres. In general most of the festivals celebrated in the Sattras of Assam have a Pan-Indian taste and that is why the researcher has restricted only a few observances which are exclusively and more significantly related to Assam Vaisnavism.

*Figure: 13- Month-wise observances in a year according to Assamese calendar<sup>5</sup>.*

<i>Month</i>	<i>Observances</i>
<b>1. Śrāvāna ( July-August) / Bhādra (August-September)</b>	<b>1. Janmāṣṭami</b>
<b>2. Phālguna ( February-March)</b>	<b>2. Phālgutsava/ Doul utsava</b>
<b>3. Kārtikka (October- November)</b>	<b>3. Rāsa-yātrā/Kāti Bihu</b>
<b>4. Māgha (January-February)</b>	<b>4. Māgh Bihu</b>
<b>5. Vaiśakha (April- May)</b>	<b>5. Bohāg Bihu</b>
<b>6. Bhādra/ Kārtikka/Vaiśakha</b>	<b>6. Pāl Nām (usually)</b>

The above table clearly indicates that these are the most widespread and common festivals and ceremonials held with a set of ritual practices in the Sattras spread out in the whole of the district. This has been detailed out to identify the ones performed on a regular basis at all the major *nāmghars* or in the boundaries of a Sattra and those which directly involves the laity in the process.

- 1. Janmāṣṭami:** Commemorating the birth of the Lord, *bhāonās* are held at several places which continue for several days. People from the village laity as also from the neighboring villages throng in large numbers to observe the festival in the Sattras. The *nāmghars* of the concerned Sattra are illuminated with recitals and prayers accompanied by a musical

<sup>5</sup>In Assam the New Year is calculated on the basis of the solar month. According to the lunar calculation of the year a particular occasion may change the actual day or date based on the person's birth or death. Since the Vaisnavas in Assam stick to the month/date of the particular anniversary, it does not move from the actual month.

orchestra. It is this time of the year that the Sattras receive funds generated from the village laity. As Lord *Krisna* is the sole deity worshipped in Assam Vaisnava philosophy, this festival gets an elevated decree amongst the Assamese Vaisnavites. Nagaon is no exception to this. Till present date, many Sattras celebrate it with great pomp and show reflecting their culture as well as the religious fervor. In most Sattras<sup>6</sup> of the district, *janmāṣṭami* is celebrated by performing *puja* (idol-worshipping) and also by way of congregational prayer. The way of celebration however varies from Sattra to Sattra. Congregational prayer services are held on the night of the Lord's birth. Parts of the *Bhāgavata* are read out describing the events leading to the birth of *Krisna*. At several *nāmghars* and Sattras special prayer services are held by women known as *pācāti* to mark this occasion. Children from the villages also participate in 'din-bhāonā' (a kind of *bhāonā* performed during the day). While many Sattras in Nagaon celebrate it with a two-day long programme, there are many who perform it for a day.

2. **Phālgutsava/ Fakuṇa/ Douḷ-utsava:** Known by different names in various parts of Assam, this is an important festival celebrated in spring. It is also called *phakuwa* because *phaku*, a coloured powder specially made from grinding petals of flowers are sprinkled and rubbed on faces of people. It is a very lavish and big festival celebrated in most of the Sattras in Nagaon. It is however a gala affair in the Bardowa Thān which has gained popularity over the years. It lasts for three days with various rituals. Celebrations, though vary *samhati* or sect-wise but it has portrayed the sanctity and richness of the festival. It has much similarity with the Pan-Indian celebration of *Holi* (the festival of colours) especially in the northern part of India. It was Śāṅkaradeva who had initiated to

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<sup>6</sup> Examples are Dahghariyā Jajori, Narowa Bālisatra, Kobāikota, Karcung and Kuruwābāhi. In these Sattras the rituals accompanying the festival commences both ways.

include *phālgutsava* or *doul-utsava* in his new-found creed. Since his religion genuinely focused on devotion to God through *nāma-dharma* i.e. through reciting verses from the sacred texts, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the Gita, all the days of this festival are enjoined with *khol-tāl* recitals, *nagara-nām*, *āiati-nām* etc. People sprinkle colours on each other and take out the idol of Lord Krisna from the *doul mandir* (fig 40) in procession singing *holi-geets* accompanied by cymbals, drums and other traditional items. These *geets* or songs are meant only for this occasion. Moreover Śaṅkaradeva's chief disciple, Mādhavadeva composed a few *bargits* specially meant for this festival. *Bhāgavata-bhraman* is another distinguishing feature during this festival in which the holy text is carried out in procession to mark the significance of the festival.

3. **Bihu:** One of the major festivals of the Assamese, Bihu is also celebrated in the Sattras with grandeur. The three Bihus celebrated at different periods of the year, namely *Kāti*, *Māgh* and *Bohāg* have gone beyond the extent of celebration in the Sattras along with the community. With a holistic approach, the Sattras arrange for ritual prayers which are held in the *nāmghars*. Devotees throng in to offer their homage and take part in the rituals. In the villages special fairs are held, devotional programmes are conducted where everyone from the laity participates be it young or old. It is especially during the time of the New Year in the month of April when the items used for covering the *guru-āsana* or *simhasana* are changed and decorate them anew. In recent times, there are new elements in the celebration of all the three Bihus both at the urban and rural areas of the district.
4. **Rāsa-yātrā:** Another very distinct and unique festival celebrated with ritual ceremonies in the Sattras of Nagaon and even in the remotest parts

of the district is the *Rāsa*, popular in its content and form. It takes place in the month of October-November on a full-moon day according to the Assamese lunar calendar. This festival is normally celebrated for three days but sometimes it stretches for four to five days. “It signifies the Lord’s amorous alliances with the milk-maids in the autumnal season” (Sarma 1996, 185). The festival has undergone many changes in recent times. It is not alone confined within the Sattrā premises. The type and venues of celebration has undergone changes in due course of time. Various stalls are set up displaying various items made of clay depicting incidents from the life events of Lord *Kṛiṣṇa*. To keep pace with the modern day trends special stalls displaying varied items are set up to attract crowds. Moreover specialists in idol-making and decorators are hired from different parts of the state as well as the country to make the festival more colorful and lively. Stage-performances and also conducting it in an open ground with all modern amenities have started gaining more popularity, irrespective of all barriers. Young children are trained in dance-forms for enacting in various roles during the festival. Many big *nāmghars* or as known ‘*bar-nāmghars*’ located in the rural and urban areas have started staging *bhāonās* to popularize the content of this colorful festival. It is rather getting more popularized than confining it only to the village *nāmghars* and the rural folks. The whole *Rāsa-leela* is normally performed by the males and there are even instances of males taking up female roles in many of the Sattras. But as observed in the Sattras of Nagaon, the custom is quite different from the others. There is a separate entity for girls to perform along with the boys. The young girls take part in the festival and act as *gopis* (milk-maids) accompanying Lord *Kṛiṣṇa* as mentioned in the *Bhāgavata*. *Rāsa-bhāonās*, mostly performed by young boys are still held every year in some of the important Sattras

of Nagaon<sup>7</sup>. Except for the laity conducting the festival in a community-based form especially in the *nāmghars* of a particular village, there is no such celebration in the main *Sattras* as it used to be previously. However, *Rāsa* is still continued to be one of the most celebrated and important festival of the Vaisnavas. The *rāsa-geets* or the songs sung on this occasion attained much popularity in Nagaon than any other parts of the state and till this day it is held in high esteem. The whole festival is elaborative and colorful and also attracts a huge crowd whenever it takes place. Thousands of devotees irrespective of caste, creed or religion take part in the festival held during the autumn season. Due to its out-growing number of devotees and visitors, this festival has gained popularity in recent years like celebrated in other parts of the state and has metamorphosed into a more cultural rather than a religious festival in Nagaon.

5. **Pāl Nām:** One most popular and eccentric ritual celebrated with full devotion and dedication in the *Sattras* of Assam is the *pāl nām*. It usually takes place in the month of November-December. The history of the origin of *pāl nām* is recorded in the biographical texts of the Vaisnava saints known as *carit puthi*. The word *pāl* signifies turn while *nām* is congregational prayer. Hence *pāl nām* means continuous chanting of prayers, held by a group of devotees in turn. It happens by a way of rotation of reading the sacred scripture. This normally takes place in the premise of either a *nāmghar* or the *Sattra*. The authenticity of the ritual lies in the fact that it accumulates the laity with varied customs. It is conducted in a holistic way in most of the *Sattras* in Nagaon. Often it is held in the big prayer-halls adjacent to the respective *Sattras* or in the

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<sup>7</sup> One such example is the *Dahghariyā Jajori Sattra*, as stated by the present *Sattradhikāra*, Kesavananda Deva Goswami in an interview held on 03.09.2012.



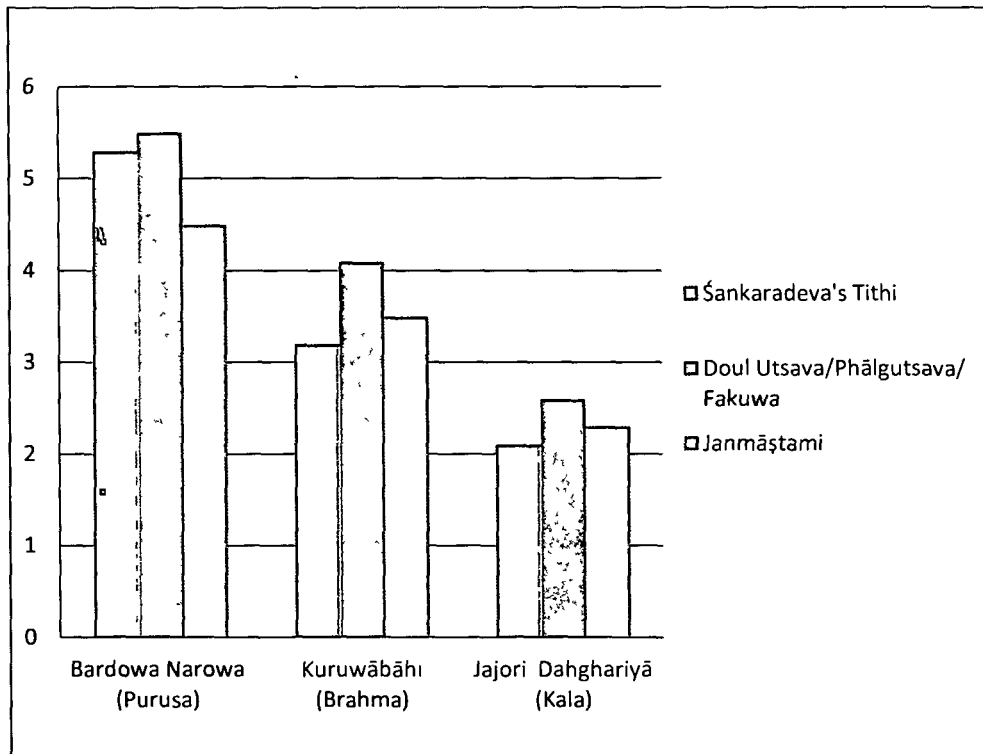
premises of a Sattrā and accompanied by the beating of a percussion instrument like *dobā* and *sankha* at short intervals. It is a community ritual which continues for a period of two to three days and sometimes it extends for a week. Sometimes it lasts for week. The main performers are the *bhakats* belonging to a Sattrā of the locality who keeps on reciting day and night. One *bhakat* normally chants the verses from the *Bhāgavata* for a few hours and then it passes on to another and this way it continues. *Pāl nām* is a symbolic ritual for the Assamese Vaisnavas who perform it every year and this is more concentrated in the *nāmghars* in every nook and corner of the district. There is no month attached for the conduct of this ritual. Normally it takes place in the month of *Bhādra*, as is considered to be an auspicious month for the Vaisnava followers. In most cases it is also held in *Vaiśakha* (April-May) marking the beginning of the Assamese New Year. Even the urban population in Nagaon has largely concentrated in the conduct of this yearly ritual in their own localities to infuse in the young minds the spirit of oneness and community brotherhood. People from all communities, irrespective of caste and creed gather to offer prayers. The devotees offer *śarai* with offerings before the altar of the Almighty and in the midst of these performances or at the end, the devotees are served with the *māh-prasada* as part of the rituals.

6. **Investiture ceremony and *tithis*:** These are two most essential and often celebrated rituals in a Sattrā. The investiture ceremony means the appointment of a new head to a Sattrā either on a hereditary basis or selected democratically. The junior *adhikāra* is raised to the headship of the concerned Sattrā, either on the retirement of the head from his responsibilities or his death. This ceremony is popularly known as the *nirmāli-lowā prathā*.

The *tithis* are the formal occasions to celebrate the death and birth anniversaries of the chief apostles of the faith, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva in all the prominent Sattras. Added to it, there are also similar celebrations marking the death (*tirobhabha*) and birth anniversaries (*janma-mohatsav*) of all the founders of various sects (*samhati*) in the Vaisnava order. *Nāma-prasanga*, *bhāonas* are the major attractions during these ceremonial occasions. The *nāmghars* are illuminated and people throng in large numbers from every nook and corner to pay obeisance in the form of offerings known as *naivedya*. In almost all the Sattras of the district, the *tithis* of the respective saint is considered to be sacred and hence celebrated with veneration. On this particular occasion people contribute to a great extent, both in cash and kind for the welfare of the Sattras to level of one's will and capacity. Still is considered to be auspicious and sacred amongst many Vaisnavas.

A chart is prepared by comparing three important Sattras of the district affiliated to three distinct sects (*samhati*); *purusa*, *brahma* and *kala*, based on the calendrical rituals and the number of participants from the community. The sampling has been done keeping in view similarities and variations of the ritual observances in these categories of Sattras. This is to support the fact that similar Sattras of respective sects (*samhati*) celebrate the festivals in a large way whereas others do not. Public participation in all the occasions accordingly varies in these Sattras.

**Figure: 14 - Comparison between rituals and public participation in three Important Sattras of Nagaon.**



0-0.5 scale in the graph indicates a total of 500 (approximate) numbers of participants.

For some activities such as conduct of *pāl nām*, initiation and ordination ceremony of new entrants (*śaraṇa and bhajana*), the visit of the *Sattradhikāra* to a respective Sattra, the occasions are held on a day of convenience rather than the one prescribed. While other regular activities like reading verses from the sacred scriptures, lighting lamps in the morning and evening occur daily. In addition, certain activities like the birth and death anniversaries of the apostles, special sessions of prayer services accompanied by special offerings do not appear as a regular feature in either the *nāmghars* or the Sattra. Having outlined the ritual practices in the Sattras and also *nāmghars* engaged in by the parishioners of the

faith as well as the laity, constituting both rural and urban mass of population, it is hereby noted that there is little in all of these rituals to distinguish from the other similar range of Sattras in the district. They differ more or less in terms of the sect division and these variations are minor ones. The basic ritual of chanting the verses from the sacred texts in almost all the occasions in any Sattra may also vary at times in relation to other Sattras of similar sect. One reason might be the wide spread influence of modernity in the conventional Vaisnava ideology that most of the parishioners are exposed to. This variation is largely a transition from traditional to new.

#### **4.4. A Comparative Appraisal of the *Doul Utsava* / *Yatra* Celebrated in Bardowa and Barpeta**

The month of *Phālguna* (February-March) is considered as auspicious by the Vaisnavas of Assam. Since the days of the two great saints, Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva *Doul Utsava* or *Phālgutsava* has been celebrated with verb and vigor. The festival of colour related with the Krisna cult is celebrated on the day of the full moon in the month of *Phāgun* or *Phālguna*. It is said that on this day Lord Krisna played coloured powder (*faku*) with the *Gopis*, his female devotees. As the season was spring, the festival is also known as *Basantotsav* or spring festival. In Assam this is popularly known as *Doul Utsava* as the deity of this festival Lord Krisna alias Govinda resides in a *Doul*.

*Doul Utsava* is celebrated with pompous and joy particularly by all the Sattras in Assam. Thousands of people gather to enjoy the festivities. Except a few local variations, the festival is celebrated almost alike in all the Sattras and *nāmghars* scattered in the state. Taking the example of two major Sattras of the state, Batadrava or Bardowa where Śāṅkaradeva lived his early life and Barpeta Sattra where he lived for many years till he went to Cooch Behar at the invitation

of the Cooch King Naranarayan, a comparison is made on the celebration of the *Doul Utsava*. Traditionally it is celebrated at Bardowa with a five-day programme and at Barpeta with a three-day programme. It can be mentioned that the observance of this festival has been able to retain the traditionality since the days of the saints. Through ages, the celebration of this festival accompanied by all related rituals in both Bardowa *thān* and Barpeta Sattrā is unique and has many things in common. And this has been in vogue till date.

According to *Bardowa Guru Carit* (Neog, 1977), Bardowa is the first place to have introduced the celebration of the *Doul* festival for the first time after Śaṅkaradeva's return from pilgrimage in order to spread the cult of Bhakti. Every day different programmes are organized by the *Batadrava Thān Parichalana Samiti* (management committee) so that devotees coming from far and wide could enjoy the festival to the brim. Congregation of devotees, chanting of devotional as well as *holi-geets*, songs particularly sung for this occasion, the fourteen times prayer services (*chaidhya prasanga*) are all together performed. Cultural shows are organized by the local youths every night, which includes theatrical performances called *bhāonās* besides other cultural items. Apart from the locals, people from other towns and districts too participate in these performances. Mention can be made of one such *bhāonā* known as *Gada Parba* staged by artists from Maibong of the neighbouring district of Dima Hasao. The performers belonged to the Maibong *nāmghar* and Maibong *Sakha Sahitya Sabha*. The whole drama was in Dima Hasao language. The full moon day known as the main day of *Phakuwa* is christened as *Gossain Phuruā Din*, a day when the deity is taken out of the sanctum sanctorum. The deity of Lord Krisna, who resides in the *doul mandir* all days of the year is brought out from the sanctum-sanctorum and encircle the place seven times. It is also taken to the Sorufāl and Barfāl (the two parts of the Batadrava village having two prominent household Sattras- Salaguri and Narowa on the north and south direction of the *thān*) and nearby Barbheti village, Nagaon. Accompanied by devotional songs, *holi-geets* sung by both male

and female devotees to the tune of the musical instruments like *khol*, *tāl* and *sankha*, in this sojourn of the deity, every household shows their respect to the deity at their house-gates. The deity does not enter any house hold except the *Satradhikāras*' residences of both Salaguri and Narowa Sattras. He shows special respect and devotion to the deity as per tradition. Thereafter the deity is brought to the main prayer hall (*kirtan-ghar*) of the *thān* and thence to the *doul mandir* after completing the *duar dhara* (gate blocking) ceremony. According to tradition, Lakshmi Devi, the Lord's wife did not approve him playing *holi* with his female devotees (*gopis*) so she asks her servants to debar Him from entering the house. The present *duar dhara* alludes to this incident of the year when the Lord enters his abode to remain undisturbed till next *holi* after an amicable settlement. Every year on this day the Sattrā authorities organizes theatrical performances in the evening attracting a huge gathering. Commonly staged *bhāonās* are *Sri Sri Krisnar Vaikuṇṭha Parayan*, *Narasimha Yatra* etc besides other cultural programmes.

Almost similar are the programmes organized by the Barpeta Sattrā Management Committee during their three day long *doul utsava*. This festival of colours is also locally known as *Sunweri* by the people of Barpeta. Here too, people throng to take part in the festivities. The ceremony of the Purnima i.e. the full moon day includes bringing out the duo deities, viz. *Doul Govinda and Kaliya Gossain*, from their overnight resting position inside the *kirtan-ghar* to the courtyard of the Sattrā. The previous evening, popularly known as *Gandha* ceremony, the duo deities are brought out from the sanctum to the *kirtan-ghar* where they rested for the night. At the courtyard the permanent resident *bhakats* of the Sattrā worship the deities by replacing the old clothes and ornaments with new ones. After the worship is over the *bhakats* take the deity to the *doul* to be placed. At this time people make a circumbulation of the *doul* for seven times and then the deity is installed at a temporary altar for three more days for the rituals to be conducted. They then board both the deities on two chariots carried by men on

their sojourn to nearby Ganak Kuchi Sattra (about 1.5 kms away) to offer *hekta*, locally called *hekta khowa utsava* (*hekta* eating ceremony). *Hekta* is a kind of cereal similar to lentil. In Nagaon *hekta* is known as *hikata māh*. *Hekta khowa* is thus a preparation of this lentil like cereal specially meant for this festival. During all this time, sprinkling of water and rubbing of colours on each other's face and singing of *holi* songs accompanied by cymbals, drums and other traditional musical instruments are carried out by the devotees, male and female alike.

On the return of the deities to the premises of the Sattra a very distinguishing ceremony takes place known as *Bah-bhanga* (bamboo breaking) where the progress of the deities is blocked by long bamboos. People from whole of the Barpetta town take part in it. Tradition goes with the ensuing of a pseudo quarrel between a devotee playing the role of *Krisna* and another playing that of *Lakshmi*, where Lakshmi finally wins. With beating of drums and the singing of *holi* songs, locally known as *bol-bolani*, the deities are escorted to their respective sanctum-sanctorum to stay there for the coming days.

Today this festival has gained grounds in both the above mentioned Sattras and is celebrated in a spectacular way. It has been made more colorful and enjoyable through the staging of *bhāonās* performed by artists from every nook and corner of the state, *nām-prasangas*, special *bargits* composed by Mādhavadeva, *doul-yatra*. People irrespective of all caste and creed throng in to take part in this festivity. Local youths, clubs and other social organizations have been very instrumental in the conduct of this festival particularly in both these significant abodes. Along with it big fairs are held every year where house-hold goods and other local items are bought and sold and shops selling religious texts related to the saints' lives are on display. It can thus be mentioned that both these Sattras has preserved a great deal of the *Mahapurusiya* tradition in respect of the *doul-utsava* along with other different festivities held at different phases of the year.

Through surveys and interviews conducted and as a participant observant attending a few important festivals and many of the ritual activities over an extended period in the Sattras, it has been discovered that many of the ritual practitioners seem to intertwine the diverse elements into their practice smoothly and consciously. According to an informant<sup>8</sup> from the field, 'due to our professional commitments and responsibilities we sometimes have to cut short the ritual-process and this is more common in the case of the urban folks.' The fact that the rituals play a significant role in the life of every individual connected with the Sattriya culture is quite oblivious. Most of the traditional forms of rituals have been eliminated due to many factors. The changes are mainly due to professional commitments of the heads of a Sattra since most of them belong to house-hold Sattra, economic disparities, lack of proper education, urbanization, ignorance towards cultural development etc.

Similarly the ritual traditions and practices in the Sattras have changed over historical time and they differ from sect to sect and vary in their regional entity even though they are attached to the cultural and social order of Vaisnavism. The relation between the performance of rituals and communication is conventional. The ones covered under the study are distinctive and have been producing a set of rituals that are rudiment to the systematic way of a productive communication. A rational outlook towards the performance and communicative process of rituals through various festivals and ceremonials is necessitated so as to affirm their continuation in the Sattras. It is a means to include the whole of the community for proliferation of the traditional beliefs and practices. Thus instead of diluting their own customs and traditions in the quagmire of modernization, it becomes necessary for the whole of the Vaisnava community to stress upon the elaboration of rituals for a long term sustenance. And for this, the representational notion of ritual needs an acceptance from the individuals and its openness for

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<sup>8</sup> Sri M. Bora, a teacher of a government school from Rupnārāyaṇ Porābheti Sattra. Interview conducted on 04.05.11.



change. Rituals have a communicative function and if this communication does not take place at all, the rituals can be attributed to be non-functional. Thus the communicative aspect of a ritual characterized by symbols is essential to mark them as rituals in the social situations.

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Figure: 15 – *Khol-prasanga*, a part of the ritual performed during *Phālgutsava*.



Figure: 16 - A *pathak* recites verses from the *Bhāgavata* on the occasion of *Bohāg Bihu*.



**Figure: 17 (a) - Part of the ritual of decorating Lord Krishna's idol during *Phālgutsava*.**



**Figure: 17 (b) – An act of worshipping Lord Krishna during *Phālgutsava*.**



**Figure: 18 – Women-men performing together during *Krisna Janmāṣṭami*.**



**Figure: 19 - The functionaries of a Sattrā participating in various rituals.**

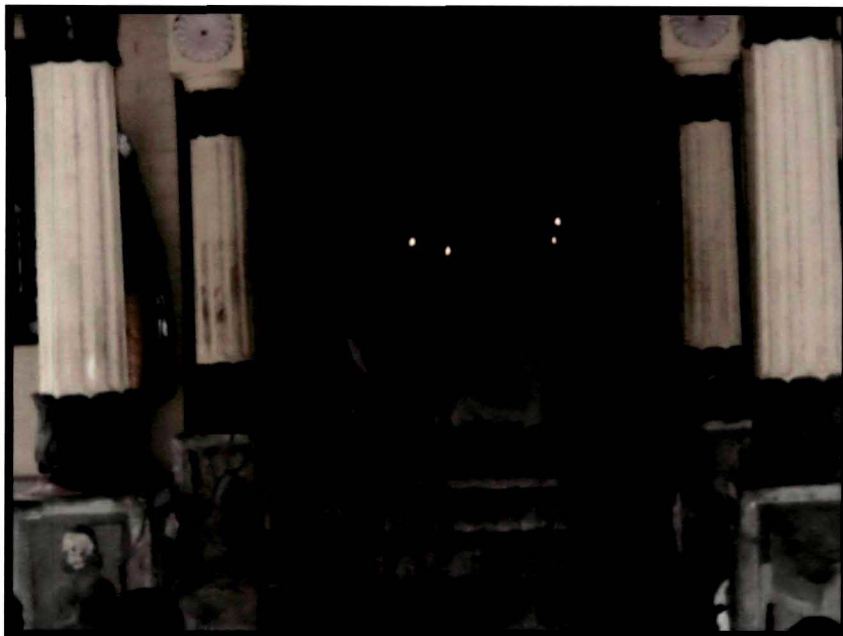


Figure: 20 - Prayer services held in the holy month of *bhādra* (August-September).



Figure: 21 – Devotees during *Phālgutsava* at Bardowa *thān*.





**Figure: 22-** Daily ritual performed at Āuniāti Sattra.



**Figure: 23-** A sculpture of *Garuda*, worshipped as an important relic in the Āuniāti Sattra.



## CHAPTER 5

### ECONOMY AND THE SATTRA INSTITUTIONS

The growth of culture in any society or community is invariably connected to its economy. Economy is inextricably related with the growth of a religious institution playing a very important role in its growth. Religion, culture and economy are all interconnected. The mid 1990s witnessed the development of organizations which increasingly became responsive to the important role played by religion in the framework of culture and the role it played for enhancing economic development in the society. It is therefore, necessary to identify the systematic differences in people's preferences and the belief system and relate them to various measures of cultural inheritance. The many sided developments suggest an approach to introduce culture-based explanations that can be tested and are able to substantially enrich our understanding of economic phenomena. The necessary step towards this objective is to define culture in a way that makes it easier to identify a causal link between culture and economic productions. And this is why, culture is defined comprehensively as 'the whole way of life' (Williams 1966, 226) which covers as well as ideational or non-material aspects like those customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups pursue, cherish and transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation. Raymond Williams, pointing out to the changed conditions of culture, also says, "the history of the idea of culture is a record of our reactions, in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life" (Williams 1966, 285). The 'changed conditions' necessarily relate to the aspect of changes in economic productions and situations necessitating such changes. As such, this definition focuses on those dimensions of culture that can impact economic outcomes or vice-versa. In addition, by restricting the potential channels of influence to two standard ones, beliefs as prior and values as preferences, this definition provides

an approach to identify a causal effect on matters ranging from culture to economic outcomes. Culture on the other, is defined as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group in the society from another. Religion defined as a “shared set of beliefs, activities and institutions premised upon faith in supernatural forces” (Iannaccone, 1998: 1466) is considered as a part of the domain of culture.

Contextualizing the Sattras as religious centers that opens up vistas for economic performances, the study focuses on the present state of economy in these institutions particularly in the district of Nagaon, which is the primary zone of the present study. The most desirable link that draws economy and religion together is that there can be an economy without religion but there can be no religious endeavor without an economic base or linkage. Every aspect of human life is affected by religion in one way or the other. The various Sattras, as considered in our present work follow a religious tempo encompassing the ancestral or cultural traditions, as well as the individual’s faith and spiritual experiences. Max Weber, in his seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1971) introduces for the first time the linkage between religion and economics and identifies the significant role that religion plays in bringing about changes to the society. Following the Weberian concept, it can be pointed out that as socio-religious institutions the Sattras have tried to draw a link between their religious dictum and economy. Weber viewed economy in part as an extension of religious belief and regarded religion as crucial to the development of capitalism. According to him, religion forms the base and economy the superstructure. As a result economic forces are best understood through the sociology of religion, which Weber introduces in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Karl Marx as an important representative of economic theory argues in favor of the reverse causality ranging from economic circumstances to cultural values and has inverted this direction of causality in terms of economic relations determining culture and cultural relations.

In a famous passage in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1859) writes:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. (425)

In this chapter the researcher looks at these theoretical aspects and on the basis of them tries to explain the causal relation between religion and economic growth and development that affects an institution like the Sattras. The researcher would also mention relevant works by different scholars on various aspects of the issue and restrict the details to a few studies.

Adam Smith in his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) says that one of the most economically significant functions of religious belief was to provide strong incentives to follow moral strictures that helped to support civil society, that is, honesty, benevolence, restraint from violence. The economic activities in Sattras can be described in this context to imbibe a value of self-support and self-sustenance instead of consumerism. The economic measures also inculcate a spirit of benevolence and restraint among the followers of the faith. Robert J. Barro and Rachel M. McCleary (2002) have argued that economic growth depends on religious activity of the economy's consumers. The consumers in the present study refer to the direct members from the laity who has an economic binding with the Sattras through their manifold religious performances. The laity of a Sattras being larger in number than that inside the Sattras premises are dependent on village *nāmghars* which constitute units in villages. And such *nāmghars* are assumed to be the main centers of

economic growth. The concentration of these institutions is more at the village level than the urban. It provides a platform for the individual to shift his focus to a collective effort. Day to day functioning as well as organization of small or large rituals entail an economic factor. Added to it is the maintenance of a relationship with the respective Sattras to which the individuals or the social unit have an allegiance. They define productivity of the religious sector to the level of belief expressed in relation to attendance in religious activities like congregations or rituals. The prayer services held in these institutions on account of various occasions, is one example to determine the level of participation and attendance of the laity considering their religiosity. The more they participate in the religious proceedings the more the question of economic relationship including growth comes. Following the arguments put forward by Barro and McCleary (2003), 'religious production efficiency' measure can be applied in the economic instances taking place in the Sattras and used in economic growth regressions in these socio-religious institutions involving quantifiable dimensions of culture.

Religion and religious activities can influence a society in two ways. First, we consider religious activities such as 'attendance' at the institutional level which are also looked at as a social activity that has an indirect relation with economy. With reference to our study and matters of field investigations, the Sattras of Nagaon mainly the ones of Karcung Teliā Pohukota, Kobāikota, Bardowa Narowa and Brahmachārī Sattras, Kuruwābāhi have a unique way of reciprocating the religious sentiments by way of regular congregations, conducting rituals thereby attracting a huge crowd. This augments the economic flow to these institutions. The attendance here refers to the regular incoming of devotees to the Sattra to offer their prayers at different periods of time. The village *nāmghar* acts as a meeting ground for the community in establishing networks. And this is of immense importance for economic activities in the village as well as the Sattras in reference. It is also helpful in establishing a

‘trading relation’<sup>9</sup> with members from other groups in the community having similar faith and association with such other Sattras. Such networks could stimulate economic growth and the market relations thus established are sometimes sufficient to cause economic changes. Another similar observance is held during one of the village fairs in Nām-Doomdoomiya Sattra. It is known by the name *ahini mela* (refer to Nām-Doomdoomiya Sattra in Appendix I) which marks the death anniversary of one of the apostles of Mādhavadeva, Mathurādas Burha Āta. On this day the surrounding public offer agricultural and horticultural produce to the office bearer (*bharali*) of the *nāmghar* and in the evening he distributes the same among the members of the village *nāmghar* after being offered at the sanctum. This is known as *lao-bhojani*. A second conduit, by which religion influences society, is the values that are taught by the adherents of the faith or by the leaders concerned. It is assumed that these values will further influence the actual behavior of an individual and thus the functioning of society. This text of religion as a source of values belongs to the economic sphere and thus culture relates to economics, which studies the relation between values, economic institutions as well as economic performance.

By virtue, religion is a harmonizing as well as a motivating factor towards development. And this development is connected to economy. Religious people and institutions may be agents of advocacy, funding, innovation, empowerment of the youths, social movements, and service delivery. Institutions of course matter also in non-economic relations. They provide the necessary basis for all social interactions. Institutionally-oriented economists like Landes (1998) emphasized both the links from culture to beliefs and values and from beliefs and values to

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<sup>9</sup>During fairs and festivals held on important occasions in a Sattra especially at Bardowa, the people from the laity and also from nearby villages flock around the place with the purpose of selling their goods, mostly items of day to day use. They earn a profit by selling those goods in the fairs which provides them with a ready market. For example, indigenous items made of bamboo, cane and clay normally used in an Assamese household are sold at a cheaper rate and bought by the consumers. This definitely establishes a link through buying and selling of goods and contributing indirectly to the economy.

economic outcomes. The institutions hold communities together and allow the community to conduct themselves as members of society. Indeed, shared institutions define our culture and the society. The institutions are central to how people define themselves. Membership at the institutional level is a means of participation in a set of social relations, as well as adherence to a system of beliefs and practices. Although religions may not exist for the sake of networking, they do create social networks, connecting people to others who have information and resources. In the larger domain, economies work in religious communities in such a way that objects, tangible and intangible, symbolic and material, are distributed. Such a distribution is always unequal and necessarily involves power. But as observed during our field work and observation thereafter the question of power and hegemony does not hold good in the context of the economic management of the Sattrā institution.

As Barro and McCleary mentions, culture is usually thought to be an influence on economic outcomes, by affecting personal traits such as honesty and work ethics. Considering religion as an important dimension of culture, they go on to consider it as determinant of growth, reiterating Weber's idea that religious beliefs and practices have important consequences for economic development. An attempt is made to analyze the influence of religious participation and beliefs of the community on an institution's rate of economic progress. To make it more comprehensive a chart is drawn comparing the number of religious minded people coming to the Sattras as regular participants. The religiosity questions used by the researcher concerns the frequency of attendance to the *nāmghars* for religious services and other similar festival held in the premises of a particular Sattrā.

### **5.1. Interpreting Economy of the Sattras**

Since the early days of their institutionalization, the Sattras have adapting to many changing environments and in course of time have embedded many such changes in their religio-ritual structures which have a direct or indirect bearing on

their economic growth. A historical perspective is necessary to understand the changing nature of the economic status of the existing Sattras, their relation with the state and the growth and ascendancy with periods of stagnation and decline in many of the Sattras. They act as the centers of social organization for the neighborhood and provide a social and cultural platform which serve as places of social communication or information transmission. An institution of this kind therefore, functions as a clearinghouse of useful communication, including communication about where jobs can be found. But with the growth of urban centres and multiple media of social communication the role of the above centres has considerably dwindled. The present study has brought to light the many sided loopholes that has made the Sattra economy stagnant in recent times. There is a vast difference in the economy which existed at the time of their foundation and that which is seen now.

Earlier the Sattras<sup>10</sup> had been the most influential institutions in terms of both religion and economy depending on the laity for support. The long established economy of the Sattras was based on,

- a) the revenue yielded from the produce of the landed property,
- b) religious taxes levied on the individuals,
- c) contributions in the form of tithes by the frequent devotees,
- d) donations in the form of cash or kind from the occasional visitor cum devotees.

The community at large always looked upto the Sattras as an ideal in spiritual and cultural respects. The sentiments of respect and reverence on the part of both the giver and taker and the entire Sattra community for that matter, are interlinked with each other. These institutions were sound in terms of economy since revenues were generated mostly from the agricultural lands granted in the name of a Sattra either by the kings or the village laity. Examples are Salaguri

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<sup>10</sup> Examples are Bhotāigaon Gajalā, Nikāmul Koliabor, Bardowa Narowa and Salaguri Bardowa.

Bardowa, Āibheti Salaguri, Karcung, Rupnārāyaṇ Porābheti Sattrā etc. Much of the wealth was accumulated by way of donations, a practice prevalent since their inception having both an economic and religious bearing. Contributions were made either in cash or kind to the Sattrā as an institution for specific purpose like the conduct of particular rituals or constructing the structural features of the Sattras. According to their economic capability, the individuals subscribed to meet the expenses keeping in mind the status of the institution they are affiliated to. This form of subscription popularly known as *guru-kar* or *baraṅgani* did not have a legal obligation but the moral obligation compels them to further initiate the process accumulating a major wealth to the Sattrā's economy. Such donations and token fees collected from attending the religious functions and rituals within and outside the premise of the Sattrā help in sustaining the continued flow of economy. This process is still continuing in many of the Sattras of the district as well. And this determines the variation in the state of economy affirming it to be rich and prosperous on one hand and poverty-stricken on the other. Based on field investigation the examples are Samaguri, Kuruwabahi, Auniāti Nagaon, Bholaguri Sattrā located in different areas of the district.

It is natural that economy forms the basis of an institution and sometimes even the community. In our present context, the Sattras are considered as economic zones because they primarily operate through an economic system. This economic system, as discussed above, rests basically on the offering of tithes by the laity as well as other devotees who, one way or the other help to enhance the economy. These resources generated from the funds therefore go to the corpus fund of every Sattrā. But the most interesting fact that is being observed with regard to the economic role of these institutions is how and where these resources are utilized. In respect to proper utilization of revenue yielded as a way of this, there are many Sattras within the district which further manages their economy and with the available resources various activities are conducted.



Basically being an agricultural land, Assam has an economy which is land-based. Incidence of tenancy is quite common in the lands occupied by a Sattra. The Sattras possessed huge quarter of lands mostly for the establishment of the institutions and for the cultivation of crops. A few of the Sattras like Jajori Dahghariyā, Narowa Bālisatra, the two divisional Sattras at Bardowa namely, Bardowa Narowa and Salaguri Bardowa still possess large areas of land, more of which are fallow and not suitable for cultivation. The above mentioned respective Sattras had large landed property at one point of time. The income generated through land has proved beneficial for the overall growth of the economy of many of these institutions. The produce from the lands utilized further by crop cultivation was used for the development of the Sattras. The maximum income of the Sattras mainly came from two sources,

i) the lands which were originally granted by the kings as part of their religious sentiments before the intervention of the British and in subsequent years these were confirmed and recognized by the British government,

ii) the regular flow of tithes both in forms of money or goods from the disciples as a complement to support the Sattras. Sometimes even a piece of land was donated in the name of a Sattra as symbol of veneration.

These two sources played a very crucial as well as a conventional role in channelizing economic sustenance and growth of the institution. Some of them like Cipahā Hātbor, Brahmachārī and Rupnārāyaṇ Elengi Bebejia had land-grants in varying degrees which ranged from a few acres to a thousand acres of land. These lands were mostly revenue free or had the system of paying half revenue, which either had to be borne by the Sattras concerned or the individuals. A large number of acreage that too half free revenue, were possessed by many Sattras<sup>11</sup> like Dakhinapāt, Kamalābāri, Āuniāti, Bengenā-āti (all of Mājuli origin). The

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<sup>11</sup> These Sattras are mentioned in S.N Sarmah's *The Neo- Vaisṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (1996). A detail of the estimated records of the lands possessed by the Sattras are mentioned in the District Gazetteer of Assam, Sibsagar (1905).

Garamūr Sattrā in Majuli has 52 *bighās* of revenue-free land under its possession granted to its branch Sattras located in the district of Nagaon alone. Example can be cited from Garamūr Puranigudām Sattrā having 34 *bighās* of the landed property in possession. Some other Sattras do not have as much revenue free land as the previous ones but the lands they possess are mostly assessed at half the rate of revenue from the usual. Another very glaring factor that accumulates the economic increase earlier was the yield of income through the number of disciples with their families belonging to the order of laity. If the number of disciples increased the tithes also increased. This was considered a moral obligation on the part of the individuals to give some amount of tithe in forms of cash or kind to the Sattras where they have been initiated. This process although was a kind of tax levy process for the people from the laity, but such a form of subscription was considered as a sacred task by the people and it otherwise contributed to the prosperity of a Sattrā. In many Sattras the tithe meant essentially for the *guru* (*guru* here means the founders of the Vaisnava faith in Assam, Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva and other apostles) and a kind of a religious sentiment attached with a moral obligation which also accounts for the economic welfare of the Sattras. In addition to this regular flow of income, another source of income was the offerings or presents from the devotees, special subscriptions collected from the disciples within the enclosures of a Sattrā on special occasions. These sufficed the expenses meted out in carrying important functions and these helped greatly in making way for a steady economy. There was not an official imposition of religious taxes on them. However, the religious obligation was so strong that the individuals were keen to pay in whatever form they could afford. Apart from these, there was no such hard and fast rule to yield revenues for the economic growth of any Sattrā. Such historical considerations are crucial in an understanding of the evolution of these institutions, especially in the district of Nagaon (specific Sattras as mentioned in *Appendix 1*), and the underpinning economic status in the changing scenario of modern economy. In the early years,

these institutions had different regulatory rules of economy as discussed, which enjoyed wider autonomy. The intervening concepts of the freedom of expression, community development, a right of belongingness and religiosity, cultural pluralism and procurement of more income for sustainability are all taken into consideration in this chapter. Through the lens of religion and economy, these concepts are explored and the relative impact on the economy is understood by an examination of all the Sattras scattered in the district.

To establish a grass root foundation for the society and narrow the gap of economic insecurity, the Sattras have a social responsibility towards their overall development keeping the question of economy in view. This is possible only when resources are channelized in the right direction. The Sattras are important institutions drawing a link between their economy and the society. They can be interpreted as the 'store-house' of economy. Besides being centers of socio-cultural and religious institutions, the Sattras also act as self-sustaining economic units. Till the end of the eighteenth century, they were all functioning well contributing to their economic self-sustainability. Most of them were allotted huge areas of land which did not yield any revenue as such. These lands known as *devottar* were mainly utilized for growing crops, vegetation, planting trees etc. The cultivation was mainly done by the *bhakats* and in turn they had to give certain amount of the produce to the head of the Sattra.

Another essential feature contributing to the economic status of the Sattras essentially in the district is the production of homemade items made out of readily available resources. It is estimated that the industrial productivity out of this, consisting mainly of the non-agricultural production like cattle-rearing, fishery, apiary and the making of household consumer goods catering even to the poorest sections of people in the society contributed nearly to 40-45 per cent of the total income. Cottage industries have been a respectable avocation since the days the Sattras came into being. This is one such area where a steady flow of income is

witnessed. There was a time when the economy of the Sattras flourished greatly due to the availability of raw materials in abundance. It may be mentioned that bamboo and cane are used abundantly for the making of handicraft goods in the *thān* and Sattras. Hence the output is more at the village level due to the availability of raw materials and cheap labour. This increasing demand is proved beneficial for many of the Sattras in the region for sustaining their economy. Moreover, another observable feature is the geographical locations of these institutions, generally being situated close to the river banks, yielding more productivity of these raw materials. As such small scale industries involving in indigenous products used in the Vaisnava households and *nāmghars* grew up within the enclosures of a Sattra or within the village. These small scale productions have contributed to the economy of the Sattras as also ensuring the welfare of the people. Earlier buying and selling of several home made products like *koth*, *kharahi*, *bisani* and other implements have not only helped the small-scale industries to grow in the region but has also opened up vistas for employment in this sector. An ample number of potters, blacksmith and carpenters are associated with such institutions providing employment to a sizeable number of the population. But with changing times the demand for these indigenous items used in religious, theatrical as well as domestic purposes have lost its value gradually. Even the traditional craftsmanship is dwindling in most villages of the district. The popular and often used items in the Sattras have also been replaced by cheap and easily available market products. This has seriously jeopardized the traditional cottage industry thereby affecting the growth and development of economy. Moreover, due to the heavy rate of influx of immigrant population in the state and especially in the district where the survey has been conducted, major part of indigenous business has been taken over by them at easily available and cheap labor force. As such the traditional farmers and the craftsmen are facing a serious threat to their local economy.

It is a customary practice that the devotees from the laity affiliated to a particular Sattrā contribute something either in cash or kind and this eventually helps in administering the Sattrā well. The revenue thus generated is often utilized in the construction works or some other purposive ventures in the villages. It is often observed that quite a good sum of money gets generated during the initiation ceremony, when a devotee is newly admitted to the order. They voluntarily make the offerings in the name of the Sattrā they are affiliated. As such the fund never goes to the individual account of the *Sattrādhikāra* or his assistants but to the welfare of the community and the Sattrā at large. However in respect of the Āuniāti Samaguri Sattrā it was observed that the *Sattrādhikāra* pays occasional visits to his Sattrā to take part in ritual occasions as well as developmental works. But sometimes it so happens that the laity does not require the presence of the *Sattrādhikāra* in day to day or routine activities of the Sattrā. They also conduct agricultural activities in the land of the Sattrā on their own and contribute a minimal amount of its income to the Sattrā.

The Sattrās also serve as a continuous link between past and the present, and the society and themselves and their mission is to care for the spiritual welfare of the inmates as well as the community at large, by means of regular prayer services, singing of hymns, mass gatherings during festivals and ceremonial proceedings and other forms of religious rituals. From an economic standpoint, the services provided by the Sattrās respond to the needs of the consumers. The consumers as mentioned earlier are the members from the laity from whom a part of the income is derived.

#### **5.1.1. The Sattrās of Nagaon**

Coming to the study area, i.e. the Sattrās of Nagaon in the above context, it is observed that they act more than a mechanism for transmitting cultural heritage with an impact on the economic structure of the whole of the district. As regards to the internal financial resource management, the Sattrās in different

places vary according to the local environment. Most of the lands granted to the Sattras as religious cum economy centers, by the Ahom rulers, continue to be occupied by them more due to the retention policy adopted by the British rulers and the governments after independence. It is also to be remembered that all the Sattras including some in the district of Nagaon did not enjoy the benefit of such land grants. So there are fluctuations in individual Sattras located in the district in respect of economic management as a whole. Incentives are taken both by the Sattra functionaries as well as the laity to develop and improve the rate of economic avenues in the district. One such instance is cited from the study of a few Sattras in Koliabor region where initiatives have been taken alone by the youths for self-employment. Since unemployment is a critical issue affecting the entire community since a long time, the youths have started investments at their own initiatives. For example, weaving traditional garments both for religious and household purposes, utilizing the farm-lands apart from growing regular crops like paddy, and making masks for *bhāonās* and other items regularly of use in the Sattras especially in villages of Koliabor, Dhing and Bardowa area of the district and for the larger benefit of the community and also to enhance the Sattra economy. Although the Sattra was established for the explicit or manifest purpose of providing a space for Vaisnava religious and cultural practices, it also fulfills the latent purpose of bringing people together where they can learn what opportunities are available.

During one of the field investigations, the researcher had the chance to interview Sri Narayan Muktiyār of Bardowa Narowa Sattra, an informant who retired as a treasurer of the respective Sattra and a regular member of the congregation. When asked about the present state of economy and the community's involvement, he remarked, '...at the Sattras we find out everything that is going on and try our level best to mend our issues and problems.'

Serving as a center of fostering cultural identity may be viewed as the major manifest function of the Sattrā. It also has other latent functions of an economic character. The *nāmghars* situated in the neighborhood of each village also contributes a lot to the economy. Most of them play the role of a community center catering to the needs of the lay parishioners comprising agricultural farmers and other occupational villagers. At the same time it is seen that most of the villages in the district are affiliated to a single *nāmghar* as a group commonly known as *khel*. The *khels* vary from village to village. They provide a platform for the farming groups to discuss matters on their agricultural produce, land tenancy etc; women to interact and condition their co-operatives' initiatives and agendas; organizing the youths under different *khels* to hold various activities such as workshops on drama, dance and music, celebration of *Bihu*, the festival of the Assamese and other related rituals and festivals of the Vaisnavas etc. The lay people feel free to enter the premises of the Sattrā or the *nāmghars* to discuss and carry out the various socio-religious and cultural events. They are structured in such a way that they could generate funds as and when necessary. In many cases the *nāmghars* act as an agency working for the welfare of the community. As mentioned above, it also serves a variety of new economic needs by providing a place where network connectors can connect members of the group with jobs and financial resources. Occasionally, special prayer services like *pāl-nām*, *Bhāgavata pāth* continue for days are conducted in exchange for donations, which bring income to the Sattras concerned which again flows to the Vaisnava community at large. The revenues collected out of this are normally utilized in construction of the buildings of both the Sattrā and the *nāmghars*, preserving the valuable assets and for their all around development. Adding to this, an annual contribution is made especially to the Bardowa *thān* by the devotees as part of the community ritual. Apart from making contribution in cash or kind they also offer rice, pulses, mustard oil etc. which are mostly for the resident *bhakats*. Such offerings are generally meant for the *thān* rather than the *Sattrādhikāra*. It is credited to its

account but there is no special fund in the name of the heads of the Sattras. Whatever is accumulated it is entirely for the benefit of the Sattras. He has to meet the social and cultural needs with expenditure and these practices are still continuing in many of the Sattras rich in conducting regular congregations, initiation ceremonies, theatrical performances like *bhāonā* etc. Mention may be made of Samaguri, Nikāmul Uriāgaon, Rupnārāyaṇ Gonāmarā Sattras situated in the district.

Especially the women are benefitted out of the co-operatives started solely by them as a cumulative effort. This is more prominent in the villages under the *khel* system. A special assistance is granted to the folk women as they form a large part of the congregations. They form units known as *got* from the members of the laity and invest whatever they could afford. The money collected from women of each household is either invested in a local bank begetting interests for their benefits or utilized during a ritual in the village *nāmghar*. At the end of the month or so the total investment is mostly utilized in conducting a religious affair like *āiati-nām*, *pāl-nām*, *Bhāgavata pāth* in their respective Sattras, starting small scale business like weaving and food<sup>12</sup>, or seldom for personal benefits. This way it helps in the economic development by way of self-funding for the poverty stricken Sattras since women form a major part of the daily congregation. As such they are engaged within their own group and even they could invite people from other communities for help. Since the laity essentially invites the religious professionals, decision-making in the Sattras has shifted from the heads to a committee of laymen composed of the same successful skilled craftsmen who normally administer the proceedings of the Sattra. Apart from this some of the Sattras surveyed<sup>13</sup>, it is observed that financial management of the Sattras has become undemocratic. There is a continuous blame-game process going on

<sup>12</sup> Traditional weaving of attires like *mekhela-cadar*, *curia*, *gāmocha*, *seleng*, *eri-cadar* etc. and preparation of traditional Assamese snacks like *pithā*, *laru*, pickles etc.

<sup>13</sup> The respective Sattras are Narowa Bālisatra, Māhārā Dimow, and Puranighar (Koliabor), Āibheti Salaguri Nasatra.



between the lay parishioners and the heads of most of the Sattras concerned resulting in their decline.

The Sattras of Nagaon portray a grim representation of economic assuage in contrast to a sound religious economy where the Sattras have been reduced to a level of inept management thereby inviting low economic growth. The same institution may function differently in different environments. Because of the encroachment of the landed property of the many Sattras in Nagaon, particularly in Dhing and Bardowa areas of the district, there is a sharp decline in revenue generation. It may be mentioned here that an approximate of 130 *bighās* of land reserved only for grazing was allotted in the name of Bardowa *thān*, located to the west of *Akasi Ganga* in the year 1979. For a period of around ten years or so, the Sattras adjoining the *thān* allowed some local people to cultivate in these lands for their economic benefit. But in course of time, the management committee of the Sattras found that these lands are not economically viable and as such they returned them to the Department of Social Forestry in the year 1989. But at present there has been a problem of encroachment of these Sattra lands for which the government has also interfered. It is found that an Islamic primary school known as *moktāb* has been established by the local Muslim population in the lands given to the forestry department by the representatives from the Sattra. In a recent news published in a newspaper<sup>14</sup> it has been reported that the Muslims residing in the surrounding areas have decided to establish a prayer hall in the Sattra lands which was vehemently opposed by the Assam Sattra Mahasabha and others. If this intrusion continues, the Sattras will lose their landed property in due course of time. This is one problem we observe while dealing with the economic state of the Sattras in the district. This is imminent in many other Sattras too.

As observed, the crisis underlying the Sattra in the rural sector is mainly due to rural unemployment. Economic or employment generation through

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<sup>14</sup> This is reported in *The Assam Tribune*, published from Assam by a local correspondent from Nagaon on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2012.

agriculture has virtually stagnated and there have been hardly any parallel development of non-agricultural livelihood opportunities instead of depending on the agriculture. Had it been taken care of, the Sattras would have allowed themselves to tackle with the problem of unemployment. The opportunities for rural non-agricultural employment should be increased as the Sattras have been providing scope for developing co-operatives for poultry farming, weaving and other non-agricultural activities. This has benefitted the indigenous non-farming class within the community with better conduits of employment. And this way the Sattra economy could be raised as it is an institution based on aspects of community level participation.

#### **5.1.2. Land-use and Agricultural Economy in the Sattras**

Land is an important component of economy. The process of globalization has greatly affected the economy and has undergone two major changes, one in the non-availability of agricultural lands in the rural sector and the other, rapid urbanization. There arises a competing demand on the use of lands and an underlying tension in the agrarian relations especially in the rural areas where huge properties are under the possession of individuals and local institutions. The Sattras too have witnessed changes as a result of this process. These changes are caused by new forces like urbanization, spread of education, outmigration, occupational shift, globalization, illegal immigration from Bangladesh and similar other factors. These affect the social system and lead to changes in the land ownership structure. This further generates an increasing demand on these community based institutions, mostly rural based for private property and for commercialization of the existing land relations. There are also a few Sattras in certain areas of the district where land ownership has been recognized but they are without a title deed (*patta*) of the acquired land.

The availability of land suitable for agriculture has been shrinking on account of the competing demands from various sectors. And agriculture being the mainstay of the economy of the Assamese community at large, the Sattras are more or less dependent on the agricultural produce of the lands that they have acquired by way of donation in the name of religion at the time of their establishment. Donation of a piece of land was a means of acquisition by an individual household Sattra and this is prominent in most of the Sattras of the district. All the major Sattras have huge acres of land which are either suitable for cultivation or lying fallow. The forest and agriculture departments of the state as conveyed by an informant<sup>15</sup> have acquired some acres of land for multi-purpose projects like plantation, fisheries etc for the larger benefit of the Sattra and also it is considered to be a check for the illegal settlers occupying the Sattra lands. The model of the whole economic system rests on the agricultural land and the ways of their usage. The Sattra is not an exception and has been mostly under an agriculture based economy.

Leasing has become one of the fastest growing activity of the Sattra institutions especially the ones in and around the main Bardowa *thān* and Dhing as demarcated in the map of Nagaon. A major economic support from the land lent out on lease for a stipulated time-frame. The agricultural lands are often leased out and leased in on an informal basis by the beneficiaries of the Sattra. The Sattras are benefited when the lease is granted in exchange for a specified rent. The amount which is paid is generally known by the *Sattradhikāra* and other functionaries in advance and the asset remains the property of the individual who lends it out. But many of the Sattras under the survey show a variation. It happens sometimes that on the expiry of the term of lease the lessee becomes the owner of the assets. In most cases it is done forcibly and thus the Sattra loses its own

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<sup>15</sup> During field visit to a village called Rāidengia adjacent to Bardowa, the researcher interviewed (09.06.11) Sri Sashi Ram Saikia (aged 65 years), a *bhakat* and an active member of the village *nāmghar*.

property. The later factor has brought the affluent Sattras of Nagaon<sup>16</sup> under the shades of decline and stagnation in terms of economic growth. And most importantly the Sattras being house-holders, the families are scattered and their lands distributed have no systematized land-holdings. Suffering from paucity of labour to work in the agricultural fields, the members from the household Sattras have started hiring people from the economically poorer and socially depressed sections including immigrant settlers to work in their respective agricultural lands. In many Sattras especially the ones situated around Bardowa and Dhing, we observe that these lands are also provided on lease to certain landless agricultural workers for their family sustenance. This has enhanced the mobility of a cheap and easy labour force. And for these many external factors have taken the full advantages out of this and settled down in the landed property of the Sattras. Moreover, in some rural areas of the district, it is also observed that the *grām-sabha* or the village panchayat acts as a competent authority pertaining to matters relating to transfer, acquire, purchase or lease of land. This creates a rapport between the representatives of the Sattras and the local bodies in the management of economic resources.

The major share of the Sattra lands is in the name of the *Sattradhikāra* who acts as the landlord as also the caretaker of the Sattra property. The acquired land is inherited and it moves down generation after generation. Of the total establishment of Sattras in the whole of the district with regional variations like geographical location, quality of the soil, labor force etc, an overall estimated cultivated area culminates approximately to around ten per cent of all the land. The ownership of the lands is the only aspect of the Sattras that has ramifications for the economy at large. Since these establishments cater to the needs of the people and lay a claim on them, it could be better employed for other uses. Moreover almost every household in the village has *bari* or homestead land which

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<sup>16</sup> Barjahā, Āhātaguri Hujgaon etc. are few Sattras in the district of Nagaon which have not so far been able to retrieve their lost lands from the lessees.

also contributes to the economy. Half of the incomes yielded from these lands have been supplementing their growth.

## **5.2. Challenges to the Growth of the Sattra Economy**

The Sattras, in recent times have been facing a number of problems which have posed as serious threats to their existence and in the pursuit of socio-cultural contributions to the community. The problem in the Sattras covered under the present study is quite different from the ones lying in other parts of the state. Apart from the major problem of illegal immigration and encroachment of lands within the district as discussed below, there are other factors that have hindered the economic condition of these institutions to a great extent. In many places however, the *devottar* lands given to the Sattras have been acquired by the government under Assam State Acquisition Act of Land, belonging to religious or charitable institution which was amended in 1987. The money that comes from the government for the maintenance of the Sattras is not sufficient to make up the costs and this has been severely hampering the economy.

Factional disputes have also taken place in some other Sattras in the district. Since almost all the major branch Sattras follows the non-monastic order, there is a difference in the organization and management of all proceedings in these institutions from the ones following the stricture of a strong monastic order. Even though the Sattra heads are hereditarily selected and sometimes based on seniority as well as other consideration of necessity and priority. Yet some conflicting situations also, at times arise in view of the power and authority associated with the position of the Sattra head, leading to disputes in income and economic management.

As immigration from other lands increasingly grows within a community, it changes the cultural perceptions in various ways which in turn increases the

probability of migration in future. It is a general tendency that if someone has once migrated to a place, he or she is very likely to migrate again, and therefore the probabilities of taking an additional trip rise with the number of trips already being taken and this often pose as a serious hazard. Continuous influx of migrants from outside the country has become a threat to the indigenous people living in the state and has led to a shift in the demography of the Assam valley. The once self-sustained economy of the Sattras is also now burdened with illegal migrant issue and encroachment of the Sattras lands affecting the demography and ecology of the areas. At various points of time, the indigenous properties of the Sattras have been subjected to encroachment due to the continuous flow of immigrants. As such at present the Sattras property is at stake. In most cases, indigenous inhabitants have either moved away from these places leaving their ancestral land holdings or sell them out for various reasons due to which the Sattras have lost their original landed property with no substitution of regular revenue yield. This is stated to be a perennial problem creating a demographic as well as socio-economic and cultural crisis in the Sattras of Assam and the worst affected is the district of Nagaon. The rate of influx is so high that they have in fact occupied most of the barren lands of the Sattras and even reserved government lands. This has created a sense of religious insecurity amongst the local masses, mostly at the village level since most of these illegal immigrants have occupied the village stratum.

Mass immigration and respective occupancies of the immigrants on the waste lands, forest reserves and grazing lands mostly on the lands belonging to the Sattras has posed a serious threat. The immigrants, mostly cultivators have been continuing to infringe upon the land rights of the indigenous Assamese population since the days of the British. This immigration taking place under the colonial policy was purely based on economic grounds. It is to be noted here that the indigenous Assamese people had huge amount of lands under their possession and cultivated in them also. But they were not steady in their cultivation

techniques and methods. They cultivate in their lands for a maximum of three to four years and then leave the lands fallow without cultivation for years. They abandon the lands claiming to have lost the fertility due to constant use. It is also observed that the tendency of evacuating their place of origin from a rural to an urban base for better avenues prevails among them. This is also quite common amongst the members of the Sattras since many of them in the surveyed region belong to the *grhasthi* (household). They settle down mostly in towns and cities across the state after being employed in lucrative jobs or professions leaving their original land holdings. Under such circumstances the immigrants find an easy trespass to the fallow lands and start cultivation. After a period of time of using the land, they prefer to acquire legal settlements of such abandoned lands and even pay good prices to purchase these lands. And this way they continue to cultivate for years and finally settle down at those places. Apart from this there are many illegal occupants too, who are landless but work as hired laborers in the fields of the indigenous Assamese cultivators. These landless immigrants often encroach upon the nearby lands and declare themselves as permanent settlers. Due to all such reasons the Sattras property is at stake. The worst affected ones are those who possess unused lands under a Sattras. This case is quite common in the Sattras lying in the vicinity of Bardowa-Dhing area of the district. The influx rate is so high that the occupants do not even fear to encroach the lands belonging to a religious institution like the Sattras.

### **5.3. Present Economy**

It is now a common assertion that the problem of illegal international immigration has constantly been affecting the state. It is evident from the survey that they are the earlier migrants mostly of whom came after the Indo-Bangladesh war in 1971 A.D. and have formed settled groups with third or fourth generations. Land encroachment has become a much debated issue having political, economic and cultural ramifications in recent times. The present state of economy of many

of the Sattras mainly in the areas surrounding Dhing and Bardowa has been under pressure. There is no transparency observable in the policies of the government regarding this continuous flow of illegal occupants. No restrictions have been imposed on these settlers in taking up more lands in the villages. Had this been checked from time to time, there would not have been further settlement of immigrants mostly in the lands already under the occupancy of the Sattras. In view of the fact that major economic support for the Sattras came from the cultivable land and its produce, the constant influx rate and encroachment have eaten up large amount of income. This infiltration has now assumed significant proportions in the whole economic status of the Sattras.

Based on the above analysis, the researcher has put forward two main problems in harnessing the wealth of the Sattras of the district in particular. One, there is dearth of adequate man-power for cultivating the available lands for wet as well as dry cultivations round the year. As such the labor force flows generally from the immigrant population who cultivate in the fallow lands and also the cultivable lands. Moreover they are also employed as domestic help in many of the residential Sattras. The other is lack of interest from the government in issues concerning the Sattras, many of which are already on the path of decay in many areas of the district. Since the Sattras have huge lands acquired in the name of religion at the time of their inception, the search for cheap and docile labour in the agricultural lands has become one major concern. These are labor intensive sectors where most of the laborers are from the immigrants. Due to lack of proficiency in the indigenous groups, these lands are easily accessed by them. In course of time they have used their skill to develop a niche in the community and this is largely affected the present day economic state of a majority of the Sattras in the district. No matter the government is trying to find out a better solution to this current issue yet no such meticulous steps have been underlined by both the central and state functionaries. As such the property of the Sattras is at stake and it is directly affecting the landscape of the place. Data collected from the field



reveal the fact that in recent year the problem of cross-country clandestine immigration has become more pronounced affecting the economic output of these institutions and their landed properties. There are instances of migrant women identified as domestic helps in most of the Assamese households in the society. Even the members directly acquainted with a Sattras also hire them as laborers for domestic chores or other similar activities.

It can be cited here that many of the Sattras are surviving still, depending entirely on the donations in terms of money provided by the laity having both a religious and economic meaning since the time of their inception. Sometimes the disciples donate money for the renovation and repair works of the architectural features of their respective Sattras. This forms a major source of revenue to substantiate the poor economic condition of many of these Sattras. These donations, however accumulates on a yearly basis or on sporadic proceedings taking place in a particular Sattras. This sums upto be a very subtle amount which does not help in to keep pace with the changing state of economy in present times. Moreover, the lands which are donated and not being utilized for growing crops round the year could be used for other purposes such as fishery, poultry and rearing cattle which will yield more revenues. In turn this will not only suffix the pain of seeking for appropriate funds from the government but also it would prove to be a long term engagement engaging members from the laity as well as the beneficiaries from the Sattras. The Sattras therefore should act as self-propelled institutions.

If culture can be thought of as a system of beliefs, values, customs etc. shared by a group, as discussed earlier, then cultural interactions among members of the group or between them or members of other groups can be modeled as transaction or exchanges of symbolic or material goods within an economizing framework. Considering the role of culture in the economic development, it places cultural traditions and aspirations of the people from the community into

an economic framework. It is seen as a means of identifying ways in which their material circumstances can be improved in a manner consistent with cultural integrity. And that is why the concepts of culture and economic development are considered to be inextricably intertwined with any religious institution. The following observations are cited in support of the relation between economy, religion and culture enabling an institution to grow and develop. The discussion can be concluded with the following remarks:

First, the Sattras were established at a specific stage of socio-economic mobility, when members of the ethnic communities had begun to experience collective socio-economic upward mobility. The village *nāmghars* act as places of religious practice in order to maintain a sense of cultural identity.

Second, the Sattras as socio-cultural and religious institutions had the latent function of serving as a network center of economic activities. This means that the religious institution was both cause and effect of socio-economic mobility. While mobility was initially a source of the formation of congregations, the congregations in turn fostered continuing mobility.

Third, it provided the primary manifest function of preserving cultural traditions. Religion acts as a cultural marker and a way of preserving the cultural heritage of the Sattra institution.

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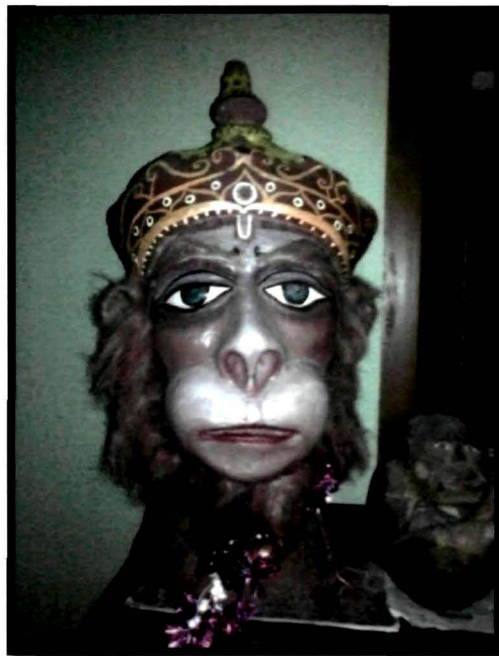
Figure: 24 - The campus of Āuniāti Sattra in Nagaon.



Figure: 25 - A make-shift arrangement of the *maṅikūta* at Letugram Sattra.



**Figure: 26 - Land utilized as children's park near Samaguri Sattrā in Koliabor.**



**Figure: 27 – A kind of mask used in *bhāonā*.**

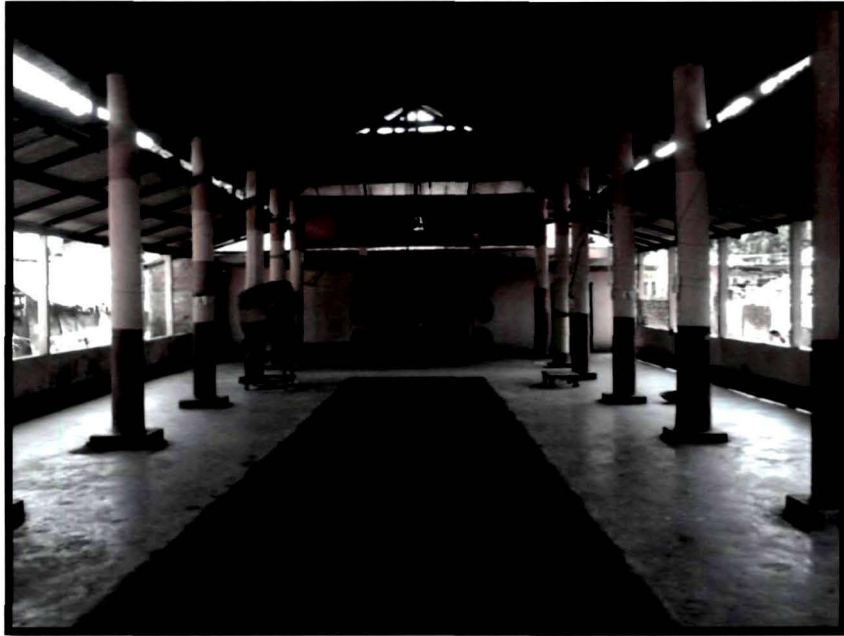


Figure: 28 – The newly constructed *nāmghar* at Boraligaon, Samaguri.



Figure: 29 – Dāmodaradeva Āta *thān* at Bālisatra, Nagaon.

## CHAPTER 6

### HERITAGE DIMENSION OF THE SATTRIYA CULTURE IN RECENT TIMES

Heritage is considered to be a part of a common past. “Heritage by its nature values the past and is concerned with the manner through which the past is constructed in the present” (Soderland 2009, 55). Heritage provides an enduring process of producing the past knowledge through documentation and thus elucidates the relationship between knowledge, text and value. “The historical dimension of heritage provides an enduring context within which its changing meanings can be traced” (Soderland 2009, 55). We can find a validation of the above formulation in respect of the Sattria institution as the Sattria with all its paraphernalia constitute in itself the phenomenon of heritage as well as functions as a pursuer and preserver of heritage. By way of constructing the past into the present, the history of heritage in the Sattras bears a new dimension with its changing meanings.

The past with historicity and even beyond it is at the root of heritage. The historical value can accrue from its association with people or events, its uniqueness of a past event or monument assessing the age of the heritage material. Thus the capacity of a site or an object to convey, embody or stimulate a relation with the past is part of the fundamental meaning of heritage objects. History and heritage also remain at the core of culture and its elements of ideas and habits passed through time. Equally with historical values, cultural value is of immense significance. According to a report based on assessing the values of cultural heritage, “cultural values are used to build cultural affiliation in the present and can be historical, political, ethnic, or related to other means of living together” (Mason 2002, 11).

Heritage of the Sattras provides the knowledge created and assimilated at various points of time in the history of development of these institutions. The embodiment of a Sattras sheds light on how history was created in the past and why it is important to incorporate its heritage resources and works for their sustenance in the present. The recognition of heritage in the Sattras reflects the identity of the Assamese as a community. But with times this perception has changed and it nurtures the essence of a new Assamese identity valued through the heritage of the Sattras. In other words it can be stated the religio-social preserve of the Sattras began to be viewed as a major part of the heritage of Assam and Assamese culture.

Cultural heritage requires memory. Memory, as an aspect of the past which has not been witnessed or experienced is essential in constructing the identity of both individual and collective. Heritage exists in reciprocity with memory and identity. The heritage of the Sattras displays the contours of memory and identity by asserting collective and individual uniqueness. The memories connected with the development of these institutions meet the needs of present times on the lines of a constructed past. The Sattras through its multiple resources have been able to reconstruct the past constituting an influential force in the whole of the Assamese cultural identity. Hence the heritage of the Sattras is a form of an 'objectivised culture' as mentioned by Assmann (1995, 128) which marks the identity of the Assamese Vaisnavas in general. An objectivised culture can be in the form of texts, images, buildings and rites reproducing knowledge and which can be assigned as having a structure of memory. This draws a close connection between individuals and their identity. Knowledge acquired this way is identical to identity and so the individuals connected to these institutions bases their consciousness of unity upon such knowledge.

Now to define heritage, it is considered as a possession of the community, a rich inheritance that is carried on and which invites the appreciation and



participation of all members from the community. Considered as important to have passed on to future generations, heritage is perpetually connected to culture. Since culture includes languages, traditional practices, literature, religion and religious beliefs, performing art manifested through the medium of dance, music and other expressive forms as important assets of the society, they are a part of the heritage which is acquired through inheritance. It can be coupled with the human and social development activities which individuals cannot get away from. Cultural heritage denotes those conditions or things related to culture which are also passed on from one generation to the next.

This chapter is an analysis of the aspect of heritage associated with the Sattras which renders rich cultural traditions involving community participation and recognition. The Sattras do not exist only as an individual and exclusive entity, but they are the components of larger historical, cultural and traditional unities. By way of associating heritage with the Sattras, they include the idea of a cultural landscape displaying the tangible and intangible resources and the process of interaction with the society surrounding them.

### **6.1. Cultural Heritage Preservation**

Cultural heritage was first addressed in international law in 1907 and a body of international treaties and texts for its protection has been developed by UNESCO and other intergovernmental organisations since the 1950's (Blake 2000, 61). The question of cultural heritage has become an important issue which has greatly transformed the meaning, use, extent, and possibilities of the heritage concept. Preservation of heritage means conserving all elements included in it in the best possible conditions. The preservation of the material culture includes various objects of daily use and also the intangible cultural forms like dance, music, theatre and rituals is necessary to generate the shared notion of a common

good which is for the benefit of the whole community. Such activities involve proper maintenance, repair, safeguarding from external elements and restoration to prevent deterioration and devastation of the existing heritage. Cultural heritage has become a vital ingredient of cultural identity and the need of the hour is to protect the cultural identity of individuals and groups which substantiates the requirement to protect and preserve cultural heritage. Cultural heritage preservation is growing in this shifting world and henceforth the custodians of heritage need to adapt with the changes. The most debatable concern in relation to the heritage preservation is the challenge currently faced by the heritage stakeholders of the community, professionals and individual performers in terms of training, funding from the government, job opportunities, or the status of heritage in the public domain. Preservation has now become a major cause of concern for the ones invariably connected with the socially and culturally recognized heritage.

Working for the preservation of heritage contributes to strengthen a common sense of identity within a community. Through the recognition of the past, preservation of heritage helps in the preparation of a better future. And it is only through these cultural heritages which draw a tangible link between the past and the present. The essentiality of a cultural heritage to survive in the long run is in its potential for preservation. Heritage preservation has also become a major concern in recent times with relation to the Sattras. Protecting and preserving the culture of the Vaisnava community through the Sattras has now become an immediate concern that holds many challenges for the community. The Sattras being an important centre for cultivating and producing a rich segment of cultural heritage, its resources in both tangible and intangible forms need to be preserved. As such the available cultural products should be such that they educate and at the same time attract individuals from both inside and outside these institutions.

### **6.1.1. Sattras as Living Religious and Cultural Heritage**

The Sattras in Assam are repositories of the elements of heritage in both tangible and intangible forms having a historical, cultural and aesthetic value. The existing resources are unique creations of the saint and his immediate apostles who tried to give the nascent Assamese society and culture a new look, form and identity at the time of crisis. These are forms of a coherent collective memory which transcends into the lives of an individual. As mentioned by Confino (1997, 1386), “collective memory is a representation of the past and is a making of a shared cultural knowledge by successive generations in vehicles of memory.” The Sattras too are the outcome of a collective memory of the rich Vaisnava tradition in Assam. Right from structuring a composite culture in the form of religious pursuits through diverse forms of arts including performing ones to housing various sacred artefacts, these produce a unique cultural history. Moreover the built-in vernacular heritage of these institutions occupies a central place in the affection and pride of the whole of the Vaisnava community. Considering the numerous heritage resources available throughout these institutions they still have traditional mechanisms to maintain respect for culturally significant resources. Since these institutions also cater to the religious indentation, the heritage content in it can also be termed as religious cultural heritage. But an immediate concern is that the various aspects of the heritage of these Sattras has to be identified, recognized and protected against the risk of the loss of its historical roots. For long term sustenance the culture, memory, hybridization and tradition of these institutions have to be preserved in respect of its distinctiveness and requirements. Valued as socio-religious institutions and catering largely to the cultural elements the Sattras have so far been able to display the richness of their cultural heritage. But this has not been the similar scene in all the Sattras established in the state at various periods of time. Employing secondary data source in the form of continuous participant observation for collecting information, heritage dimension of the Sattriya culture

in the Sattras of Nagaon and their present ramification in the process of protection and preservation are being discussed.

### **6.1.2. Locating the Tangible and Intangible Resources**

Cultural heritage contains both tangible and intangible resources. Tangible and intangible are two intertwined concepts. They cannot be separated from each other. Heritage therefore, connects the physical to the non-physical. The tangible or the substantial and the intangible or non-substantial resources contribute to the heritage. The intangible cultural performances and the tangible objects enhance both personal and community identities which produce a fundamentally strong collective identity. Cultural identity is thus nurtured by the cultural heritage of that particular group or individuals so far as their identity is influenced by a sense of belongingness. It is further vitalized by an understanding of both tangible and intangible heritage resource of that culture. As suggested by Laenen (1989, 90), “the main reason for the massive interest in heritage and the past can be located in the moral, social and identity crisis experienced over the past decades.” It is however, not only for the conservation and promotion but also for a wider understanding and assessment of their values, a holistic approach to the recognition of the elements of heritage is considered necessary. And in regards to our study, the intangible heritage of the Sattras can only be recognized with an understanding and appreciation of its enduring expressions including the tangible forms.

While talking about heritage, it is important to understand the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage. Even though there is some element of differences between the two, yet they are important in defining heritage. The tangible or the substantial heritage and the intangible resources contribute to the heritage. The heritage of the Sattras is also built on the edifice of both physical and non-

physical objects. Generally the cultural heritage products in a Sattra are both tangible and visible (artefacts and crafts, buildings) and intangible or invisible (songs, dance, drama, indigenous knowledge, folklore, rituals including their enduring practices).

The definition on Intangible Cultural Heritage provided by UNESCO Convention of 2003 is,

practices, representations and expressions, and knowledge and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (Keitumetse 2006, 166).

## **6.2. Situating the Sattras of Nagaon in the Process of Preservation**

The Sattras lying in the district are a treasure trove of all cultural embodiments, be it tangible or intangible. Since the time of their inception, they have been able to maintain a status quo with other Sattras in the state regarding both preservation and protection of the tangible and intangible forms of heritage. The present study brings in the various resources available in the Sattras scattered in the region which culminates to the heritage of these institutions.

The Sattras in this part of the state have been playing an influential role in recapitulating the past, maintaining the present and bestowing the traditional attributes upon the future since a long time. Recapitulating meaning a majority of the Sattras have preserved their age-old traditions which they have inherited from their past generations and have carried on further. Examples can be cited from a

few of the most influential Sattras of Nagaon. These include Bardowa Narowa, Karcung, Puranighar and Nikāmul Uriāgaon Sattra which have maintained the tradition of preserving and protecting both the intangible and tangible objects and members of the community are very hopeful that the various aspects of cultural heritage will be bestowed upon the future generations as part of the veneration of the Assamese cultural identity. Through the recognition of the past, preservation of heritage helps in the preparation of a better future. It has also been observed that regardless of the position one holds in the premises of the Sattra, it is upto that individual or the collective effort of the beneficiaries to determine the prerequisites of preserving the cultural artefacts and ensure that adequate resources are provided to protect the resources. It is an established phenomenon however; when people start participating in the decision making they will be committed more to the notions of conserving and managing the cultural heritage resources. This phenomenal change has taken place in Nagaon to a very limited extent where the decision as to what is deemed worthy of protection and preservation has been made by State authorities on a national level and through the constant negotiation between the Sattra representatives and the authorities of the state<sup>17</sup>. The challenge is to strike a balance between the supply of informations with authenticity and accuracy and also to stimulate the interest of the concerned heritage professionals. However there are some possible weaknesses in the findings of the research. As mentioned by Hewison (1987) regarding the nature of heritage experiences, he proposes that cultural and educational museums will become largely redundant as consumers demand more and more interactive, live history. Complementing his views in my own research findings, displaying an item of the Sattra in the museums has masked the absence of a reality. Rather a living and interactive experience gathered through the use of the artefacts instead of display in the museum involves more community participation. It keeps the

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<sup>17</sup> The *Sattradhikāra* of Letugram Sattra in Koliabor made this comment in an interview where he has witnessed the shortcomings evolving in his Sattra. According to him, there has been constant efforts by the community members in the decision making process which has indirectly stimulated the process of their preservation.

individuals occupied without a static representation and consequently these are considered to be authentic as heritage value. Moreover, both the tangible and intangible resources as already been mentioned also serve as a means of livelihood and ways of sustenance. Endowed with a cultural significance these resources comprising the cultural elements of the heritage of a Sattra survives on the representations, the performances, ritual practices, craftsman skills along with the objects of daily use, artifacts etc. It is important to note that in a majority of the Sattras in Nagaon the utility of these resources have become an important source of livelihood. Apart from keeping a variety of objects in the lone museum located in Bardowa as a way of preservation, the community has made a reciprocal effort to use these items for means of occupational living. This is more prominent in the Sattras situated in the rural areas of the district. This is a new means for gaining economic solidarity directly helping in the sustenance of the cultural artefacts considered as inherited and useful. The market economy rises as a result of this and this affects the economic dynamism of the Sattras. For example a good number of individuals have taken up the art of basket-making, drums, wood-sculpture, weaving as their basic means of livelihood<sup>18</sup>. For generations, these indigenous arts are displayed with intricate designs and vibrant colours authenticating the traditional cultural aspects of life in the Sattras. Traditionally in Nagaon these items were mostly used for religious ceremonies and as offerings in the form of tithes to the head of a Sattra. And still this process is continuing. Through this indigenous craftsmanship they have been able to engage themselves in a modest mode of living and have grown a business amongst the community. Moreover raw materials required for the crafts are easily available in many of the Sattras around Dhing and Bardowa out of which the artefacts could be made and sold in the market. This also indirectly boosts the

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<sup>18</sup> As for example weaving has become a major profession in most of the villages of Nagaon. The weavers weave the traditional *gāmocha* which is also used as part of congregation in the Sattras apart from using it as a regular item of use. This is a kind of a business involving the community at large and this has enhanced the community participation in maintaining and preserving the traditional aspect of the living heritage of the Sattras.

economy of the Sattras which is essential for its sustenance. As a result of this ongoing process there is a subtle amount of reciprocity between opening up of economic avenues and preservation of cultural heritage. This has helped in the growth of the Sattras lying in close proximity to both a rural and urban setting. One fine example can be cited from one of the Sattras surveyed, where the individual was involved in the art of making-masks where masks are popular objects generally used in *bhāonās* and other important artefacts like *guru-simhasana*, *maṇikūta*, *thāpona* etc. He was of the opinion that people from adjoining places come and purchase the masks to be used during festivals and ceremonies held in the Sattras from time to time. He also said ‘if this process is endured for long the Sattras will be benefitted largely as this would involve more and more individuals within the community as also the lost artefacts would continue to be restored.’ This involves not only an interaction amongst many but also portray the cultural forms of the Vaisnava culture in Assam through different models of art. Moreover these artefacts are sold to customers mainly for two purposes, one to be displayed as decorative piece and the other for regular use in the household. Few have even been sent to the museums as models for preservation so that the identity of the culture is not lost at all. On the contrary this has also created some sort of displeasure amongst many of the informants as mentioned earlier.

The Sattrā *nāmghar* is an important heritage building site of a Sattrā. Its location in many of the rural and urban settings of the district plays an important role in disseminating the cultural and religious verb and contributing to the tangible heritage resource of the Sattras. These have tried to maintain this continuum so far as most of these artefacts are utilized in the *nāmghars* on a regular basis. Be it a festival or ritualistic performance the artefacts in the Sattrā are utilized for multiple purposes on the selected days of ritual undertakings as well as in the daily chores of the Sattrā and most predominantly in the *nāmghars*. Certain indigenous items such as *tou*, *sarai*, *kharahi*, *bānbāti*, *soria*, *thāl*, *ghontā*,



*orga* etc. are in regular use. Several of them are used for the purpose of distributing the offerings made to the Almighty in the form of *māh-prasada* after conclusion of the regular prayers in the form of *nām-prasanga*. The *bhakats* normally uses the traditional items made of brass and copper, most commonly available metals in the whole of the state. There are evidences of the use of copper (*tām*) in many of the older Sattras in the surveyed region but commodification of the traditional items for a good market value have taken place in almost all of the Sattras. For longer duration and utility, the use of steel as a cheap means of commodity has replaced the traditional artefacts bringing in a visible decline to the growth of cottage industries associated with the development of the Sattras as has already been discussed in my previous research findings. Copper-plate inscription (*tāmor phali*) is one such artefact which had been in use in these Sattras for a long time but now it is treasured in the museum as an item of display with less heritage value. The commodification hypothesis proposes that culture becomes popular culture and in the process a series of staged authenticity occurs. This staged authenticity is said to thwart the visitor's genuine desire for authentic experiences (Goulding 2000, 837). The buildings, artefacts and other tangible items may be cited as authentic but the selective portrayal of events such as a ritual taking place in the Sattras and the history related to it are all to a great extent tailored to appease the visitors who are not directly from the community.

Another interesting feature of the Sattras of Nagaon is the growing popularity of the intangible resources, regarded as important heritage property that defines the cultural life of the Sattras. The popular forms of entertainment which falls under the category of intangible resources are the plays, musical performances, songs and dances. These form an indispensable part of each and every Sattra. Most of the Sattras of the district have been pursuing these art-forms and are connected with the task of maintaining such traditions in a continued form. Important themes of the *bhāonās* are staged and performed by members of the Sattras. This is a sort of a community-based performance when young or old,

the individuals take actively roles as participants. *Bhāonā* or the dramatically performed acts display different levels of participation at different phase of time. This is a special acquaintance observed in the Sattras of Nagaon. It has been observed that *bhāonā* performances are more pronounced in the Koliabor region, with scintillating performances by actors of various age-groups, thereby attracting a huge crowd (*see fig.39*). They also perform outside the region on varied occasions displaying their art and culture. These different art forms- dance, music and drama help to foster an awareness and appreciation for the past and present relationship and introduce a sense of stewardship amongst the individuals. These forms of art performed at various nuances of time and space represent some of the most compelling means of communication about the need for protection and conservation of the cultural heritage. By looking at the past work of these performers and their performances, the individuals can form an idea of their perspectives on the socio-cultural environment of the Sattras. Similarly watching a *bhāonā* or participating in a dance or musical performance, one can experience the Sattriya cultural traditions blending with the socio-cultural climate developing in the Sattras. So unlike the tangible items of use there are also intangible objects for display through mediating art in content and form.

As already discussed in Chapter 3, the Sattras are not only religious embodiments containing all sacramental qualities but they also acts as institutions where art and its different forms-dance,music,drama are spaced in a specific way for enrichment. These popular forms of entertainment described as the ‘living cultural’ forms of expression has to be promoted as a means to engage the neophytes and the already existing members of the community to protect and preserve the cultural heritage. The Sattras of Nagaon is under pressure and demand so far the process of preserving the rich Sattriya tradition is concerned and most of them are also under the threats of extinction as a consequence of not being able to retrieve their lost traditions of heritage. An outcome of the survey of the field is that there is lack of quality utilization of the resources of cultural

heritage. The method of analysis of data has been done through interviews of individuals engaged in that setting as contemporary heritage consumers and based on observations. It has been observed that there are frequent conflicts over indigenous landed property of the Sattras which forms an inherent heritage resource of the Sattras. The lack of provisions for protection, ownership, storage, curation and management of historic artefacts has been addressed by various individuals over the past decade, all of whom requires the need for official repositories, better protective measures and more precise assessment criteria (Mackay and James 1987, 41). The Sattras therefore requires attention and adoption of punitive measures to address the right to protect their property.

### **6.3. Problems of Preservation**

Despite the fact that state repositories for providing funds in support of the Sattras has been established and meet the demands of the time, it has not been accredited to have endowed with necessary resources to manage and curate the artefacts. There is a need to encompass the variety of the cultural elements, both tangible and intangible as connected to the Sattra and the Sattriya culture at large. These include the illustrated miniature paintings depicting the stories from the *Bhāgavata*, ritual sites, items of daily use and ritual items, musical instruments, idols and images worshipped, musical traditions like *bargits*, *sattriya nāc*, *gayan-bayan*, ceremonial and ritual traditions, aspect of the way of life of a Vaisnava individual and the relationship which exists among the individuals affiliated to a Sattra.

In some cases, the culture of the Sattra disappears because most of their adherents die out. Lack of proper care, non-adoption of scientific techniques, poor resource funding and community negligence are many reasons of impediment to the growth and development of a Sattra. However in recent times the Sattras at

Majuli and adjoining places of upper Assam have made remarkable contributions in the domain of enlivening the Sattriya culture. In this way these Sattras have also served its purpose of preservation of its cultural heritage in both tangible and intangible form.

The Sattras have borne a new dimension through its various migrated cultural elements. When two cultures come together a number of changes take place through mutual interaction. The migrated elements give rise to a process of new acculturation through which the existing culture undergoes certain changes. Such changes are often perceived in respect of cultural expressions in some Sattras of the district. An example can be cited in this regard with reference to Baghargonya Sattras which originally belonged to the Bengal school of Vaisnavism initiated by Caitanyadeva. But in course of time, it incorporated into its ritual order and some other aspects elements from the existing Sattras of Assam Vaisnavism. Some of their elements also came to impact other nearby Sattras through mutual interaction and exchange. Every Sattras in each locality of the district is currently facing new challenges which have affected the Vaisnava community at large. The increasing concern for protection of its cultural heritage has brought to light the importance of standardization. Intangible forms of art like *bhāonās* have gained grounds in this district with a developmental strategy adopted in its form and kind. The concept of a *bhāonā* has taken a place in the stage rather than its performance in the premises of a Sattras or the village *nāmghars* which was earlier a notable and spectacular phenomenon. Apart from these the Sattras possess unique architectural features which has lost its aesthetic value in due course of time. Concrete structures have replaced the age old traditional structures of a Sattras. This is done to control the deplorable condition due to natural calamities.

Citing the causes regarding their preservation and maintenance, it has been observed that the most troublesome issues include the physical and

economic factors such as lack of adequate funds for their protection and regular conduct of management programmes. Cataloguing in a standard format irrespective of all requisite information collected, excavation records as well as all relevant documentary materials should be stored in for perpetuity. It becomes necessary to deposit a comprehensive catalogue so that the institutions could manage the relevant artefacts. There is also a lack of museological research on the techniques and methods of their preservation in addition to lack of awareness among the general public relating the value of these rich cultural heritage. Museums are a common and important cultural asset displaying various cultural products belonging to a particular community. It displays its own culture. Culture, within this reach is defined as the totality of ideas which are inherited, activities of a group of people with shared traditions transmitted generations after generations. To showcase the cultural elements of a Sattriya lifestyle, a museum culture would definitely give commitment to becoming the custodian, preserver and conservator of the rich tradition of Vaisnava culture for future generations. Within the district, there is only one museum<sup>19</sup> showcasing composite cultural artefacts mostly from the region. The museum has displayed the visual forms of culture, often featuring the artefacts and works produced by the local population, providing a better picture of the cultural characteristics of the Sattras. It has been able to serve as a major source of attraction for the non-Vaisnava, who is benefitted by the exposure to this unique historical and artistic production through the display of the various tangible artefacts in the Sattras. In order to preserve the cultural heritage connected to these institutions more museums can be developed within the locality so that the traditional role of curatorship of the existing material culture, documents or objects are maintained. The need to protect and manage these cultural properties has been increasingly felt in the wider academic circle in recent times which means enabling the cultural heritage resources to be rescued from the disabling

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<sup>19</sup> Batadrava *Thān* Museum established for the benefit of the community is the only museum preserving the rich heritage of the district as well as the state.

conditions of fragmentation. A matter of immediate concern is the vulnerability of the state government in respect to matters of preservation which often shies away from the question of dealing with the statutory protection for artefacts. In most of the Sattras in Nagaon it has been noticed that taking advantage of this susceptibility of the state apparatus many unscrupulous and greedy people act with impunity for their own benefits, as a result of which the Sattras' property are at stake. Examples are cited from the Samaguri Sattra in Koliabor of preserving the indigenous manuscripts of the Sattra, which were of great importance at the time of their creation and acted as the multiple knowledge bearer of the Vaisnava tradition. But when few of them could not be preserved with proper treatment they were taken over by the state for preservation and declared them as protected resources. The *Śankaradeva Kalakshetra*, a government organization of the state has played a unique role in the process of preservation. Efforts have been laid to curate many of the tangible items such as the manuscripts and rare books written by the apostles of the faith, illustrative plays which have been in use in these Sattras for the last five hundred years. Even at the local level, a Nagaon based non-governmental organization named *Prakalpa Sangrakshana* has restored a four-foot tall broken *Viṣṇu* idol from Narowa Bālisatra. A series of restoration works have been carried on by this organization in several other Sattras of the district which include Leteri Sālaguri, Bālisatra and Kobāikota. This is possible due to the initiative and efforts by Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva Research Center situated in Bardowa. The heritage building of the Sattra such as the *nāmghars* and *maṇikūta* also deserves attention. Through application of scientific methods in preservation these heritage buildings could be retrieved from getting damaged in course of time. Almost a quarter of the one affluent Sattras presently located in Nagaon have been abandoned at some point of time or the other. With passage of time, stealthily and openly the landed property of the Sattras has been encroached upon in the name of religion and for offering worship. There are circumstances

when the community set up around these places, is not in a position to retain the resources. Though these institutions house scores of tangible objects as their inherited collections, yet as a result of adequate funding provisions, thorough and effective conservation work has not been carried out on the collected and excavated materials, which have deteriorated the process of integrating the cultural manifestations. Since Nagaon has numerous family oriented Sattras, individual properties of the *Sattradhikāra* have also substituted the cultural heritage property of a Sattra. Though many of these resources are not in regular use but they have not altogether lost their importance. Through such a holistic approach towards their preservation, the past heritage of the Sattras could be made more physically and economically sustainable for long term survival.

So far my observation from the field goes, preservation process by itself is problematic as it requires dedication and involvement from individuals and groups, suitable climatic conditions for continued existence. Assam is a land mostly prone to natural calamities like cyclones, earthquakes, floods etc. The demography of the place is not favorable for long term preservation of the tangible goods. And Nagaon being at the heart of the state is no exception to it. As a matter of fact however, efforts have been made to a considerable extent in preserving the heritage of these institutions. They have undergone many changes mostly due to two factors; one the natural calamities which come without a warning and the other human ignorance and instability to regard the resources as valued treasures. There are many Sattras still lying in a deplorable state due to the negligence on the part of the government or due to ignorance of the individuals, who claim to be the custodians of the heritage of these institutions.

Standardization with a scientific approach is a major challenge faced by the cultural heritage curators today. Documentation and archiving of all available cultural heritage resources have brought to light the importance of standardization. Information from the field has shown that there is lack of

provision in formulating a standard technique to catalogue, present and conserve the heritage resource of these Sattras. Standardization efforts in cultural heritage have several kinds of problems that need more time to be solved and then visualise the benefits of standardization.

One of the most significant pressures on their conservation was the high and increasing cost of maintaining these properties. The preservation and maintenance of a heritage depends on how effectively the public are involved. For that purpose, people must collaborate and help in maintaining the tradition. The valuable religious heritage of a Sattras can be made practicable for survival only through the actions performed responsibly by the community and its stakeholders that have guarded them to a possible extent till now. Traditional performance and craft skills began to decline as the impact of modern amenities of lives as the predominant typology. Heritage preservation in the Sattras mostly depends on the public funds or the funds generated by the government for the overall development of a Sattras. But there is a sort of a blame-game amongst the stakeholders of the Sattras and the government. The former claims to have not been granted requisite funds for preservation and continue with the heritage perspectives and on several occasions criticized the later.

Even so, the individuals claim that, over recent years, there had been a relative decline in the conservation of both tangible and intangible heritage resource, with much of the remaining funds being swallowed by the administration of the state. For instance, the head of the Letugram Sattras denies the effective role played by the government in matters of fund and blames the



government for showing negligence towards the growth of the Sattra<sup>20</sup>. It is therefore necessary for every individual in the Assamese Vaisnava society to relate the human past through the preservation of this epitome of culture, the Sattras. In many cases, it has been found that the society is informed about the growing need for preservation but they are not adequate to meet with the crisis at hand. The members of the community know very little about the developments taking place in the act of preservation and even why there is a need to preserve the heritage of the Sattras. Insufficient funds from the government and negligence on the part of the individuals have greatly affected the preservation strategies of the Sattras. The individuals blame the government to have turned a deaf ear to the problems concerning these institutions and their institutional growth. But there is an exception noticeable in the case of Bardowa. There is a potential feature associated with the preservation of antiquities in the museum situated in the Bardowa *Thān*. The tangible items of daily use and the ones which require a replacement have been collected from different Sattras and associated nāmghars in the district and have been organized for public display as modes of preservation in the near future. This has inevitably supported eco-tourism in this sector as also indirectly contributed to the Sattra economy. When it is linked to tourism, heritage can also become a direct source of income raising its economic value. But to avoid the consequences of an uncontrolled development of mass tourism and its negative impacts on sites preservation, local communities have to be directly involved in cultural and eco-tourism.

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<sup>20</sup> Sri J. Mahanta, the present *Sattradhikāra* of this Sattra lamented on the lack of concern by the state. According to him, few Sattras were provided with funds in the year 2011; his Sattra was also included amongst those. A sum of one lakh has been granted so far of which only a quarter of the amount has been granted and utilized in the reconstruction of the *satra-griha* but the rest has not yet been received. He further adds, if the Sattra is regarded to be a heritage identity of the Assamese Vaisnava, then why there is no proper generation of the fund.

#### **6.4. Involvement of the Community in Preservation**

Heritage is a basis of the community identity. Both tangible and intangible heritages play a role in the development of local communities. The Sattras are directly linked up with the community. The communities revolving around these institutions have a concurrent role to play in future preservation and protection of the available resources. Communities shape the culture of a heritage. The impact of heritage on local communities is not only immaterial; it can become very concrete as soon as local actors are involved in the preservation and promotion processes. Local communities which have for a long time had an active participation in the Sattras can be inspired more to come forward and be fully involved in formulating better methods of preservation and developing the lost heritage of these glorious institutions of the state. The local actors with reference to this study are the stakeholders who are invariably connected with one or more Sattras, the head of the Sattras concerned as also the members from the laity who have been maintaining the tradition so far. A survey of the Sattras lying in this district has revealed the fact that there is optimal potential to carry forward the rich cultural heritage mostly through the intangible resources. Moreover heritage when well managed can become a tool to share experiences, exchange know-how and to integrate local communities into international networks. Involving the community is an important and powerful vehicle to procure more effective results in preserving the heritage which is more or less dying<sup>21</sup>.

An important feature involving the community in the process of preservation is developing a heritage inventory as guide for the benefit of the Sattriya community at large. The Sattras, whether big or small, or situated in rural and urban vicinity, they are valued for their association with the community history of the Vaisnavas. The present study cites the Sattras of Nagaon as the historic places which contribute to the benefit of the community through its

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<sup>21</sup> Remark made by Sri Haren Mahanta, an artist who is indulged in the art of mask-making and sculpture in an interview conducted on 28.07.11 at his residence in Koliabor.

versatile components and help to define the unique character of the Vaisnava community in general. Community heritage inventory can be used as an important tool for the community to develop effective strategies for managing the heritage resources of the Sattrra. The inventory record of a Sattrra should contain a historic description of them, information about their location and usages of the tangible indigenous items. A community heritage inventory associating the Sattrras is essential to improve the community's understanding of its own heritage, identify and protect important heritage resources and promote community involvement for effective preservation of both intangible and tangible resources of a Sattrra. The community schools or Sanskrit *tois* developed under the aegis of a Sattrra, the research libraries associated with it, Vaisnava community developmental organizations can be regarded as examples of the custodians for an inventory. A survey of the field has reflected the necessity of creating a heritage inventory for the Sattrras lying not only in the district of Nagaon but also the entire state in general, to fill up the information gaps for the known Sattrras, identify and record other lesser known Sattrras which may have been previously ignored. Depending on all the available resources, the community heritage inventory would help identify the value these Sattrras holds for the community. Hence the resources—both tangible and intangible and their usage, location, and cultural associations or meanings that contribute to the heritage value of the Sattrras must be retained in order to preserve its heritage value. Value is an important asset of heritage. “Heritage is valued not as an intellectual enterprise but because (as one aspect of material culture) it plays instrumental, symbolic, and other functions in society” (Mason 2002, 8). The value ascribed to heritage is multivalent. As for example the Sattrras as mentioned in our study, it has spiritual value since it is designates as an important place of worship; it has a historical value because of the rituals and other performance related events that have transpired here; it has an aesthetic value because of its beautiful architecture; it has economic value as a huge landed property; it has political value since it represents symbolically certain kind of a

social order. This multivalence is important while discussing the notion of heritage values to be intrinsic in regard to these institutions.

Sometimes reaching out to such a community with specific religious traditions becomes more complicated. The aim of raising awareness of the heritage and developing them at times is difficult since along with a will to modernize many traditional ways and values are maintained. Examples can be cited from the sacred scriptures housed in many of the Sattras. The government has made a considerable effort to preserve those in a modern and scientific way rather than keeping those manuscripts in the Sattras to decay due to damp condition, insects and other calamities. Thus the goal of actively involving the community in preventive conservative measures and monitoring those institutions for long term survival lack at times and cannot be realized. This lack of awareness and participation from the public in the preservation of cultural heritage has created a cause of concern. Many of these Sattra sites have been abandoned and left to decay since the community start losing interest in their maintenance. It is considered that the state has a responsibility to take care of those eventually losing the traditional values associated with the heritage.

#### **6.5. Necessity of an Institutionalized and Sustainable Support**

Despite its obvious benefit to the society the cultural heritage of these institutions is increasingly threatened with destruction and degradation. The cultural heritage of the Sattras is a priority area of concern now since they have started falling under the root of decadence. The question of sustainability arises when cultural heritage is threatened due to neglect and allowed to deteriorate. It is also damaged when the natural integrity of the particular site or the people involved herewith is deluged by external influences. Such instances have affected the Sattras in sustaining their heritage to a great extent. The present study

investigates many such institutions in the entire district which are vulnerable to extinction. The support of the government as well as the laity is sought for preserving them for future. The task of the individuals and government funding agencies is to encourage the particular Sattras around the district to strengthen and increase efforts for proper conservation of the available and accessible resources, their preservation and promotion and enhancement of their cultural heritage as part of its sustainable mission. The cohesive co-ordination between the state functionaries and the central government is commendable only to a limited extent, directly or indirectly paving ways for preservation of heritage of these Sattras. Though many of them as mentioned are in a dilapidated condition yet the generous funds provided by the government from time to time seems to have controlled the situation of crisis in matters of preservation and protection (Choudhury 1990, 3). Many Sattras are in the progress through the funds provided though a very meagre amount. The Sattras are expected to grow and take up the task of protection and management of their cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, only by moderating them towards this goal and energizing the concerned individuals with more economic and moral support. While talking about economic support, generally the state government is responsible for providing the requisite support for maintenance and preservation. Even many non-governmental organizations have provided help in the process of preservation, though the major role has to be played by the government, both at the centre and the state. The concerns of these local organizations with their youth sensitization programmes have helped to promote the cultural heritage have contributed greatly to the local provision of employment, wealth generation and improvement in the environment for long term sustenance. Taking examples from the field, it has been observed that many of the Sattras have adopted their own survival strategy, like adopting new and modern scientific methods for preserving the indigenous manuscripts, worn out texts which form an important segment of

Sattra's property<sup>22</sup>. Given the problems with current state-based approaches to heritage management the question of how to develop a sustainable and successful framework for the effective management of heritage sites imbued with sacred values becomes an important one. It is imperative that arrangements are made in such a way that the main custodians of these heritage resources carry out the compulsory analysis and undergo proper curation instead of the help provided by the state repository. Even though there is a poor and irregular funding from the government at the state level, yet there are some Sattras in the district which have been provided with minimal funds for utilization. Particularly in Nagaon, the *Asom Sattra Mahasabha*<sup>23</sup> is one such organization who has been mobilizing the government to a considerable extent. Consolidation of contacts and cooperation with governmental and non-governmental organizations has involved active participation for the promotion of cultural heritage issues. The *Samanwita Yuva Tirtha*, the youth wing of the apex Sattra body, has also been playing a vital role in influencing the youths in creating an awareness to preserve and protect the heritage of the Sattra. Though a collective effort has been made, both at the centre and state level to raise these institutions and protect their socio-cultural entity with the estimated funds. The governments definitely cannot be expected to support preservation of cultural heritage in the private domain. As such the responsibility lies in the society to engage more and more people in the process of preservation and protection. This dexterity through constant interaction and negotiation between the state and the centre has been brought into focus by the media. Yet, despite its obvious contributions towards the social, cultural and economic benefits to the society as a whole, the cultural heritage of such institutions are still at stake. They are increasingly threatened by destruction and degradation. Human

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<sup>22</sup> Samaguri Sattra has taken the initiative to preserve and protect the indigenous manuscripts and other important religious texts. The government funds have been utilized and also the community efforts to protect the traditional artefacts and the intangible forms of art are worth mentioning.

<sup>23</sup> Information collected from the Secretary of the Asom Sattra Mahasabha, who is a resident of Nagaon and has been playing an active role in negotiation with the government of Assam in matters of preservation of the Sattras.

activities are mostly responsible behind the decay and loss of the cultural assets of the Sattras. Rapid urbanization, theft and vandalism, illegal immigration are such important factors affecting the growth of such institutions<sup>24</sup>. Thus the development of the Sattras and the society can be interpreted through the notion of heritage which throws light on the problems and difficulties facing both. If properly utilized, the heritage of the Sattras provides an identity and a measure of stability and growth adopted for these institutions to sustain in times of rapid change and development. To understand this decree of concept, Williams (1982) mentions,

For tradition ("our cultural heritage") is self-evidently a process of deliberate continuity, yet any tradition can be shown, by analysis, to be a selection and reselection of those significant received and recovered elements of the past which represent not a necessary but a desired continuity (187).

This discussion can be concluded with the fact that the cultural heritage of the Sattras in the study is at a crossroad. It is time to look to the future and make positive decisions for the generations to come. In due course of time the cultural heritage of these institutions tends to get threatened when neglected or allowed to deteriorate. The external influences like constant influx of migrants and their occupation of the indigenous landed property considered as a tangible resource of the Sattras also penetrates into the natural setting into which the cultural heritage is set. In this context the most affected ones are the indigenous people inhabiting the Sattra land. In true sense the heritage requires being dynamic, active and well performed so as to reveal its meaning and potency as both tangible and intangible objects rather than being inert and static. Moreover the heritage resources are a part of the dynamic eco system which requires community participation for long

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<sup>24</sup> Sri Paramananda Deva Mahanta, the Deputy Secretary of Batadrava *Thān* Management Committee and present *Sattradhikāra* of Salaguri Sattra has lamented on the fact that Bardowa alone houses a property of around one crore, but in recent times many of the important artefacts has been stolen. He added that the government must give protection to the remains, otherwise Bardowa would lose its importance as an important heritage site in coming years. This was stated in an interview conducted on 21.12.11 by a local television channel (Nagaon Talks) in Nagaon.

term survival and productivity. Thus the concept of heritage is one which serves many important purposes at present, be it political, social or economic or cultural and this is crucial to understanding the meaning of the term while approaching the heritage of a Sattra. The development of the Vaisnava community in general can be interpreted through cultural heritage which sheds light on the problems and difficulties being faced by the Sattras in particular. Cultural heritage is no longer confined to a group of experts, it is for all. Members from the community has major role to play both in the decision-making process and continuous care for longer term. It is done to ensure the preservation of the tangible and intangible aspects which forms the heritage of the Sattras in full richness of their authenticity. Therefore, if properly utilized, the cultural heritage including both tangible and intangible resources providing an identity and a measure of stability for the Sattras to grow and develop and in periods marked by mobility and rapid change. Thus the material cultural heritage of the Sattras always reflects and communicates the essential immaterial heritage too maintaining the religious and devotional traditions, customs and practices of congregations characterizing the Vaisnava faith.



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**Figure: 30 - The dilapidated state of the *nāmghar* at Letugram Sattra.**



**Figure: 31 - Manuscripts preserved at *Mādhatāri* Sattra.**



Figure: 32 – An old *nāmghar* and relic shrine at Samaguri Sattrā.

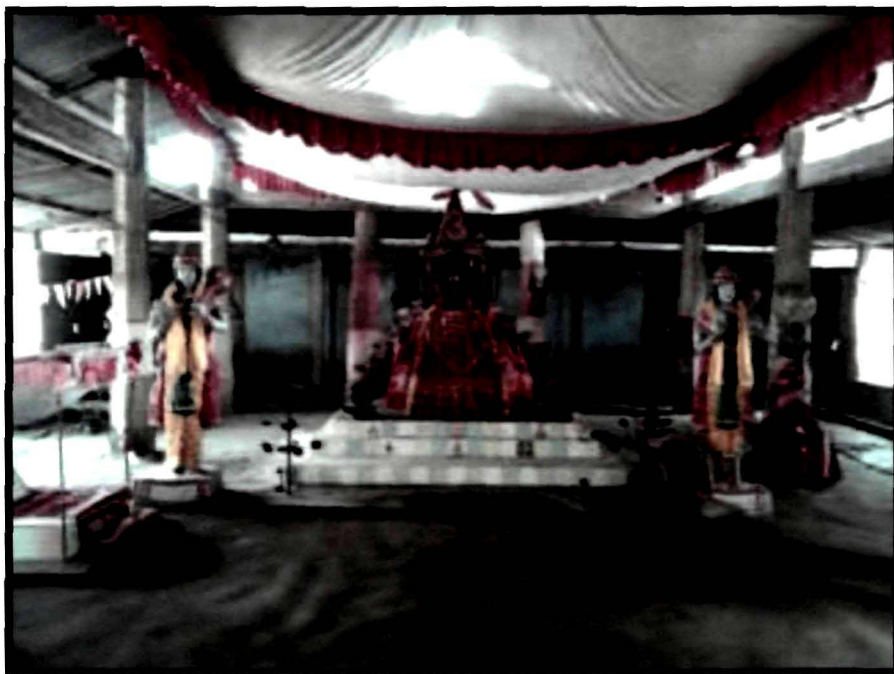


Figure: 33 - Inside view of Brahmachārī Sattrā.



Figure: 34 - The well used by Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva preserved at Bardowa.

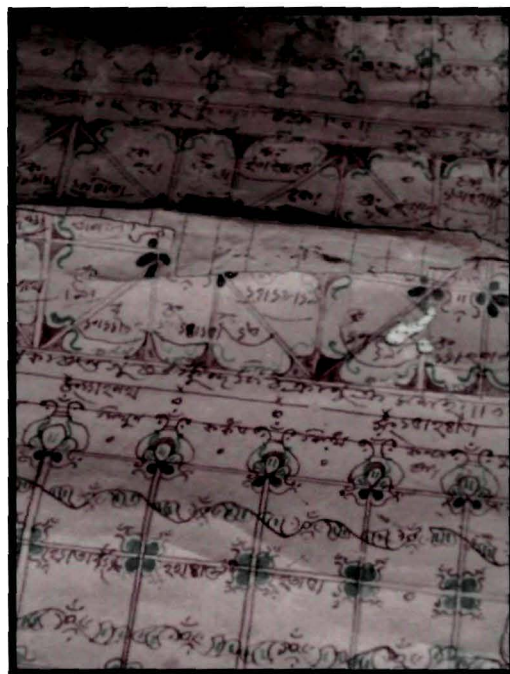
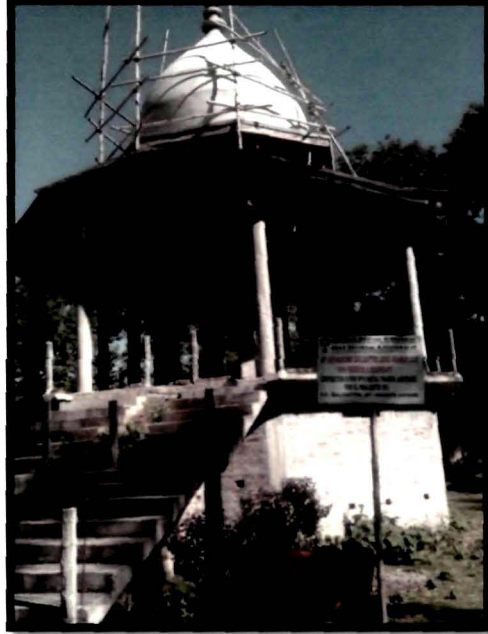
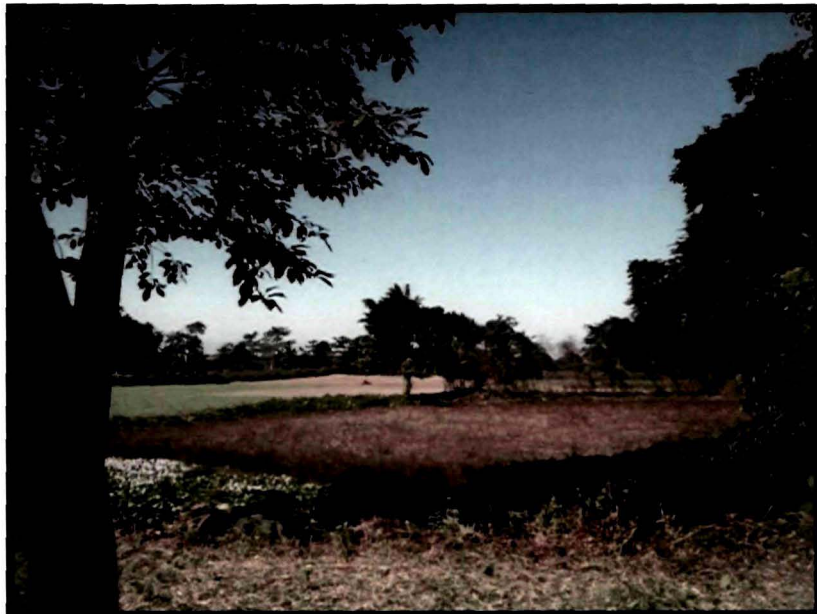


Figure: 35 - A specimen of astrological calculation prepared by a *Sattradhikāra*.



**Figure: 36 - Newly constructed Narowa Bālisatra *doul mandir* cum mini museum.**



**Figure: 37 - Sattrā land utilized for cultivation by encroachers near Dāmodaradeva Āta *thān*.**





Figure: 38 – A type of drum (*dobā*) used in prayer-services at Narowa Bālisatra.



Figure: 39 – Scenes from different *bhāonās* in the premise of a *nāmghar* at Koliabor.

## **A case study on Bardowa *Thān*: The heritage site of Assam Vaisnavism.**

The existence of a pilgrimage cum tourist center named Bardowa or Batadrava in the heart of the state of Assam would definitely give an insight into the cultural history of the place. Bardowa, being the place of birth of Śaṅkaradeva, also happens to be the sacred site from where the saint and preacher started the journey of the Bhakti Movement and thereby it marks the nucleus of a Sattrā as an institution of popular participation. Born to the family of the *Bara-Bhuyans*<sup>25</sup> who were believed to have migrated earlier from Kanauj in North India, the saint began preaching the Neo-Vaisnava faith from here with multiple activities. Located at an approximate distance of 18 kms north-west of the Nagaon town, Bardowa has gained reputation as a religious center over the years being Śaṅkaradeva's birth-place as well as the foundational site of what transpired as a cultural resurgence. It came to be considered as *thān* meaning a sacred place. Unlike all other prominent Sattrās and *thāns* in the state, Bardowa has definitely etched a name in the socio-cultural scenario of Assam. It was only because of the untiring efforts of this great soul that the Assamese culture got a distinct identity and form. Since then it grew into prominence as an important centre disseminating all socio-cultural and religious activities. It was in this place that the saint gave birth to a new religion in Assam which brought about a religious resurgence in the whole of the state.

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<sup>25</sup> In the book written by Nakul Chandra Bhuyan titled *Bara Bhuyans* there is a mention of the Bara-Bhuyans of Assam who ruled over certain principalities in middle Assam and were either the original inhabitants of the state or have migrated from other parts of this land during the early medieval period. They became the principal rulers on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. The Bhuyans came to Kamatapur and presumably were given the royal status of *Zamindars* (landlords) called Siromani Bhuyan by the king of Kamatapur. Śaṅkaradeva was the progeny of the Bhuyans. In another note Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa mentions that the Bara-Bhuyans were not the rulers appointed by a superior king but they assumed the title of Bhuyan because of their physical power.



Śankaradeva was born in the family of the *Bhuyans* in the year 1449 A.D. (1371 śaka) at Ālipukhuri near Bardowa or Batadrava in the district of Nagaon, Assam on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. There is however a sort of a controversy for long in respect to the location of his exact place of birth. Many scholars claim Patekibari a place about 8 miles (an approximate distance of about 12.8 km) to be his original birth-place while others have regarded Bardowa. During my period of field work, different notes and documents were made available to me, which had little evidence to claim Bardowa to be his actual place of birth. There are notable accounts relating to Bardowa to be the actual birth-place of the saint. In one of his own creative writings, the saint provides his own identity. An excerpt from the *Rukmini-harana-kavya* (verse. 527) by Śankaradeva goes like this:

*bardowa nāme grāma                      śasye matsye anupāma*  
*laûhityara āti anukula*

[Bardowa, the village situated near (on the bank of) the Laûhitya (Brahmaputra) was full of all kinds of agricultural products].

As the researcher has specified and limited its area of work to the Sattras of Nagaon, Bardowa *thān* has been taken as a site for case study with a view to highlighting on the history of the institution enduring with its cultural legacy and the process of changes. It is important to analyze the facts underlying the changes and also determine the continual process of maintaining the tradition based on the model of the *thān*.

Acknowledging the fact cropping out of the controversies related to the birth-place of the saint, Bardowa has a long history behind and the events that took place. As Kalita (1985, 2) states, it is a *thān*, a seat of pilgrimage, for containing some relics of the past which are directly related to the birth and activities of Śankaradeva. However we find no significant difference between a

*thān* and a Sattrā. The ones initially established by the two saints, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva came to be known by the name *thān* (sacred sites) while the later establishments came to be known as Sattras after their demise. The only difference is in the time of their establishments and association of memories of the saints. Except for the nomenclature, these two institutional set-ups display similarities in their ritual calendars, architectural features, apparatuses for functioning and stratas of individuals. The institution like the Sattrā never took a formal shape in style and function during the period of the saints' stay in Bardowa, it was him who only paved the way for setting up an institution catering to the socio-cultural life of the Assamese community. The Bardowa *thān* is one such fine example among all the other prominent ones scattered in the state and became the first one to have been popularized by the saint himself. Śaṅkaradeva started preaching his new-found faith here and the seeds of Vaisnavism were sown more than five hundred years ago and gradually it took a permanent seat giving a niche to the Assamese identity.

The history of Bardowa presents very interesting features. As we trace back to its history, it has to be recognized as the first entity ever in the history of Vaisnavism in Assam. The saint set out on his first pilgrimage from this place at the age of thirty-two in 1481. Inspired by the philosophies of other contemporaries of his times, immediately after his return back from the pilgrimage for twelve years across whole of north India, he thought of bringing about a reform in the society. He set himself to the task of propagating the new faith of Vaisnavism (Sarma 1996, 16). During this period he made great contributions in the literary field. He composed several works, translations and adaptations, songs and lyrics, narratives and doctrinal treatises which are also celebrated as masterpieces of Assamese literature. But his stay in Bardowa did not continue for long because of growing political conflicts with the neighbouring tribes. In 1516 A.D., the saint along with the members of his clan had to evacuate the place due to the invincible attack of the *Kacharis*. After this retreat,

Śaṅkaradeva never came back to Bardowa in his lifetime. For as long as 140 years, the place where the saint first started a revival in the society, religion and culture remained stagnant. No developments took place during this period. As such after about hundred and thirty years later, Bardowa was re-discovered by the saint's grand daughter-in-law Āi Kanakalatā, wife of Caturbhuj Thakur. It was at her initiative that Bardowa was rediscovered and renovated and it was possible during the reign of the Ahom ruler, Jayadhaj Simha (1654-1663). She greatly contributed towards radiating its refulgence by discovering and reclaiming Bardowa, the ancestral seat of Śaṅkaradeva (Sarma 1996, 129). Over the years it got divided between the two families who were descendants of Śaṅkaradeva, Rāmakanta and Anantarāya. During the reign of the Ahom king, Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811) the tussle between the two parties became more intense. At the command of the king, his able prime minister, Purnananda Burhagohain examined the whole issue and finally divided them in 1799 A.D. Each set up a distinct house-hold Sattrā at Bardowa namely Narowa (known as *barfāl*) and Salaguri (known as *sorufāl*) which rose into prominence in later years. The *kirtan-ghar* built in its premises is an important component whilst the *hatis* or cloisters set up in four different directions serve the purpose of accommodating the residential *bhakats*. Added to the main premise of the *thān* in the year 1509 A.D. these *hatis* still accommodate a number of disciples as regular inhabitants and also devotees from across the state on special occasions. The *kirtan-ghar* was re-established to serve the purpose of both the parts only in the year 1958 A.D. after a gap of around 160 years of the division. However it has bonded the members of both the Sattras till date by way of their participation in the religious and cultural affairs. The members of both these Sattras have been managing the *thān* since the day of its establishment. In course of time, Bardowa became the nerve-centre of many activities in nurturing the faith, as mentioned in many of the later biographies and the *Katha-Guru Carit*. It was in this place that a spacious *deva-griha* was constructed to hold regular prayers and religious discussions, creating

an atmosphere to propagate the faith at the nascent stage of the movement (Sarma 1996, 16). The *maṅikūta*, *cāri-hati*, *guru-padaśila*, *doul-mandir* built in the premises of the *thān* have made remarkable contributions to the Vaisnava heritage of Assam. Added to this is the granary built during the days of Śaṅkaradeva is also present till date.

The myrobalan (*silikha* in Assamese, scientific name- *terminalia cebula*) tree, under the shades of which the Guru wrote many of his important renditions and preached his faith is still alive within its enclosure. One interesting fact is that this tree is as old as the birth of the saint. This has now become an important heritage symbol. The celestial pond *Akasi Ganga* is another very interesting heritage resource of Bardowa with a natural landscape and scenic beauty. This was created by the saint after his return from the pilgrimage when people from the village were under the spell of a drought. It is interesting to note that this pond survives till date in Bardowa. The bank of the pond has been utilized now as a picnic spot attracting huge crowd every year but as an act of veneration to the Almighty fishing and boating in the pond is not allowed even today. This kind of gathering has given an ample scope for visitors to enhance the serene beauty of the place. Even the *thān* authorities have allowed these visitors to cook meals in its premise which culminates to a kind of community interaction.

The holy text *Bhāgavata* symbolizing God at the altar is placed in the *simhasana* of the *maṅikūta*. He set up the *kirtan-ghar* for the first time in Bardowa in 1468 A. D. In the subsequent years, he composed the verses of the *Kirtan-ghoṣa*, several episodes of Assamese rendering of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, so that people could get into the depth of the new religious order. Starting with all praise for the Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, a major portion of this treatise on Vaisnavism was written in Bardowa. Inspired by the verses from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Bhāgavata Gīta*, his new creed came to be known as the *Bhāgavata dharma* or *Ek saran nām dharma*, that is finding solace in only one supreme God. This came to

be popularly known as the *Mahapurusiya Dharma* as Śaṅkaradeva was believed as an incarnation of God in Assamese Vaisnavism.

At Bardowa itself, he started to manifest mostly through his literary creations and musical compositions, the practice of which has been continuing in many of the distinguishing *Sattras* of Assam today. He wrote verses in the form of musical compositions which were known as *bargits* and other poetical verses. These are some of the finest compositions ever done in the history of Assamese genre of music and also make a prodigious contribution to the cultural life of the people of Assam. Bardowa thus became the nerve-centre of the new faith and in developing a socio-cultural norm in the whole of the state. Since then Bardowa has become a role model for whole of the Assamese Vaisnava tradition and the *Sattras* built in its proximity have grown into institutions maintaining an interactive relationship with Bardowa in practicing the faith. The serene atmosphere of the place still attracts thousands of devotees and has become an important pilgrimage as well as a recreational centre. Since the saint had spent the initial years of his life at Bardowa, so naturally this place has become famous by preserving certain relics related to him and his childhood. These relics form an important heritage resource. One of the important relics preserved in Bardowa is the foot impression of the saint cut on stones known as *guru-padasila* where homage is paid to the saint through regular offerings in the form of *naivedya*. Amongst the Vaisnavites of Assam this is of vital importance and symbolic for paying obeisance. This is considered to be a part of an invocation to the supreme deity in some *Sattras*. The well from which the saint used to take water for religious and personal uses, popularly known as *pāt-nād* (see fig. 34) is also preserved as an important relic in the premise. It is an attraction for the devotees.

The word *thān* has moreover attained a significance since it houses the saint's foot impressions known as *guru-paduka*. It is still considered to be holy and pious. But this form of relic worship became more significant only after the

death of the two great apostles, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. The importance of these foot impressions has already been discussed in the third chapter. Thousands of devotees irrespective of caste, creed and religion throng in every year and include it in their itinerary to visit and bow down at the relic and pay rich tributes to the saint. Consequently, over the years it has gained a vital importance amongst the Assamese Vaisnava community as also attracting a huge non-Vaisnava crowd from across the country. A very conscious observation was made during one of my field visits to Bardowa, during the celebration of *phālgutsava*. Devotees from every nook and corner of the country come in to offer prayer to the deity and as part of the congregation they have stayed here for months and took part in the festival. This has not only popularized the faith but also paid rich veneration to the saint and his birth-place. Assimilation of people from different cultures and religious groups during this festive season and other significant occasions makes an important mark in the history of Vaisnavism in Assam today. Fairs are held during this time, local traditional goods are made for display and sold and this way an interaction with the community takes place. The death and birth anniversaries of the saint and his disciple, Mādhavadeva are celebrated with reverence and this way more and more people are attracted to this faith.

The Batadrava Thān Managing Committee known as *Sri Sri Batadrava Thān Parichalona Samiti* established in the year 1968 A.D. is an apex body which manages the *thān* to its credit. The democratically elected members mainly comprise a president, vice-president, general secretary, assistant secretary, treasurer and executive members. These members take utmost care in maintaining the day to day affairs conducted inside the premises of the *thān*. The members must be initiated into the faith before he takes up the responsibility of being the office-bearers of this committee. After about five hundred years of his birth at a place like Bardowa, the ideology of the saint and his identity as an iconic figure is still nurtured by the people who strictly follow Vaisnavism today. At the social level his works and ethos have been the exemplifiers of a radical change in the

society. This is only because of Bardowa, Batadrava or as been called Tembuwani that Nagaon has become one of the important locations of the state of Assam because of this heritage site. Its influence has been so immense that it spread to even the remotest parts of the district and also to other parts of the state. Even devotees from remotest villages visit the place at least once a year and consider it to be the '*Dvitiya Baikuntha* (second heaven) and an important pilgrimage center.

Recognized as one of the heritage sites by the government of Assam, Bardowa is no less significant in terms of its socio-cultural manifestations. It is still the abode of aficionados congregating for the faith. The two Sattras situated close to the *thān* have been functioning well under a systematic organization. The rituals, rites and festivals are performed and celebrated in a collaborative manner. One of the essential elements of daily rituals taking place in Bardowa is the '*prasangas*' divided into fourteen units held at different intervals from morning till evening. This marks the uniqueness and systematization of the rituals. The rituals are accompanied by the beating of the *khol-tāl* in a rhythmic way, singing of the *nām-ghoṣa*, the *kirtana* and other scriptures, community prayer specially by women, mid-day prayers conducted by men, recitation of the *bhatimā*, *gunamala* and *sastras*. However in recent times there have been certain alterations in the performances due to constraints of time and space. Moreover most of the adherents are non-celibates; as such have not moved away from their regular duties and responsibilities. Apart from the regular conduct of religious services and discourses, they also perform certain cultural functions which are also an important feature. Among the festivals celebrated in Bardowa, the most prominent ones are the birth and death anniversary of the saint. Being the birth place of the saint it is celebrated for a day or two with day-long programmes. *Nām-kirtan* or congregational prayer is a part of the ritual programmes for the day and held in high esteem. To mark these occasions now, at several places around Bardowa sapling of trees are planted at the initiative of the government, the *thān* management committee and the local people. The death of the guru is also

commemorated every year with special prayers and recitals which conclude in a day. *Khol-prasanga* is a part of this religious ritual held on this particular day. Infact this is a part of the daily ritual activities in the Sattras along with the *thān*. *Doul-utsava* is another important festival celebrated during spring which attracts a huge crowd every year. Celebrated with great pomp and grandeur the festivity lasts for three days. *Ram dhemali* is a major attraction during this festival in Bardowa. Śaṅkaradeva was the first to have introduced this festival amongst the Assamese which bear great relevance today. The biographies of the saints, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva narrate that it was Śaṅkaradeva who celebrated the *doul utsava* or *holi* at Batadrava after his return from his pilgrimage to propagate the cult of Bhakti. And since then this has been continuing. Fairs are held to mark the occasion and the festival is celebrated with great pomp and show concentrating on all the rituals related to it. Apart from the local devotees there are many who gather here from different parts of the country and pays homage to the ideologies of the saint and his contributions to the Assamese community. *Ghoṣa-kirtan* also known as *ghura-nām* is especially performed on the last day of the month of *bhādra* (August-September), which is considered auspicious amongst the Vaisnavites of Assam. Participants belong to different age groups irrespective of castes. They move in circles singing hymns from the saints' compositions accompanied by the beating of the *bar-dobā*, *bhortāl*, *nagara* together. Moreover *gayan-bayan* also form an important part of all the programmes held on different occasions at different times in the premises of the *thān*.

Bardowa is no exception to the many folded cultural expressions in thoughts and performances through the popularization of *bargits*, *bhāonās* and *sattriya-nāc*. The saint wrote and enacted his first play, *Chihna-yātrā* or the 'drama with illustrated paintings' in the year 1468 A.D. in Bardowa. The enactments in such plays popularly known as *bhāonās* are another set of regularly conducted cultural event in the *thān*. The performers are trained by experts and



most often the members are from the Sattra itself. They are even artists who have performed in the state as well as the national level. In rarest of occasions, experienced people are hired to perform the act. Wood-carving is another form of art gaining popularity in Bardowa since long. It also preserves a considerable number of wooden crafts of the past. Apart from this it also houses many artefacts used during the days of the saint and his successors. A mini-museum has been set up at the premise of the *thān* which is run by the Directorate of State Museums for the preservation of the long lost artefacts of the Sattras. It contains manuscripts written on the *aguru* (scientific name-*aquilaria agalocha*) barks, exquisite masks and dresses used in traditional dramas and various musical instruments dating back to the period of Śāṅkaradeva. This has been set up mainly for two purposes; it is the treasure-house of many indigenous artefacts and traditional items of use in the Sattras in order to preserve its rich cultural heritage, secondly it has been attracting tourists all over the country every year<sup>26</sup> turning it into a hub of the Sattriya culture. A research centre cum library with a sound archiving on Vaisnava literature and other related texts have been set up with a view to provide ample scope for further research and knowledge. Apart from having *hātis* for accommodating the disciples, rest houses have been built inside its premises for travelers from distant places. This has been a very recent development in the *thān*. And as such there is a swarm of devotees from nearby places including visitors from all over the country. If the tourism industry develops in another couple of years it would definitely attract crowds from other parts of the world too. Though meagre, yet these contributions have enriched the place since then. Bardowa has been declared as one of the major tourist attractions in the state. Mostly during important occasions like the *guru-tithi*, *janmāṣṭami*, *doul-utsava*, *pāl nām* devotees along with many tourists from other parts of the country visits this place. It is mostly during this period of the year that Bardowa sights a festive look. Apart from the Assamese Vaisnava there is an inflow of devotees from different parts of

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<sup>26</sup> As commented by Sri Maniram Bhuyan (aged 45 years), an attendant in the *thān* who has been actively connected with the *Thān* Management Committee for the last 30 years.

the country and the world as well. Blending both the spiritual and cultural stances, it has been attracting a huge crowd every year and has been able to maintain its traditional variety till date. Even though major changes have occurred in recent times in the administration and management yet Bardowa has retained its popularity through its religious proceedings and its varied cultural expressions.

Integrating many tribal folks from different surrounding areas into the faith, Bardowa is a fine example in the creation of a socio-cultural cohesion in the state. So far as religious and cultural ethos is concerned, there is no such profanity observed amongst the folks. Even if there are some, they are not pronounced since they have been following the virtues of the gurus in their blood and soul. According to some informants within the premise of the two Sattras lying adjacent to the *thān*, there are many adherents being converted into the faith mostly from the tribal society. And this has never been a problem. They are regular in the *nāmghars* and normally it is the always the women who have the majority participation. One observable fact is that here the participation of women is increasing day by day. It is not exactly the case noticeable in the Barpeta *thān* in the district of Barpeta, Assam where since ages women are not allowed to enter the main *nāmghars* with certain taboos and restrictions. Bardowa is at an elevated position. The Bardowa *thān* management committee is up-to-date about the system prevalent in the *thān* and have been trying their level best to maintain a status quo with other religious forms that are growing at an alarming rate in the whole of the state. The head of both the Sattras- Narowa and Salaguri are also actively participating in all the activities and rituals with devotion. Apart from holding the performances in the form of daily rituals and ceremonial functions, the members are also keen on preserving the cultural heritage in the museum which has been an important contribution to the Assamese Vaisnavas. This has indirectly contributed a lot to the economy as well. It has geared up the process of eco-tourism as well as heritage management in recent times for the larger benefit of the masses.

The tangible and intangible heritage of the place demands necessary preservation and maintenance. The premise of the *thān* can be utilized as training grounds for craftsmanship, artistic performances etc. thereby enhancing community presence. It can convert into beacons of cultural and environmental sustainability by providing scope for social interactions, engaging the youth for services, and recreational activities for moderating eco- tourism in the region. It can be mentioned that the Bardowa *thān* has been able to bind the members of the Vaisnava community together and has retained a great deal of the *Mahapurusiya* tradition. Especially in respect of the daily and occasional rituals, the *thān* has been continuing the process. Conditioned as an important heritage center it has to maximize the utilization of its available resources. This can also largely contribute to the communication process by involving in socio-cultural matters and promote cooperation at all levels in order to guarantee sustained survival and prosperity for the whole of the Vaisnava community scattered in Nagaon. As such Bardowa *thān* along with its Sattras should exemplify the richness and glory of the Vaisnava tradition in Assam in general and act as an ideal institution for the general mass in particular. To a considerable extent it has bind the people of different communities and castes coming from near and distant lands, thereby maintaining the traditional facets and the legacy left by the scholarly saint during those times.

Acknowledged as being one of the most celebrated institutions in the whole of the Sattriya culture in Assam, Bardowa has been continuing with the promotion of the cultural values of the Vaisnavite tradition till today. There have been changes but the continuum is maintained to a great extent. It has been still been generating the religious ethos amongst the Vaisnava as well as the non-Vaisnava of Assam. According to the informations collected from many of the informants residing within the premises of the *thān* or elsewhere, it has undergone changes. As an institution of repute Bardowa, certain phenomenal changes have

taken place in the public as well as private life of an individual in and around the *thān* complex and beyond.

Change is evident. But it requires the cumulative efforts of the individuals as members of the society to bring about a transformation. The Vaisnava philosophy of the great saint has not been diminished from this place and present day evidences claim that tradition alone cannot survive a culture. The Bardowa *thān* along with its two Sattras at a closer radius has been till date able to popularize the faith amongst the masses vis-à-vis maintaining the age-old tradition approving the religious sentiments and ethos of the individuals basically. Irrespective of all major changes in recent times, it has been able to contribute a lot to the Assamese society in general and the advocates of Vaisnava philosophy in the district in particular. But one vital issue concerning the present situation of Bardowa is that of the illegal occupation of lands by the migrant population which is growing at an alarming rate especially those originally belonged to the Sattras. The problem of land encroachment, included in the discussion in the previous chapter on economy, is to a large extent diminishing the heritage of this living tradition. An investigative report by the Northeast Policy institute (NPI), 2012 has brought to light the fact that near about 283 *bighās* of land has been encroached in Bardowa alone so far for the purpose of either settlements or cultivation of seasonal crops. Governmental measures and local initiatives should be such that it benefits the entire community. Apart from illegal occupation of the lands in and around the *thān*, they have also indulged in heinous crimes such as thefts and loot of Sattras' indigenous properties, thereby affecting its economic prosperity. The pristine atmosphere of the place is undoubtedly been engulfed by both internal and external forces of illegal migrations and encroachment of lands possessed by the local inhabitants, the crave for power and status amongst the members of the *thān* management committee, lack of awareness to preserve and maintain the indigenous heritage etc. Since all these have become a persistent reality for the

original settlers, it is essential to create an environment where tradition goes hand in hand with development.

In spite of all these developments, Bardowa *thān* has much more to add to its glory. With changing times and development in all segments of the society, Bardowa has also come under the grasp of constant change and development. According to the statement made by an informant<sup>27</sup>, “the socio-religious and cultural attributes have slightly lost its value. The restraint is from the younger generation as they are not willing to participate in the interactions and performances as well. A less participation is also noticed from the women folks. If this continues Bardowa will lose its glory in times to come.”

In view of the theme of the thesis, Bardowa *thān* taken as a case study has helped to establish that the changes taking place in recent times is seen exhibited in certain important areas. These include the leadership of the head of both the adjoining Sattras, a rationalist and democratic approach to the direction of the ongoing changes, an expression of freedom and responsibility among the members of the laity and a network of many of these similar institutions that sustain and propagate the ideals of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement and hold the community together. In present times, the *thān* is posed to have captured the great diversity in the socio-cultural and religious paraphernalia in Śāṅkardeva’s *Ek saran nāma dharma*.

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<sup>27</sup> Narayan Muktiyar, aged about ninety said this in an interview conducted on 11.03.10 during one of the field visits. He is a staunch follower of Vaisnavism with a very liberal and broad outlook. He once served as the treasurer of the *thān*.

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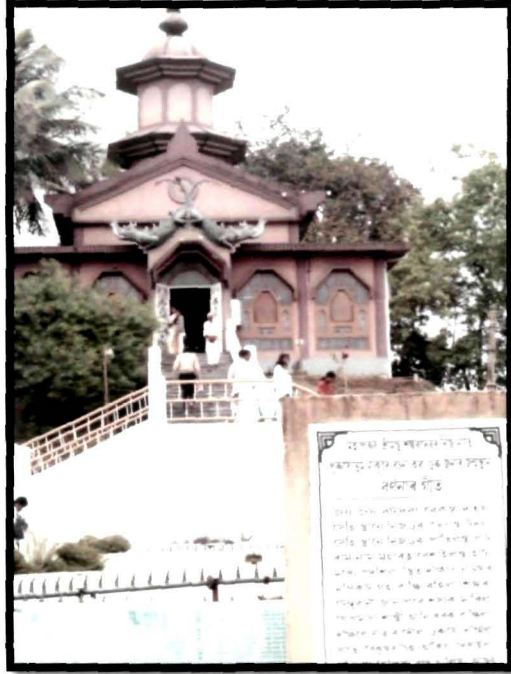


Figure: 40– The newly constructed *doul mandir* at Bardowa.



Figure: 41 - Inside view of *manikūta* at Bardowa *thān*.



Figure: 42 - Congregation during the *doul-utsava* from all over the country.

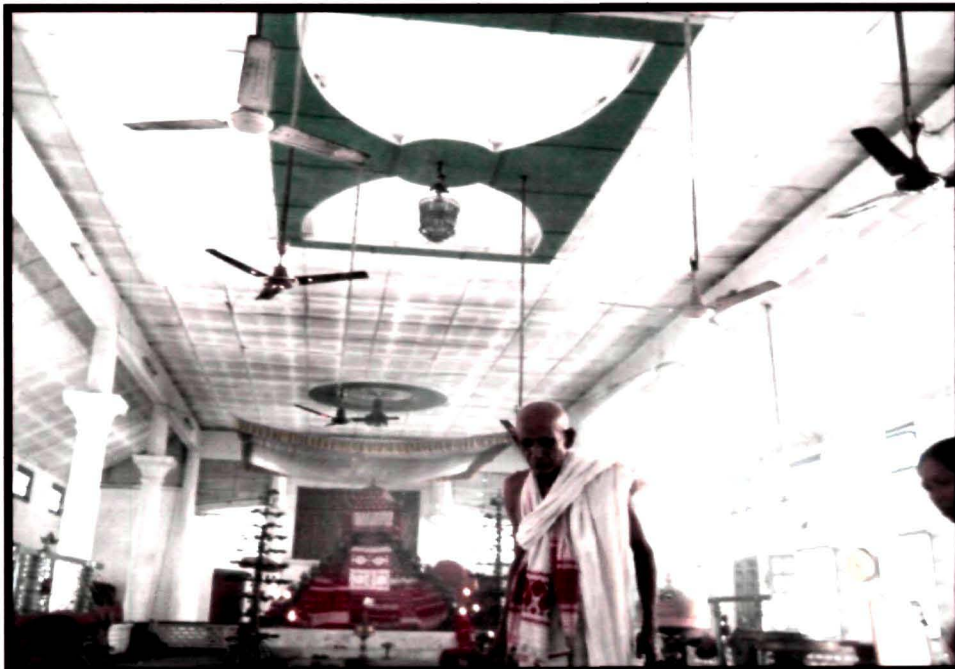


Figure: 43 – The main *nāmghar / kirtan-ghar* in Bardowa.





## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSION**

In the above pages, it has been tried to understand and analyse various dimensions associated with the Sattras being a major institution playing a significant role in the cultural history of Assam in general and Nagaon district in particular with appropriation of various theoretical precepts, in the line of the objectives as laid out in the Introductory Chapter. Here in the concluding chapter it is tried to sum up the findings that have evolved from the study of the previous chapters and underlining the spectrum to the work carried out by the researcher. This chapter basically brings into fore three main aspects of the thesis. First, it gives a summary of all the chapters. Second it contains main observations on the data generated from the series of field work carried out in different points of time for the study and finally it suggests a few ideas relevant to the present study.

So far there have been a lot of studies on the Sattras lying in different parts of the state commencing with their manifold ideas, values and functions. But there are many areas of enquiry yet to be done, like how these ideas developed imbibed with a set of values and shaped an institution enduring through the ages with a distinct organizational character and provided a platform for their survival in the years that followed. This study on the Sattras of Nagaon with reference to Bardowa in particular has provided us with much insight to understand them from an ideological point of view.

The first chapter provides a theoretical framework for the entire study. It refers to the main objectives for the purpose of the study, research methodology, a brief review of the literature, focused area of research and the limitations of the work done.

The second chapter has highlighted the facets of the study of cultural history today. It has highlighted the interpretations by cultural historians and the recent trends that have evolved into a new cultural history.

The preceding three chapters contain analysis and observation based on field investigations taking into account three distinct features; rituals, economy and heritage studies emphasizing on the aspect of cultural history. Based on this, these chapters analyze the concept of power and ideology, knowledge and power, individual and collective memory to denominate the contours that support the study of cultural history. Rituals, economy and heritage are important medium as well as outcome of cultural formations. Since our study is restricted to institutions and institutional growth, these factors play an important role in their development. Heritage develops with economy and they are co-related. The main focus of this thesis is to understand how the Sattras get so embedded in the lives of the Vaisnava community leading to its perpetuation.

The first finding of the work has been connected with the rituals, which are incredibly attached with the life of a Vaisnava and the whole Assamese community. As discussed in the previous chapter, the rituals have not altogether decayed in form and practice in the Sattras. It is observed that the rituals still play a great role in collaborating two different sets of minds. Rituals act as a communicator and help in the intellectual development of the individual. The timely deliberation of the rituals in the Sattras more or less affect the community and for that reason the Vaisnavas have not altogether shown disrespect towards their moral values and principles inherent in those rituals. Despite the fact that modern day technologies and developmental strategies have greatly touched the lives of the community attached with these institutions, their existence is still enduring with values and functionalities.

Economically too, the Sattras have a major role to play. The existence of the Sattras in the district is largely connected with the influence of the Vaisnava

ideology and vice versa. The village community is more attached to the Sattriya way of life than in the urban areas of the district. As such the economically sound Sattras are more largely situated in the villages where a lot of the population is still dependant on the agricultural production yielded from the lands owned by the Sattras through land grants given to them during the Ahom rule. Against a general notion that 'the more the produce the more influential the Sattras will be', the Sattras in the state as well as in the district are generally more in the practice of following an economy for self-support and self-sustenance. Though there are many reasons behind the decadence of many of the popular Sattras, the major one can be cited as modern ideologies contesting traditional values and beliefs. The individuals are more prone to adapt to themselves to changes whether for good or bad and in this contemporary tug of war the Sattras are the ones whose existence is at stake.

It is earlier observed that the Sattras are the heritage institutions preserving another set of heritage properties and tradition of the Assamese society. It is essential to preserve and conserve those traditions and objects. If left unattended, these institutions will tend to lose all aspects of their cultural and socio economic influences leading to their decay and downfall. The findings of the study reveal that preserving the diverse forms of Sattriya culture has become important in recent times. Adopting proper preservation techniques the antiquities should be preserved so that it could transcend limitations of time and remain as symbols of pride for generations after generations.

After a discussion on the Sattras of Nagaon on three important counts, it may be summarized that the Sattras have undergone changes mostly after the post-independence era. Even at this matrix of change, they are able to retain the Vaisnava philosophy through the pursuit of variant cultural forms and practices. However there are some inescapable circumstances which have crippled many of the prominent Sattras in the district. One of the major issues concerning their

sustainability is the heavy influx of illegal occupants on the Sattra lands as discussed broadly in Chapter 5 of the thesis. Although Sattras in general advocate the cause of harmony, social camaraderie and delegation of power and authority to the community, certain aberrations seem to be cropping up in certain Sattras, as observed in our field work, where there are feuds and disharmony emerging from the question of power and dominance. Whatever is inherited culminates to a strong urge to apply discretionary power of control over others. Different individuals have a different set of ideologies. These ideological differences are related to power and dominance by one group on the other. One of our findings is juxtaposed as a stumbling block to the developmental strategies of the institution. This can be only when individuals participate wholly with a liberal set of mind.

The contemporary life of man has undergone change in many ways. One of the major factors behind such changes is by ways of modernization, liberalization and globalization. The Sattras as institutions catering to several social and cultural requirements have also come under the influence of these factors. There are certain core problems which have been detrimental to the growth and sustenance of such institutions and some of these attributes are underlined in course of our discussion based on findings through investigations in the field. The problems identified also include ignorance towards preserving the heritage of the Sattras, inadequate resources from the state apparatus for their proper conservation and finally, lack of man-power to look after them with necessary care from time to time. These act as hindrances in the continuing path of development reflecting neglect shown towards the individuals related to it and the community at large. These have slowly crippled the lives of many and new developments take place in the community and at large generate a series of crisis in the society. The cultural fervor with traditional values cherished by many past generations since a long time has also face an erosion in course of time. Under a tremendous pressure a series of events have also brought in the decay of many of the influential institutions. Considering the discourse of change and modernity in

recent times the Sattras as institutions of both culture and religion are sometimes subjected to a situation like losing their legitimacy to a great extent. But among the findings, one major indicator is that the impact of modernization is felt more in the urban society than in the rural. In this context it can be said that the rural Vaisnava population have retained their tradition due to lack of exposition to many external factors. But the situation is other way round amongst the urban population.

It is noteworthy to mention here that time has come when the individuals should remain united and come to undertake a comprehensive measure or of making an effort for the sustenance of such institutions in the state. Since the Sattras acts as a mirror of the cultural heritage of the Assamese society, these are not to be merely seen as an institution securing only religious zeal within the community for they perform many socio-cultural and politico-economic functions. And for that matter, the Sattras should survive. Even amidst all obstacles which have been discussed in the present work citing three important areas; the economy, the ritual process and preservation of its culture, both tangible and intangible forms. It has become doubly important to revive what has been lost. Otherwise a whole range of forms and values would be lost. There are also pulls and pressures subdividing the individuals bringing in many conflicting issues with strategies in terms of its orientation and action. An institution like the Sattras could develop when it is prosperous from all angles, be it the economy, the societal influence or the everyday affairs which take place within the realm.

Against such a backdrop, the researcher has also marked some positive signs in some select Sattras as already been mentioned in the previous chapters. There cannot be a generalized concept on the change that has taken place as because the researcher has cited certain such Sattras within the district, which have flourished both in religious and cultural ways. These Sattras have received funds as well from the government to renovate and repair their property and are

having a wider social participation. Even in the midst of a global impact, there is a constant flow of parishioners inclusive of the youths and women, actively participating in all the regular affairs maintained within their premises. Right from organizing various source of entertainment like *bhāonās* and other related performances to religious rites and ceremonies, these Sattras have embraced the laity to a considerable extent. Community development programmes like plantation and cleanliness drives and other welfare measures like organizing women with certain self-funding small-scale projects which have helped the village community to a great extent. In many cases, developmental works take place at the initiatives of the head administering a Sattra and his associates.

The main focus of this thesis is to analyse how things have been organized, managed over the years in an institution like the Sattra located particularly in a district of Assam. So far our study area is concerned as mentioned earlier on several counts, the Sattras have undergone changes. But, inspite of its many adverse conditions, Assamese Vaisnavism is found to be embedded deeply in the life of the community leading to its perpetuation. It is the Sattras which have carried out multifarious functions and they have been doing so for many years.

The relation of cultural history with the religious institutions is multilinear and unique in its own way. The Sattras form the locus of religious education. They not only have housed various religious artefacts since the time of their establishment but also have acted as a moderator of culture and cultural values. Despite the continuing changes from time to time; these have striven to overcome the state of inertia that often come because of unforeseen and other circumstantial situations in their economic as well cultural performances. Moreover, a *modus vivendi* is to be achieved between the state and the Sattras so that the efficiency is not questioned on both sides in the long run. For this there should be a constant

interaction of the state with the latter which would ensure its growth and development.

The Sattras of Nagaon have gained popularity in recent years. Quoting from Jawaharlal Nehru, Somarajan states, “if man did his duty and was ethically right in his actions, the right consequences would inevitably follow” (Somarajan 1993, 44). The same could be applied to the concurrent Sattras which are mostly at a crucial stage now. But as discussed in the preceding chapters there are many loopholes in their functional features. If at all these setbacks are removed, the Sattras which have lost their traditional values in the midst of globalization and modernity, would make a mark as an institution of repute in the near future. This wind of change should be for the benefit of the Assamese population at large.

Its uniqueness should be introduced to the new learners with proper representation about the rich cultural ingredients present in the institution itself. The changes witnessed in almost all the Sattras of the district can only be understood essentially as a process of ‘modernization’. By modernization is meant an indigenous, historical and ongoing process in which people participate both consciously and critically with renewed synergy and modernity in outlook. The Vaisnava followers of this region to a great extent have incorporated the values of modernity into their culture without losing the core values of the tradition of Vaisnavism. In view of the cultural history of the Sattras of Nagaon which is the theme of the thesis, the field research has helped to establish that the modes of change in this particular area can be seen in the headship of a Sattra, in terms of a rationalistic and democratic approach to the direction of change, an expression of freedom and responsibility among the members of the laity being affiliated to one or the other Sattra and a network of many such similar branch Sattras lying within or outside the district that sustain and propagate the ideals of the Neo-Vaisnava movement and hold the Vaisnava community together.



If we look at these institutions from a twentieth century perspective, the first thing that clings to the mind is the change in perspective towards this institution. And this gradual change is due to various ramifications as discussed by the researcher from different stances. Rituals, economy and heritage preservation are the three focal themes on the basis of which the study was conducted. It is observed that an institution grows only when there is an involvement from the community. That community collectively forms an identity.

Lastly the study reveals the fact that despite these changes due to the influence of modern developments, yet, in the long run the Sattras continue to be the soul of the Vaisnava community particularly amongst the people of Nagaon. The study emphasizes on the fact that these institutions creatively channelize new social and intellectual energies and as such they sustain.

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## GLOSSARY

Numerous vernacular terms related to the Sattrā discipline are used throughout the present work and are given italicized form with diacritical marks as and when necessary. A list of such vernacular terms with possible English meanings is given below:

<b>Vernacular terms:</b>	<b>English meaning</b>
<i>Adhikāra / Sattradhikāra</i>	The Sattrā chief, pontiff.
<i>Agni</i>	God of fire.
<i>Aguru</i>	Sandalwood tree; a fragrant wood from which perfume is extracted and the barks are used for preparing manuscripts.
<i>Ahom</i>	The people belonging to the Mongoloid Tai tribe, who ruled Assam for about six centuries.
<i>Āiati-nām</i>	Prayer sung by the female devotees.
<i>Āldhorā</i>	Personal assistant / attendant of the <i>Sattradhikāra</i> who looks over the personal works of the head.

<i>Ankiya-nāt</i>	A form of drama based on the Vaisnavite faith introduced by Śaṅkaradeva and his apostles.
<i>Bānbāti</i>	A traditional Assamese bowl with a stand.
<i>Bar-deurī</i>	A senior official in the Sattra hierarchy.
<i>Bar-dobā</i>	A large kettle drum.
<i>Bargit</i>	Devotional song attuned to classical rāgas, specially composed by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva.
<i>Barphukan</i>	An administrative officer during the Ahom rule working as a regent in lower or western Assam.
<i>Bātcārā</i>	The gate way or entrance of a Sattra.
<i>Beel</i>	A small lake.
<i>Bhāgavata Purāṇa</i>	A sacred scripture on which the Vaisnava faith is founded.
<i>Bhāgavata-pāth</i>	Recitation from the <i>Bhāgavata</i> .
<i>Bhakat</i>	A disciple residing in a Sattra and serving the institution.
<i>Bhāonā</i>	A dramatic performance of the <i>ankiya-nāt</i> .
<i>Bharali</i>	A store-keeper. He takes care of all the properties of the Sattra.
<i>Bhatimā</i>	Eulogistic religious poem.



<i>Bhojana-vihara</i>	A dramatic composition by Mādhavadeva.
<i>Bhortāl</i>	A large pair of cymbals made of brass.
<i>Bighā</i>	Traditional unit of measurement of an area of land. In Assam a bighā is measured as 14400 sq.ft (1337.8 sq.m) which is usually less than an acre (0.4 hectare).
<i>Bisani</i>	A hand-made fan usually made of bamboo.
<i>Bonsibādan</i>	Image of Lord <i>Krisna</i> with a flute in His hands.
<i>Cadar</i>	A wrapper for the upper portion of the body worn by both man and woman.
<i>Cāri-hati</i>	Four clusters of hutments for accommodation of the disciples in a Sattrā.
<i>Cāri-prasanga</i>	The four divine prayer services held in the morning, noon, afternoon and night.
<i>Chariali</i>	Cross roads.
<i>Curia</i>	A long piece of cloth worn by men as a lower garment.
<i>Deka-adhikāra</i>	An heir apparent to the pontifical seat of a Sattrā.
<i>Deurī / Bilania</i>	Responsible for arranging and distributing the offerings to the devotees. The heads are called the <i>bar-deurī</i> and his assistants are called <i>pāli-deurī</i> .

<i>Deva</i>	God.
<i>Dihing</i>	A large tributary of the Brahmaputra in Upper Assam. Also known as Burhi Dihing.
<i>Dobā</i>	A large musical instrument made of brass or wood layered on top with leather. It is generally kept in the nāmghars and is beaten on one end with two sticks during an invocation.
<i>Dolā / Khatula</i>	A litter, palanquin or sedan with only an oval shaped hollow boat-like seat with a curved or straight ridge-pole carried by two or four persons on shoulder.
<i>Doul Mandir</i>	A shrine where images of Krisna, Balaram and Subhadra are worshipped during the <i>Phālgutsava</i> .
<i>Ek Saran Bhagawati Samaj</i>	A parallel socio-cultural and religious organization established in the year 1973 by a devout votary of Śaṅkaradeva, Acharya Illaram Das. In the consequent years it became the meeting ground of people from all communities.
<i>Eri-cadar</i>	A warm fabric made from the cocoons of a kind of maggot known as <i>endi</i> .
<i>Gāmocha</i>	A hand-woven traditional Assamese towel with colourful motifs.

<i>Garuda</i>	A large mythical bird or bird-like creature that appears in both Hindu and Buddhist mythology/ a mythical half-vulture half human figure (also the charger of <i>Viṣṇu</i> ).
<i>Gayan-bayan</i>	A unit for the orchestral presentation with drums and cymbals in the prayer services as well as the dramatic performance. The group consists of singers, <i>gayan</i> and drummers known as <i>bayan</i> .
<i>Ghontā</i>	A kind of bell usually made of metal.
<i>Gopi</i>	Maidens of Vrindavana / female devotees.
<i>Got</i>	A unit of three or four devotees.
<i>Grām-sabha</i>	Village panchayat.
<i>Gunamala</i>	A poetical composition by Śaṅkaradeva summarizing with the playful acts of child Krisna narrated in uncommon rhythmic metre.
<i>Guru</i>	A spiritual guide / preceptor.
<i>Guru-āsana</i>	Holy pedestal or throne representating the sanctum.
<i>Guru-kar / baraṅgani</i>	Tithe; religious tax or contribution / tax payable to a Sattra.
<i>Guru-padaśila / paduka</i>	Foot impressions on stones preserved and paid homage with offerings. It forms as relics of the saints or other

	apostles of the faith. Normally the places where these foot impressions are preserved are known as <i>thān</i> .
<i>Hāt</i>	Periodical market.
<i>Hikata māh</i>	A kind of wild black gram that does not soften on boiling.
<i>Hirā-nām</i>	A particular form of community prayer of chanting the name of God by the clapping of hands and cymbals.
<i>Holi-geet</i>	Songs sung during the spring festival of colour.
<i>Kachari</i>	Ethnic group predominantly in Assam speaking Tibeto-Burman languages or claiming a common ancestry.
<i>Kaivartas</i>	A distinct community recognized as Scheduled Caste by the Government of India which were originally fishermen by vocation. However, nowadays the community has taken all other professions like others for livelihood.
<i>Kapili</i>	A river in the Nagaon district.
<i>Karbi</i>	A tribal community living both in hills of Karbi Anglong and some areas of Nagaon district.
<i>Katha-Carit</i>	Narratives in prose depicting the lives of the saints.

<i>Kharahi</i>	A basket woven with small and smooth strips of bamboo.
<i>Khol</i>	A type of drum being the most important musical instrument in Sattriya culture.
<i>Khol-prasanga</i>	Prayer-service with playing of <i>Khol</i> .
<i>Kirtana</i>	Congregational chanting.
<i>Kirtan-ghar</i>	A prayer-hall being the most important center of all activities relating to Assam Vaisnavism.
<i>Kolong</i>	A tributary of the Brahmaputra river with an approximate length of 250 kms. flowing through the heart of the Nagaon urban area.
<i>Koth / Pati</i>	A kind of mat used in <i>nāmghars</i> .
<i>Krisna</i>	Divinity, being the pursuable God in Assam Vaisnavism.
<i>Laru</i>	A ball of confection made of pounded rice, sesame, jaggery, coconut, sugar etc.
<i>Madrassa</i>	Islamic school.
<i>Mahapurusa</i>	Extra-ordinary human being ascribed to Śaṅkaradeva.
<i>Mahapurusiya</i>	The school of Assam Vaisnavism propounded by Śaṅkaradeva.
<i>Mahkuma</i>	A sub-division of a district.

<i>Māh-prasada</i>	Sacred offerings consisting of pulses, uncooked rice and fruits.
<i>Maṅikūta</i>	A shrine being the <i>sanctum sanctorum</i> of <i>Kirtan-ghar</i> where sacred scripture is installed and venerated.
<i>Medhi</i>	One who co-ordinates the relationship between the Sattrā and the laity.
<i>Mekhela</i>	A skirt-like garment covering the portion from waist to feet (worn by a traditional Assamese woman).
<i>Mouza</i>	A revenue village in a district or within a large town. In Assam a number of villages typically form such a revenue village.
<i>Muktiār</i>	A senior official of the Sattrā who looks after the estates of a Sattrā and also liases with the outside world including the state on behalf of the Sattrā.
<i>Nagara-nām</i>	A form of community prayer with playing of small size drums.
<i>Naivedya</i>	Sacred offering in the <i>kirtan-ghar</i> which include gram, moong (pulse), seasonal fruits, areca nuts, betel- leaf (pan) and other palatable items which are offered uncooked.
<i>Nāma</i>	Name of the Divinity/ singing of prayers.
<i>Nāmghar</i>	Similar to a <i>Kirtan-ghar</i> .

<i>Nāmghoṣa</i>	A religious text written by Mādhavadeva.
<i>Nām-prasanga</i>	Congregational chanting.
<i>Natuwā-nāc</i>	A distinct dance number within the repertoire of Sattriya tradition of dance.
<i>Nirmāli-lowā-prathā</i>	A form of initiation.
<i>Nispikherāj</i>	Land assessed at half the usual rate of revenue granted to the religious institutions.
<i>Ojā-pali</i>	A choral dance illustrating scriptural stories / a band of choral singers.
<i>Orgha</i>	An utensil made of copper used in worshipping idols.
<i>Pācati</i>	A festival celebrated on the fifth day of the birth anniversary of Lord <i>Krishna</i> , exclusively conducted by women in the Sattras of Nagaon.
<i>Pāik</i>	A person who rendered specific duties to the state or a Sattra, specially appointed by the Ahom kings, prevalent in medieval Assam.
<i>Pathak</i>	One who recites the Bhāgavata and other related Vaisnava texts in a rhythm to attract the attention of the devotees.
<i>Patta</i>	A legal document of permanent settlement on land given by the government.
<i>Pithā</i>	A cake made of rice powder.

<i>Pūjāri</i>	A priest. He mostly belongs to the <i>brahma samhati</i> Sattras where along with the <i>nām-prasangas</i> certain Brahmanical rituals are performed.
<i>Pūrā</i>	A measure of land equal to four <i>bighas</i> .
<i>Rāsa</i>	A festival observed during Autumn celebrating Lord <i>Krisna's</i> playfulness with the <i>Gopis</i> in Vrindavan.
<i>Sālagrāma-śila</i>	A black stone sacred to the Vaisnavas as it symbolizes the presence of <i>Viṣṇu</i> .
<i>Sanchipotia-puthi</i>	A scripture or manuscript written in the bark of <i>aguru</i> tree.
<i>Sankha</i>	The conch-shell.
<i>Śarai</i>	A brass or wooden elevated tray.
<i>Śaraṇa-bhajana</i>	The initiation-ordination ceremony of a Vaisnava disciple.
<i>Sastra</i>	A religious or sacred scripture.
<i>Satra Griha / Guru Griha</i>	The abode of the preceptor.
<i>Sattriya-nāc</i>	A tradition of dance evolved during the Śaṅkaradeva Movement.
<i>Seleng</i>	A shawl.
<i>Simhasana</i>	A wooden or copper throne consisting of one to seven



	tiers, supported by four to thirty-two lions adorning the shrines of the Sattra often decorated and painted with designs. In many Sattras copies of the sacred scriptures are kept in lieu of the image/ The holy throne in the sanctum sanctorum of a <i>nāmghar</i> .
<i>Sivaratri</i>	Worship of Lord <i>Śiva</i> , one of the Hindu trinities, held on the <i>Krisna</i> Caturdashi day before new moon in the month of <i>Chaitra</i> (March-April).
<i>Soria / Bar-soria</i>	An open vessel made of metal used as a wash basin or for keeping things.
<i>Swargadeo</i>	Ahom kings.
<i>Tāl</i>	Cymbals; hollow musical instrument, a circular form like a dish beaten together in pairs.
<i>Thāl</i>	A kind of tray.
<i>Thān</i>	A sacred shrine.
<i>Thāpona</i>	An altar.
<i>Tithi</i>	Anniversary of a great man's date of birth and death.
<i>Tiwa</i>	A major plains tribe of Assam.
<i>Tol</i>	A centre for teaching Sanskrit in a traditional method.
<i>Tou</i>	A brass vessel used mainly for cooking.

*Uthā-nām*

A type of chanting prayer in standing posture with frequent rhythmic movements to the clapping of hands and cymbals.

*Vigraha*

An idol.

*Viṣṇu*

A Vedic God venerated as the Supreme Being in Vaisnavism.

## Appendix I

### List of Surveyed Sattras in the Nagaon District under the Present Study:

The following are major and minor Sattras affiliated to four *Samhatis* (sects) scattered all over the district of Nagaon. With respect to their affiliation, *Brahma*, *Purusa*, *Kala* and *Nika* they have been listed accordingly. A survey of the Sattras has revealed the fact that most of these Sattras have undergone changes in various respects in course of time, some of which have zeroed down to virtual non-existence. However, the rest have continued to survive maintaining the traditional activities and values of Vaisnavism in Assam.

#### A. The following are the Sattras affiliated to the *Purusa Samhati*:

1. ***Bardowa Narowa***: Established in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, this Sattra of the *purusa samhati* has its original base in Dhakuakhana, one of the districts in eastern Assam. Presently situated under Batadrava *mouza* in Bardowa. In 1799 A.D. the Sattra was formally divided into two during the rule of the *Ahom* king, *Swargadeo* Kamaleswar Simha also known as Suklingphā (1795-1811). Now this Sattra has a total of 8 branches scattered in the district of Nagaon alone. Important among them are the Bardowa Barfāl, Bālisatra, Rampur and others. Of these the Rampur Sattra is extinct completely. The *Sattradhikāra* is selected on a hereditary line. This Sattra is functioning well covering both religious and other associated cultural areas. Regular conduct of rituals along with festivals is a key

feature of this Sattra along with the preservation of many traditional artefacts in the Batadrava Museum<sup>28</sup>.

2. **Narowa Rāmpur:** Due to the illegal inhabitants occupying lands awarded to it through land grants by the *Ahom* kings of that period, this Sattra has completely become extinct. The Department of Archaeology, Government of India, offered a grant of Rupees 1 lakh to this Sattra for its preservation but it could not be taken up due to circumstances and human resources. Although there is a constant negotiation going on with the state to revive the lost heritage of the Sattra yet no effort is noticed regarding its preservation. Since independence of the country, the estimated 390 *bighās* land of the Sattra has been under the clutches of the illegal immigrants from across the border. Situated in between Dhing and Bardowa this Sattra was once one of the most prominent and influential ones. The era of Bhakti Movement in Assam saw the potential growth of such a religio-culturally affluent Sattra.
  
3. **Narowa Bālisatra:** Located at a distance of about 5 kms. to the east of Bardowa on the Bardowa-Dhing road, this Sattra has a unique history. Dāmodara Āta's visit to recover Bardowa after the demise of Śaṅkaradeva led to the establishment of this Sattra on a patch of sand-dune along the river-bank and hence the name Bālisatra (*bāli* meaning *sand* in Assamese). The *Satradhikāra* is selected hereditarily but in recent times, the constitution of the Bālisatra management committee has made provisions for electing the heads in a democratic way. It contains several manuscripts, the illustrative version of the *Bhāgavata* and many indigenous objects of daily use. Due to the impact of western education and lack of efficient people to administer, today this Sattra is in a poor

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<sup>28</sup> Situated very close to the Bardowa *Thān* is this museum which houses many indigenous and valuable assets of the Sattras mainly from the district of Nagaon

state of functioning. However this Sattrā is famous for housing elaborate accounts on dance-drama, music, dance and sculpture. The Sattrā lands are now under the threat of possession by the illegal settlers and a few acres of these lands have been mortgaged and utilized for cultivation (*see fig. 37*).

4. **Narowa Bhetiani:** Situated at a stretch of 1 km east of Bardowa under Bhetiani *mouza*, Bhetiani Sattrā was founded by the son of Dāmodara Ata, Harendra Narayan. There is no proper functioning due to lack of funds and collective effort of the laity.
5. **Narowa Tolibeel:** Located in a village called Sonari under Dhing *mouza*, this Sattrā has made a contribution to the art of sculpture. Indigenous items like *dobā* made of brass, seven tiered *simhasana*, manuscripts and masks are kept in the *maṇikūta*. The historicity of this Sattrā in the field of *cāri-prasangas* and *bhāonā* and other forms of music are slightly diminishing today. It houses one library and a *nāmghar*.
6. **Salaguri Bardowa:** Popularly known as Sorufāl or Koāmarā, it was established in 1799 A.D. at the command of the then *Ahom* king, *Swargadeo* Kamaleswar Simha (Neog 2008, 119). Like the Narowa counterpart, all important and sacred rituals and festivals are held from time to time. Examples cited are the celebration of the birth and death anniversaries of the saints and founders, *phālgutsava*, *janmāṣṭami*, *rāsa* and also conducting dance-dramas accompanying with music and dance. Culturally strong this Sattrā has its head selected on a seniority basis and till date it is administered well. Another interesting note to be made regarding its administration is that since 1958 the Bardowa *Thān* Committee is taking care in its functioning of both the Bardowa Narowa and the Bardowa Salaguri Sattras. As a result of this, there has been a

constant interaction between the two prominent Sattras resulting in the increase of its socio-cultural paraphernalia. While taking part in one of the auspicious *phālgutsava* in the main *kirtan-ghar* of Bardowa *thān*, it has been witnessed that individuals belonging to both these Sattras have collaborated and taken part in all the ritual acts and performances. Dual performances from members of both the Sattra-division with respect to *nām-prasangas* are another notable feature on such occasions. Many important dramas containing the excerpts from the *Bhāgavata* were written in this Sattra by several apostles. In Nagaon apart from this Sattra, there are several other Sattras of the same order. Important among them are Āibheti Salaguri, Āibheti Nasatra, Leteri Salaguri.

7. *Āibheti Salaguri*: Situated at a distance of about 10 km west from Nagaon town under Hātichung *mouza* in a village named Rāidengia, this Sattra was established under the initiative of Kanakalata Āi, wife of Caturbhujā Thakur<sup>29</sup>. It is housing many unique manuscripts, *ṣanchipotia puthi* and many indigenous objects mostly used in the rituals such as *bar-soria*, *dobā*, *śarai*, *orga*, idol of *garuda*, *boṅsibādan* etc. The heads are selected on seniority basis and this Sattra has disciples from all communities. Possessing once around 2000 *bighās* of revenue-free lands (*nispikherāj*) granted by the *Ahom* ruler, Jayadhvajā Simha<sup>30</sup>, this Sattra is at present economically sound as there is a constant flow of revenue in cash or kind from the area of land given to the Salaguri Āibheti Nasatra under the same *mouza*. With the subtle amount of fund generated by the village laity, the *satra-griha*, which was in a dilapidated condition, has been reconstructed.

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<sup>29</sup> Grandson of Śaṅkaradeva.

<sup>30</sup>The neophyte *Ahom* king Sutamla alias Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663) who accepted the Brahmanical order of Vaisnavism (*brahma samhati*).

8. ***Āibheti Salaguri Nasatra:*** Under the same *mouza* near the Salaguri Āibheti is located this Sattrā which has to its accord 1478 *bighās* of revenue-free land. It houses the relics of Śāṅkaradeva's footprints, endowments sent by the *Ahom* rulers to the apostles of the faith in the form of indigenous articles such as *śarai* made of brass alloyed with silver. The *Sattradhikāras* are selected on seniority basis. Till date this Sattrā is quite influential one with disciples from every nook and corner of the state following all Vaisnava traditions.
  
9. ***Leteri Sālaguri:*** Situated in the outskirts of Nagaon town at Dhing is Leteri Sattrā—a branch of the Bardowa Salaguri Sattrā. Due to the absence of a regular head to administer the Sattrā, the other important officials have taken the responsibility to conduct the regular affairs. But in the present survey it has been found that this Sattrā has become non-functional because of its location and dearth of funds for its restoration.
  
10. ***Samaguri:*** One of the most affluent Sattrās of Nagaon once, its glory has diminished greatly. Located at an approximate distance of 21 kms. from Nagaon adjacent to the famous Samaguri *beel*, a home for the migratory birds and fish-breeding, economically this Sattrā was sound. At the time of establishment in 1585 A.D. by Purusottama Thakur's grandson, Dharmanarayan it was in Koliabor. But in the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was shifted to Samaguri under Nagaon sub-division. Culturally rich with heritage, this Sattrā is now totally on the verge of extinction.
  
11. ***Dighali Purana (old) Bhogbāri:*** Situated on the bank of the river Sonāi, under Hātichung *mouza* in Rāidengia village, its state of functioning is not smooth. However it has a reputation for cultivating the Sattriya culture in the form of *bargits*, *nām-prasanga*, *bhāonās* etc. One of the exponents

of *bargit* in Assam, Amiya Mahanta belongs to this Sattra. The senior member of the family holds the position of a *Sattradhikāra*.

12. ***Dighali Natun (new) Bhogbāri:*** Located in Hātichung *mouza* under Jajori police-station, it is functioning well till date. The *kirtan-ghar* and *manikūta* of the Sattra are big and spacious for regular congregation and other performances. All cultural activities within the Sattra are carried out in grandeur. This Sattra boasts of possessing a strong tradition of wood carving and has a good number of such beautiful wood craft works.
13. ***Mothorbori:*** Established by the same founder of Samaguri Sattra, it is under Raha sub-division of the district. It is located at a distance of 4 km (approx.) west of Raha in a village called Baropujia.
14. The following four Sattras were established by Śaṅkaradeva's grandson, Purusottama Thakur. Among the twelve apostles anointed by him for preaching the tradition of Vaisnava faith in the state through establishment of Sattras, Vasudeva Bhagawati was one.

Five Sattras, namely Latābowa, Ratanpur, Dhawali, Tāmulbāri and Bārbhagiā-Bākariāl were established in course of time by his grandsons and great-grandsons in this corner of the state. Out of these five, the first four are situated under Nagaon *mahkuma* and the fifth is under Koliabor *mahkuma* respectively. A detailed note on the present condition of these Sattras is given below:

- a. ***Latābowa:*** Presently this Sattra is located under Khātowal *mouza* to the north-east of Nagaon town. Many of its indigenous artefacts are in a



dilapidated condition due to lack of proper support as well as conservation methods, natural calamities as well as political and social imbalances. Since the time of British rule in India this area has been under constant pressure from immigrants. And occupation of Sattrā land has been going on and is becoming a contentious issue. The Sattrā is under the administration of a hereditary head and this has been continuing since then.

- b. **Ratanpur:** Under the same mouza on the bank of the *Kolong* is situated this Sattrā. In spite of the many reasons for its poor functioning, it has maintained its tradition and is running with a *Sattradhikāra* who is hereditarily selected. It has lost its past glory in present times.
- c. **Dhawali:** It is situated very close to the Latābowa Sattrā to the northern bank of the river *Kolong*. At one time it was a rich and affluent Sattrā maintaining its all socio-cultural forms, but now its past glory is diminishing.
- d. **Tāmulbāri:** It is located in a village called Teliāgaon under Khātowal *mouza* close to the National Highway-37, at an approximate distance of 14 kms. east of Nagaon. It has stopped functioning and has lost its traditionality, even though there is a regular appointment of a *Sattradhikāra* for administering it.
- e. **Bārbhagiā-Bākariāl:** Established in the year 1831 A.D. it is located in Koliabor, belonging to the line of Purusottama Thakur. It is more prominent than the rest of the four above mentioned Sattrās located in Nagaon. Daily rituals and all other important occasions are celebrated with

a large number of disciples, irrespective of caste and creed. A total of 15 *bighās* of land is under the possession of this Sattrā now.

15. **Karcung:** Located under Hātichung *mouza* in Rāidengia, this Sattrā has its main branch in Sibsagar district of Assam. *Bhāonās*, *nām-prasangas*, *janmāṣṭami*, *pācati* are the major rituals that attract large crowds to this Sattrā. It also houses 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> episodes of the Sanskrit version of the *Bhāgavata* with illustrations. Majority of laity of this Sattrā belongs to the *Kaivarta* community, being a depressed caste, with a strength of around one thousand. It can be cited as one of the important Sattrās of the *purusa samhati* in Nagaon. This Sattrā had large land endowments as revenue-free (*nispikherāj*) out of which 1228 *bighās* were taken over by the government without any compensation. A part of the revenue-free land of the Sattrā is now in the occupation of illegal migrants resulting in economically indigent condition today. Out of 83 *bighās* and 4 *kathas* that remained, much of the portion has been encroached illegally bringing misfortune to the Sattrā. The *Sattrādhikāra* is from the *brahma samhati* sect although the Sattrā belongs to *purusa samhati* established under the ordination of Caturbhujā Thakur, the younger brother of Purusottama Thakur.

16. **Karcung Telīā Pohukota:** Another important branch of the same Sattrā Karcung, it is to the east of the town at Telīā Pohukota. The Sattrā is functioning well with a feast of *nām-prasangas*, celebrating death anniversaries of the saints and all other related rituals.

17. The following Sattras brought under survey were established by Caturbhujā Thakur and his wife Āi Kanakalata.

- a. *Nācanipār*: Situated under Jāgiāl *mouza* near a place called Dakhinpāt, the present status of this Sattra is non-functional. Considering the modern amenities of life, the families of the *Sattradhikāras* have started moving to the town in search of new avenues leaving their ancestry behind. As a result, since a long time this Sattra is without a head to administer. Today its administration is looked after by other Sattra dignitaries from the village laity. This is one of the reasons of its negligence towards growth and stability.
- b. *Nepāli*: Started under the tutelage of Āi Kanakalata, it is located under Hātichung *mouza* in Jajori. Its major branch is in Teok in the Jorhat district of Assam. *Nām-prasanga*, saints' day, birth of Lord *Krisna* are the important days observed with all related rites and rituals. Presently it is in a poor state of functioning.
- c. *Kobāikota*: Economically sound and culturally affluent, it once boasted of having several acres of land. It houses the historically famous tank known as 'Mahdhowa Pukhuri' which is now been encroached by illegal settlers and has been used for the benefit of a mosque and a *madrassa*<sup>31</sup>. The present situation is grim as it has gone into the clutches of illegal intrusion. As a matter of concern, it has shifted many of its traditional artefacts to the Batadrava museum. A wooden box containing the manuscripts has also been given to the State museum for preservation. The influx rate is so high that almost all the original land holders have

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<sup>31</sup> Stated in one of the dailies published from Assam, The Assam Tribune dated July 13, 2012.

vacated the place in fear. As such the Sattrā has lost its officials, disciples as well as its sanctity. One of the most notable features of this Sattrā is that there is no permanent residence for the heads within its premise. In 1972 A.D., the Sattrā has joined the *Ek saran bhagawati samaj* and since then it has been functioning under their tutelage. Disciples throng in huge numbers from neighboring villages during ceremonies and rituals. *Pāl-nām, bhāonā, janmāṣṭami* are held every year.

18. ***Rupnārāyaṇ Elengi Bebejia:*** Situated at a distance of 5 kms west of the Nagaon town this Sattrā is a collateral branch of the Porābheti Sattrā in Koliabor. Due to lack of adequate resources for running the Sattrā and supporting domestic needs the Sattrā functionaries looked for other avenues of employment and relocated themselves in other professions and places. The Sattrā at present has virtually become culturally insignificant in course of time. It had 500 *bighās* of revenue-free lands under its possession in the past but with time it has lost all its landed properties.
19. ***Nikāmul Uriāgaon:*** Very close to the National Highway-37 is situated this branch Sattrā with its headquarter in Tezpur, the neighboring district of Nagaon (63 kms approx). One of the principal *purusa samhati* Sattrās it has disciples spread all over the state. The *Sattrādhikāra* is not a permanent resident of this Sattrā, he often pays visit from Tezpur. Functional in present time with disciples from the village, it houses an old as well as a new *simhasana* or *guru-āsana*. Other various forms of artefacts are now preserved in the Nikāmul Sattrā, Tezpur.
20. ***Letugram Puranigudām:*** Located at a distance of 10 kms. (approx.) from the main town and east of the river *Kolong*. Once culturally rich and

affluent, the Sattra now has to its credit very less number of laity. However all rituals related to important occasions are held regularly.

21. **Bālisatra Jamunāmukh:** This Sattra is situated under Gorubāt *mouza* in Jamunamukh area of Nagaon, on the south bank of the river *Kapili*. This is the only Sattra surveyed in this area. The economic condition of this Sattra is unsound, and the number of disciples affiliated to it is also less as compared to other Sattras of the district. It was established in this area just before the advent of the British in Assam. The Sattriya heritage as well as the cultural expressions has virtually become extinct.
22. **Puranigar/Puranighar:** One of the oldest in the order of *purusa saṁhati* Sattras, it is situated in Koliabor sub-division of Nagaon district under Pub-thoriā *mouza*. The Sattra houses the *guru-padaśila* which is one of the valuable assets along with some important traditional artefacts through which it has gained popularity to a variable extent till date. Devotees of the faith come in large numbers from the village laity to offer prayers and this has been functional since the time of its establishment. The Sattra is being administered by *Sattradhikāras*, who without undergoing the *nirmali-lowā-prathā* has been performing their tasks solemnly till date.
23. **Mādhātāri:** Situated under the Pub-thoriā *mouza* it is also known as Madha Āta Sattra after the name of its founder head, Mādhavanarayana. Much of its historic assets were destroyed by fire in 1931 A.D. (Neog 2008, 135). After being reconstructed, the Sattra has started functioning with regular observances of the *tithi* and performances like *rāsa-yatra*, *pāl-nām* etc. in a traditional way. The *Sattradhikāras* regularly discharge administrative as well as religious responsibilities.

24. **Rupnārāyaṇ Porābheti:** Historically significant, this Sattra being established in the year 1697 A.D. has a record of having 20 *pāiks* donated by the *Ahom* king, Laksminath Simha (1769-1780 A.D.) and around 494 *bighās* of land for the benefit of the Sattra. It has branched out into many minor Sattras in Nagaon which have also gained popularity in course of time. Disciples are from different parts of the state and it is due to this gathering of people which has enabled it to survive. The important rituals and festivals celebrated both yearly and month-wise are the *tithi*, *janmāṣṭami*, *doul-utsava* etc.
25. **Rupnārāyaṇ Khamosia:** Situated adjacent to the main branch of the Porābheti Sattra, it has above two thousand disciples from all walks of life irrespective of caste, creed and gender including tribes like *Kacharis*, *Tiwas*, *Karbis* (the three constitutes major plain and hill tribes of Assam) etc. The Sattra has both head and a junior head, namely the *Sattradhikāra* and the *Deka-adhikāra*. Important rituals associated with many important occasions are still celebrated, among them *bhojana-vihara*, *pāl-nam*, *janmāṣṭami*, *pācati*, *bhāonā* are held from time to time. Presently all such occasions are done in the newly constructed *nāmghar* of the Sattra.
26. **Rupnārāyaṇ Gonāmarā:** One of the most influential Sattras under the Koliabor sub-division, it houses many traditional artefacts, some of which are still in use for ritualistic purposes. It is functional with disciples from all over the state. It has a *Sattradhikāra* who holds a hereditary position. *Ankiya-nāt* is a special feature of this Sattra and every year a variety of *bhāonās* takes place in the premise of the *nāmghar* with the help and co-operation from the laity as well as the Sattra functionaries. This is a major attraction of this Sattra.

27. **Gonāmarā Catiāl:** It is under Sotiāl *mouza* of Koliabor on the south-east of the *Kolong*. It is functioning with a *Sattradhikāra* who looks after the affairs of the Sattrā.
28. **Bālisatra:** Famous for its proficiency in wood-sculpture all over Assam, it houses several traditional artefacts. It is located under Pub-thoriā *mouza* at a place called Kuwaritol under Koliabor. The newly constructed *satragriha* with its compound is another feature of this Sattrā. The Sattrā is functioning with all its paraphernalia of rituals and festivals on a regular basis.
29. **Letugram:** Situated under Pub-thoria *mouza* near Kuwaritol *Chariali*, the Sattrā is also known as Nasatra. The history is that the founders had to flee for life during the time of the Burmese invasions but they returned and established it again. Since then it has been functional with a regular *Sattradhikāra* who is hereditarily selected. One of the most affluent Sattrās of Nagaon, it has housed many indigenous articles. Though a few are in a dilapidated condition, still they are in use<sup>32</sup>.
30. **Nikāmul Koliabor:** Branching out of the original Nikāmul Sattrā in Majuli, it has other collateral branches under Nagaon sub-division. This is a minor branch situated under Sotiāl *mouza* in Koliabor. The rituals are conducted regularly with traditional values. It has been influential in uniting people from all communities.

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<sup>32</sup> The present *Sattradhikāra*, Sri Jogeswar Mahanta (aged 80 years) is heading the Sattrā single-handedly. He mentioned about the present condition of his Sattrā in one of the interviews conducted on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011. He said “.....the *nāmghar* is in a very dilapidated condition; just for the sake of a religious binding I am doing it. Regarding the grants from the government he said, we received a grant paid only in half from the government for reconstruction of the entire *satragriha* and the *nāmghar*, but that grant did not suffice all. I am not clear what happened to the rest of the amount...The Sattrā has now become more of a house-hold responsibility bestowed upon my family, rather than the community’s property. If this continues, in another ten years from now it would lose its present status.”

31. **Cipahā Hātbor:** Established in the year 1730 A.D., the land possessed by the Sattrā is through donation by the *Ahom* king, Siva Simha with an estimated 300 *bighās*. *Bhāonā* accompanied by dance and songs is an important feature of this Sattrā. This form of art has been popularized mostly amongst the youth of the locality and this has gradually accommodated many young people into the form. This is an important contribution in recent times as it has increased the aesthetic joy of the villagers as well the urban dwellers that had moved away from the village<sup>33</sup>. Functional in form and content, it is culturally rich and active.
32. **Cipahā Sorubhogia:** Another flourishing Sattrā with its location at Koliabor under Sotiāl *mouza*, it houses several traditional artefacts along with the cultural forms- *bhāonā*, *dances*, *music*, *art of carving* etc. Chiselled images of some Hindu mythological characters in wood by the apostles are treasured here. Many of the expertises in the *ankiyā-nāt* belong to this Sattrā and they have ably showcased their talents in different parts of the country by way of which they have enhanced the cultural stance of the Vaisnava tradition in Assam.
33. **Koliabor Samaguri:** This Sattrā is situated under Pub-thoria *mouza* at a place called Samaguri. It is one of the Sattrās founded by the family of Śaṅkaradeva's eldest grandson, Purusottoma Thakur. His son-in-law, Chakrapani originally established it in Majuli. But later during the attack of the Burmese, his successors came and set up another Sattrā by the same name. It was established in the years between 1728 and 1730 A.D. In the history of proliferation of Sattriya culture and maintaining its tradition in Assam, the Samaguri Sattrā has gained importance for various

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<sup>33</sup> As stated by Sri Bhargav Bhuyan in an interview held on 02.02. 2012, an informant belonging to this Sattrā who is also an active performer in the *bhāonās* held in the Sattrā every year.



considerations. Mask-making and sculpture are important cultural expressions of this Sattra. It also boasts of having a few manuscripts of play for *bhāonā*, written by playwrights exclusively belonging to this Sattra. Among these are *Subhadra-haran*, *Kaṅsa-badh*, *Bāli-badh*, *Kumor-haran* and others. The *guru-paduka*, seven-tiered *simhasana* and some illustrated paintings are kept in the sanctum.

**B. The following Sattras belong to the *Brahma Śamhati* (sect) or the *Dāmodariya Panthā*:**

1. ***Kuruwābāhi*:** One of the leading Sattras of *brahma samhati* in Nagaon, it is situated at a place called Gedarbari, 9 kms. from Nagaon town under Hātichung *mouza*. The Sattra received the *Ahom* royal patronages during the *Ahom* kingdom and was once amongst the most influential Sattras of Assam. It has several acres of land under its possession and so it is considered to be rich and a very affluent Sattra. The disciples are still in possession of huge plots of land in and around this Sattra. The *Sattradhikāras* selected on a seniority basis have been administering the Sattra. Regular rituals commemorating the birth and death anniversaries of the saints (*tithi*), *doul-utsava*, *janmāṣṭami*, etc. are celebrated. This Sattra is also said to have a large number of disciples both from the district as well as the adjoining districts. With its affluent status and regular activities, the Sattra continues to have an impact on both socio-religious and cultural life of the society around. Worship of the Sattra idol (*vighraha*) in the form, Lord *Krisna* (Gopala) is an important feature of this Sattra, as its forms. According to the land grant document of July 22, 1848 available at the Sattra, Sri Srikanta Goswami, the then *Adhikāra* of this Sattra had to expend the resources that is the land revenue at the worship of the image of Gopala, after

paying huge revenue to the Government. Based on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the manner of worship is similar to those of other Sattras under this sect. The present estimated revenue-free land of the Sattra amounts to 150 *pūrā*. Every year *Sivaratri* is celebrated and Lord Siva is worshipped in the Sattra.

2. ***Diphalu***: It is situated 3 kms east of Nagaon town on the northern bank of the river *Kolong*. The disciples from both *Kuruwābāhi* and this Sattra congregate here on special occasions of rituals. Their allegiance towards both these Sattras is immense. During the field visits it has been found that about fifty per cent of the population is from *Kuruwābāhi* and the rest from *Diphalu*. Rich with cultural heritage this Sattra houses the *bāṭcarā*, *nāmghar*, *maṇikūta* and *satra-griha* and there is a regular interaction amongst the laity through the *nām-prasanga*, *bhāonās* and other occasions. It houses important traditional manuscripts both from Vaisnavite and tantric traditions. It administers initiation and ordination (*śaraṇa-bhajana*) to people coming from all walks of life.
  
3. ***Māhorā Dimow***: Another important Sattra of the *brahma śamhati* is the *Māhārā Dimow*. This Sattra was earlier situated 11 kms. west of the Nagaon town, in a place by the name *Kachamari*, but very recently the main *Kirtan Ghar* had to be relocated from its original place because of the construction of a four-lane road across Nagaon-Guwahati developed by the Highway Authority of India. However the *bāṭcarā* to the Sattra has not been demolished. A full fledged institution it follows both *brahma* and *purusa samhati*'s codes of conduct. It is the nerve center of many cultural forms, like *bhāonā*, *doul-utsava*, *tithi*, *janmāṣṭami*, *rāsa*

and it has been continuing till date. Housing the seven tiered *simhasana*, manuscripts, *guru-paduka*, it is reputed to have initiated people from neighboring tribal areas into the faith as informed by one of the members of this Sattrā regarding the initiation process in the Sattrā<sup>34</sup>.

4. *Āuniāti Nagaon*: Branching out of the main Sattrā in Majuli by the name Āuniāti, it has settled down 7 kms. towards east of Nagaon town. The present head of the Sattrā is a great scholar of Assam, Sri Pitambar Dev Goswami who comes from Majuli once or twice a year to ordain *śaraṇa-bhajana* to disciples. The administration is looked after by other important set of officials in the Sattrā like the *āldhorā*, *medhi*, *muktīār* who take care of the Sattrā and maintain a cordial relation with people from the laity in the absence of the *Sattrādhikāra*. This Sattrā is affluent from all aspects.
5. *Āuniāti Dhing*: Another collateral branch of the main Āuniāti Sattrā in Majuli, this Sattrā is situated under Dhing *mouza*. The Sattrā is named after the name of the village and it is functioning through its officials with directions from its headquarter in Majuli. From the data collected from the revenue circle of the district, there is a provision of revenue-free lands in the name of this Sattrā. It houses some major artefacts like *sanchipotia-puthi*, *dobā*, *śarai* (made of wood), several idols made of gold and brass etc. It is also popular in the art of sculpture. Masks of

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<sup>34</sup> Sri J. Deva Goswami, a retired school-teacher and present secretary-general of Axom Sattrā Mahasabha has remarked that on one occasion of *śaraṇa-bhajana* he himself got a coveted welcome by the people of the Tiwa tribe, who had gathered to welcome the *Sattrādhikāra*. He had to perform the ceremony on behalf of the head and witnessing the gathering he confidently makes the remark, '*amar satriya-saṅskṛiti atut thakibo jodihe ami enedore ek got hoi thako*' (meaning if we are united our Sattriya-culture will survive in the long run).

many Indian mythological characters are preserved in this Sattra, which are also in use during *bhāonās*.

6. ***Āuniāti Samaguri***: Located under Bheleuguri *mouza* in a place called Samaguri Khutarkhāt, this particular Sattra is a branch of the Āuniāti, Majuli. The *Sattradhikāra* administers the Sattra from Majuli. He frequently visits the Sattra for initiation and other ceremonies. The Sattra is run by different functionaries like the *medhi*, *muktiār*, *pujari* and others in absence of the *Sattradhikāra*. The *nāmghar* with the *maṅikūta* is spacious and it is in this place that the laity performs important daily and other rituals like *nām-prasanga*, *bhāonā*, *doul-utsava*, *rāsa* and birth anniversary of the saint.
7. ***Garamūr Puranigudām***: Situated at an approximate distance of 10 kms. from Nagaon town towards east in Puranigudām, this Sattra has branched out of the Garamūr Sattra in Majuli which is one of the most influential Sattras of Eastern Assam. This Sattra has a record of having no permanent *Sattradhikāras* and as such occasional visits are paid by the head of the main branch. It houses a spacious area for the Sattra *nāmghar* and *maṅikūta*. *Boṅsibādan* is the principal image of Garamūr. The other set of officials of the Sattra namely; the *deurī* or *bilania*, *pathak*, *bharali*, *pūjāri* and *medhi* are presently administering the Sattra smoothly. The *bar-deurī* takes care of the daily worship of the deity with rituals besides the *nām-prasanga*.
8. ***Dakṣiṇapāt Kacharisatra***: Situated very close to Dakṣiṇapāt Higher Secondary School under Pākhimoria *mouza*, it has its main branch at Dakṣiṇapāt Sattra in Majuli. It has acquired land by way of land-grants

by the then *Kachari* king, Krisnachandra who also provided people for setting up the Sattrā. As it was under the then *Kachari* kingdom and ordained more disciples from the *Kachari* community it is popularly known as the *Kachari* Sattrā. Since then it has been functioning well maintaining its tradition like the one in Majuli. There is no permanent seat for the head but the *Sattradhikāra* from the main branch often come and perform the initiation ceremony. Other forms of cultural performances are also carried out with piety. Mostly the office-bearers of the Sattrā are responsible for conducting the affairs be it administration, ecclesiastical or financial.

9. *Koliabor Jakhālābandhā*: Established in the year 1558 A.D. during the reign of the *Ahom* ruler, Khora Raja, this is one of the oldest Sattras in the Koliabor region. During the time of the first Burmese invasion 1816 A.D. in a part of the Sattrā was established in the heart of the Nagaon town at a place called Amolapatty. Once most affluent and socio-religiously and culturally advanced, both the branches of the Sattras at Koliabor and Nagaon respectively have now lost its past glory and their influences in the society have diminished.
  
10. *Hātbor Śravani*: Established in 1705 A.D. this Sattrā came under the clutches of the third Burmese invasion of Assam in 1825 A.D., resulting in the loss of many valuable assets (Neog 2008, 132). This Sattrā belongs to the *brahma samhati* but the *purusa samhati* order is more in practice in its administration, appointment of the ecclesiastical heads and other observances.

11. **Brahmachārī:** Recognized as one of the prominent Sattras of Nagaon, the Brahmachārī Sattrā is located about 4 km. towards east from Puranigudām along the National Highway-37, at a village called Brahmachārī under Khātowal police station of Bheleuguri *mouza*. This Sattrā was established by Viswambar Dev, a bachelor all throughout his life and an ascetic who dedicated his life to the Vaisnavite tradition. From his pilgrimages to Kashi, Brindavan and other religious places he brought idols of Gopinath and Vāsudeva and later he established this Sattrā. And at a later period it was shifted to a nearby place called Amoni in the face of ill-treatment in the hands of the Ahom royalty. At this place he stayed with one hundred and twenty disciples and in course of time had a larger following which contributed in transforming it to a full fledged Sattrā. The village and the Sattrā got the name Brahmachārī as Viswambar Dev was a celibate (*brahmachārī*) himself.

According to the bronze plate inscription presently existing at the custody of Sri Mohan Sarma, the Sattrā was donated land and labor such as Chamua, Kādī and Pāik during the days of the *Ahom* king, Lakshmi Singha (1769-1780). Another copper plate made by Kamaleswar Singha states that the Sattrā was donated 170 *pūrā* land (equivalent to  $140 \times 4 = 560$  *bighās*). Besides these, the *Ahom* king also constructed the *Kirtanghar*, the *maṇikūta* of the *Kirtan-ghar* and donated the lion based throne for the deity (*simhasana*), the idol of Lord Rama and four engraved stone light pillars. The Sattrā has under its possession two revenue-free plots of land, the first one located by the *Kolong* river attained as a result of the diversion of its course and the second one being donated by the Ahom king in and around the Vasudeva *thān* at Amoni village.

The invaders from Burma (presently Myanmar) destroyed many valuable properties of this Sattrā including the seven tiered *simhasana*,

scriptures written on *sanchi* leaves, big wooden box and many sculptured items which are considered to be a great loss to the Assamese culture and heritage. Nonetheless, the Sattrā still possesses a few sculptural items like the *Garuda*, the idols of *Viṣṇu*, *Agni*, a big drum made of copper, pictured wooden box, manuscripts etc. The Sattrā has a number of disciples from Schedule Caste community and other backward classes. Another interesting feature is that people from the Islamic community living in nearby villages come together and show their devotion to the Sattrā and contribute to it. The disciples of this Sattrā are scattered over the districts of Tezpur and Jorhat too, thus the total number of devotees amounting to an approximate of more than three thousand. Of late the Sattrā has distributed its twelve hundred *bighās* of revenue-free land among the residents of Brahmachārī village. Festivals like the death anniversaries of the *Gurus*, *janmāṣṭami*, *bhāonā*, *Sivaratri*, *doul-utsava*, *rāsa*, *pācatī*, the mud festival popularly known as *bokā-bhāonā* are regularly held with great pomp and gaiety in the Sattrā. *Hirā-nām* is a speciality of this Sattrā celebrated till date. The *Sattrādhikāra* is elected on the basis of seniority and efficiency. The Sattrā Management Committee is formed with various office bearers headed by a President and a Secretary. A branch of this Sattrā is now situated in Tezpur and its affairs are conducted by a committee under the supervision of the present *Sattrādhikāra* of Brahmachārī Sattrā, Nagaon.

**C. The following Sattras brought under the survey are affiliated to the *Kala Śamhati*:**

1. *Daukācapari Sencua*: Culturally rich with heritage, this Sattra is at a distance of 3 kms. west of Nagaon town. At the time of the infamous Burmese invasion, it had to shift its base from Majuli along the mighty Brahmaputra and established in Sencua, Nagaon. Presently it has lost much of its past glory.
2. *Nācanīpār*: One major and influential Sattra of the *kala samhati* sect, it situated to the east of the *Kolong* under Khātowal *mouza* in Puranigudām. It comprises of the *bāṭcarā*, *manikūta*, *nāmghar*, *guru-griha* (residence of the *Sattradhikāra*), sprawling areas for congregations and cultural performances and also conducts the regular activities of *śaraṇa-bhajana*, dance, drama and music. All these traditional forms are continuing till date.
3. *Hemārbari Borbheti*: Close to the National Highway 37 under Khātowal *mouza* in Samaguri is situated this Sattra is not much with regular activities.
4. *Jajori Dahghariyā*: Under Hātichung *mouza* in a village called Jajori is located this Sattra. A very renowned Sattra with all religious and cultural activities drawing people from all walks of life irrespective of caste, creed or sect, the Sattra however lost its past glory in all respects. At present, the number of disciples has lessened to a great aspect due to western impact on education and culture. It possesses around 50 *bighās* of land in the name of the Sattra. The *Sattradhikāras* are selected hereditarily. The head



of the Sattrā pays occasional visits and supervises its functioning<sup>35</sup>. Every year the *tithi* of Gopāla Ātā, the founder-head of this Sattrā is celebrated in a big way.

5. *Āhātaguri Hujgaon*: Branching out from the main Āhātaguri Jajori Sattrā, it is situated 2 kms. north of Nagaon town on the Nagaon-Juria road. Due to lack of proper administration and irregularity in the appointment of administrative heads to run the Sattrā, it has become insignificant today.
6. *Bhotāigaon Gajalā*: Situated close to the NH-37 east of Nagaon town, it is beautified with a *bātcārā* surrounded by the *nāmghar and maṇikūta*. Possessing over 3 *bighās* of land, it was established in the year 1920 A.D. It houses several traditional artefacts used for different purposes and festivals like *janmāṣṭami, tithi* etc. are celebrated with honour and gaiety. The members of the Sattrā including the present *Sattrādhikāra* is very conscious about its religio-cultural identity.
7. *Gajalā Madārguri*: Having their ancestral origin in North-Lakhimpur district of Assam, this Sattrā is now located in Samaguri under Khatowal *mouza*. At the time of Burmese aggression, it moved over to the present location as a safety measure. The Sattrā is not operational today.
8. *Cecā Sattrā*: Situated in the outskirts of Nagaon town, to the east of a place named Dimaruguri, it has its main branch in Dibrugarh district of

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<sup>35</sup> The head of the Sattrā, Kesavanada Deva Goswami who is at present a medical practitioner and resides in Nagaon town has made a remark on the present state of functioning of this particular Sattrā. He observes that it is sometimes very difficult to go and perform the rituals on time as being a *Sattrādhikāra*; he has to keep certain restrictions to himself. But lack of time and his occupation does not permit him to do so. However he mentions about engaging a few office-bearers to take care of the Sattrā in his absence. He also feels sorry for not being able to retrieve the glory of his own Sattrā.

Assam on the bank of the river *Cecā*. One of the culturally rich Sattras, the *rāsa-utsava* is a form of popular entertainment attracting huge crowds every year. Observance of *nām-prasanga*, *bhāonā*, possession of a number of wood carvings are important features of this Sattrā.

9. ***Dihing Sattrā:*** At an approximate distance of 25 kms. west of Nagaon town is located this Sattrā at a place called Hāriamukh under Raha sub-division. Having its main branch in upper Assam close to the *Dihing*, it received royal patronages during the Ahom rule, and the *Ahom* king, Rudra Simha granted revenue-free lands to the Sattrā. During the Mayamara revolt in 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Burmese invasion after it, the Sattrā had to shift its base and got re-established in the year 1870 A.D. Known for accommodating disciples from all tribes and communities, this Sattrā was devastated by flood in the year 1986. But with the help of the disciples and other officials of the Sattrā it started to function since 1991. It has concentrated mainly to the proselytization of people from various socially backward classes. The *Sattrādhikāra* is selected hereditarily and the daily performances are held with piety.
  
10. ***Bholaguri Sattrā:*** Located under Pub-thoria *mouza* in Koliabor, this Sattrā was established in 1593 A.D. Famous for its contribution in the field of different areas of culture, religion and literature; it houses many important literary works which have been accomplished by the members of this Sattrā. In the field of music, dance and drama too this Sattrā is well known. The Sattrā continues to be in a well to do condition at present.
  
11. ***Āmguri Karatipār Nasattrā:*** Situated close to the NH-37 under Koliabor sub-division is this Sattrā is functional and it houses a *nāmghar*, *maṅikūta*

in the Sattrā premises. It houses many indigenous manuscripts of plays and other treatises. A few of them have been moved to the History and Antiquarian Studies Department of the state for preservation<sup>36</sup>. Congregations are held regularly, and many a time the *Sattradhikāra* takes part in the proceedings.

12. ***Koliabor Dahghar:*** Located presently in Koliabor under Pub-thoria *mouza*, this Sattrā relocated its base from North-Lakhimpur due to the heavy erosion of the Brahmaputra and regular floods. Having settled down in this part of the state, this Sattrā has built a *sattrā-griha* very recently. It is moderately functioning, conducting *cāri-prasanga* and *tithis* at regular intervals with a handful of disciples.
13. ***Saukājān Gajalā:*** Branching out from the famous, Gajalā Sattrā in Majuli, it has made one of its bases at a place called Cāmdhora in Koliabor. In present times, it has lost its glory and is no more functional.

**D. The *Nika Śamhati* Sattras taken into consideration for study in the whole of the Nagaon district are the *Barjahā Sattrā*, *Upar Doomdoomiyā* and *Nām-Doomdoomiyā Sattrā*. These three distinct Sattras have been taken as a prototype in understanding their constituent elements, growth and development and their functional levels.**

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<sup>36</sup> The present *Sattradhikāra*, Sri Prabin Chandra Deva Goswami during an interview on 14.04.11 commented, ' the Sattras are a mirror of the Assamese society. It is our duty to preserve them for sustenance. However with the help of the state government and with my own initiative, the old manuscripts have been taken care of for preservation. If such initiatives continue, treasures of the Sattras will survive for long.

1. **Barjahā Sattrā:** Situated under Pākhimoria *mouza* in a place called Barjahā, it followed the strict discipline in all matters related to the faith. Since the founder of the Sattrā was a celibate monk, the *Sattradhikāras* of the celibate order took the administration into their hands since the days of its establishment. But in due course of time, the number of celibate *Sattradhikāras* diminished and then the Sattrā started functioning under a head from the house-hold Sattras. After a few years it lacked in proper administration. At one time, the Barjahā Sattrā was the most influential Sattrā in the whole of Assam but today the condition of this Sattrā is poor, there is no such methods adopted for the preservation of the traditional artifacts<sup>37</sup>. There is a complete malfunctioning in the cultural performances as well as the ritualistic performances.
  
2. **Upar-Doomdoomiyā:** Located at Dhing at a distance of 5 kms. to the north of Bardowa *thān*, this Sattrā is known as Upar-Doomdoomiyā. During the regime of the *Ahom* king, *Swargadeo* Siva Simha, a few *bhakats* shifted their base from Barpeta Sattrā to Nagaon. They came and settled at this place and eventually, at the initiative of both the *bhakats* and the local villagers a *nāmghar* with *maṇikūta* was established. A copper-plate inscription granting revenue-free land was given to this Sattrā by the king during his regime. This inscription was lost. And in due course of time, the land allotted to the Sattrā was restored during the reign of another *Ahom* king, Gaurinath Simha. In the year 1706 A.D. around 25 *bhakats* administering the Sattrā were granted lands by the king. At present, these free-hold lands donated to a *Brahman* (a priest) known as *brahmottar* have been occupied by the illegal settlers at various points of time and as a result of which the functioning of the Sattrā has been

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<sup>37</sup> A resident from the Barjaha village, Sri N. Nath said in an interview conducted on 09.12.2011, '.....this is an enduring process. The Sattrā needs an upliftment from all sides, but somewhere it has failed. We feel sorry that our own heritage is at stake...but we are helpless...nobody takes the initiative....'

affected to a great extent. However, in the midst of these irregularities, a few important events like *guru-tithi*, *janmāṣṭami*, *nām-prasanga* etc. are held regularly. The Sattrā is however functioning even though there is a poor level of participation of the community in the ritual proceedings.

3. *Nām-Doomdoomiyā*: Presently this Sattrā is situated to the north-west of Nagaon town at a village called Nām-Doomdoomiyā. The Sattrā is now in Bhakatgaon of the Dhing town. The Sattrā got its name from the village itself. It is in a functioning condition today with the support of a Sattrā Management Committee. The important functionaries appointed for taking care of the Sattrā are the *deurī*, *bharali*, *medhi* respectively. These officials are selected from the laity. It is probably the only Sattrā in the district where the death anniversary (*tithi*) of Mathurādas Burha Āta, an apostle of Mādhavadeva is celebrated with pomp and fervor. Along with this, a fair is arranged by the local villagers known as *ahini mela*. The *ahini mela* is held with traditional fervour in the Sattrā for three days during the Krisna Caturdashī (fourteenth day after the full moon). It marks the death anniversary of the saint. *Bhāonā* organized with public participation is its main attraction. The village fair promotes understanding and harmony among the villagers who are laity of Sattras like Kamalabari, Belaguri and Garamur of Majuli in the present day Jorhat district of Assam. Several artefacts used in the Sattrā since the time of its establishment have been preserved till date.

## Appendix II

### List of Sattras not Surveyed and not Included in the Study:

There are another set of Sattras which have not been included in my research work. These Sattras were established at various times in history. Many are off-shoots of the major and prominent branches; the later apostles shifted and settled their base at one place with similar names of the Sattras they are affiliated to. A couple of these Sattras have also undergone tremendous changes and many are under the threat of extinction. The reasons behind the alteration and decline have been discussed elaborately in the chapters, which provide an insight into a deeper understanding of how and why things have changed in recent years in these once reputed socio-cultural, religious institutions.

The researcher has provided a justification for not including these Sattras during my extensive field work. Reports from the field reveal that a majority of the Sattras of the district of Nagaon belong to the *Kala* and *Purusa Samhati* (sect) which in record has more than two to three of the similar types. In many cases they are of the same name. An example is cited from the *Brahma Samhati* Sattra of Āuniāti Nagaon, which has an analogous branch each at Puranigudām, Dhing and Samaguri. The aforementioned Sattras under similar sub-sect has been taken as a prototype for the study. It is done to mainly emphasize on the point that they belong to the same order and characterizes a similar form. Most of them are influential, though they have to a great extent come under the

shades of decay in present times. Though a detailed analysis is not done of these Sattras yet the names of these non-surveyed Sattras are cited below:

**A. *Purusa Samhati:***

Kurhimari, Cepetimorā, Dighali Corāikhorang Rāidengia, Dighali Borpāthari Panigaon, Cipohā Nonoi, Phulbāri, Śālmora, Khundāmora Nōnoi, Khundāmora Bhērbheri, Khundāmora Tulasimukh, Rupnārāyaṇ Jajori, Gonāmarā Bheleuguri, Shyāmkanu Kathiātali, Shyāmkanu Pāthari, Madārguri Jajori, Madārguri Nonoi, Bālisatra Godhariā, Bālisatra Nagaon, Bar Elengi Dagaon, Bar Elengi Rāndhani, Bar Elengi Barsatra Mājputani, Dićiyal Pokāmura, Dićiyal Biraha Bebejia, Dićiyal Bebejia, Dićiyal Rāidengia, Dićiyal Nonoi, Dićiyal Khutikatiya, Teteliguri, Khundāmora, Barbhakati, Madhatāri (Borbhag), Shyāmkanu, Govinda Elengi, Bālibhui Bar Elengi, Barsatra Bar Elengi, Cipahā Upar Barbhogia, Bihimpur Kuwaritol, Dićiyal Koliabor, Baghargonya.

**B. *Brahma Samhati:***

Dukhorāmukh, Senglai Sālmora, Sravani Dāgaon, Sravani Tokoubāri, Sravani Kuthari, Murari Nonoi, Āuniāti Krisnāikhat, Āuniāti Barbāri, Langta Sattrā, Jagarāl, Phulaguri Garamūr, Kacarijua Sattrā, Kampur Sattrā, Na-Bhāgati Sattrā, Teliā Pohukotā Brahmachāri, Jakhalābandhā Nagaon, Pharing Misra Sattrā, Hari Misra Bhērbheri, Hari Misra Nonoi Pānigaon, Devar Sattrā, Murari Koliabor, Huruśa Sattrā.

**C. *Kala Samhati:***

Kolakota Sencua, Tupar Kolakota, Daukācapari Huj-Kahuwatali, Daukācapari Pāthori-Ghuriyāgaon, Hemārbari Bogoriguri (Jajori), Hemārbari Bheleuguri-Hahsora, Coriputa Ulubari, Coriputa Efaliyābori,

Coriputa Kutuhā, Coriputa Jajori, Coriputa Bebejia, Haladhiāti Efaliyābori, Haladhiāti Morikolong ( Siyālekhawā Suk), Haladhiāti Morikolong, Haladhiāti Sencua, Haladhiāti Cakalāghat, Dahghar Kothalkuci, Dahghar Ulubari, Dahghar Bhālukmāri, Āhātaguri Jajori, Mōhdhora, Āmtola Gajalā-Jajori (Da-Fāl), Āmtola Gajalā (Bori-Fāl), Khowramucar Māj Jajori, Khowramucar Cakalāghat, Āmguri Karatipār Puranighar, Āhātaguri (Gundhāmora), Karatipār Bogajon, Kāthpar Barbhag, Kāthpar Sorubhag.

**D. *Nika Samhati:***

Lāiāti (Barfāl, Majufāl, Sorufāl).