APPENDIX I

LIFE HISTORIES OF BHAKATS

1) GOPAL CHANDRA NAMLOGOWA

Gopal Chandra Namlogowa (43) was born in Sonarigaon of Nogaon district. He was the fourth son of his parents. They were ordinary villagers with a bit of land from which they made a living. The father could not make much money to feed his large family of four sons and two daughters. He used to often say that he would be better off when his sons would grow up and help him with cultivation or work elsewhere and send money home.

Gopal's parents were firm believers in the Vaishnava faith and regularly visited the village Namghar. They were disciples of the Uttar Kamalabari Sattra. The village of Sonarigaon has direct affiliation to this Sattra and several young boys are sent there to live as bhakats. Similarly Gopal was sent to Uttar
Kamalabari Sattra at the age of eight. He recalls that the guru or adhikar of the Sattra, Kamala Kanta Dev Goswami, personally visited his parents and asked for a son who would do service to God and the people. Gopal felt that he was given away because he had so many brothers. In addition, the link between his family and the Sattra would be strengthened further, which would give his parents spiritual and moral satisfaction.

So Gopal joined the Sattra and was miserable for the first few months. He thought of his parents and his home in the village. But in the Sattra he had quite a few playmates. There were seven boys including him who were sent to this Sattra. What made him homesick was the element of discipline that descended on him suddenly. There were fixed timings for him to learn Borgeets, to learn various styles of dancing such as the Boha dance, Pal nam, Jhumura, Sali and so on.¹

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¹ Jhumura is a form of Ankiya drama. This dance form gives full portrayal of Lord Krishna with His Gopis, cowherd boys and with Yashoda. Jhumura unlike Bhaana, is performed during day time in Sattras. It is performed by young boys in male or female dress. Jhumura was initiated by Madhavdeb and thus it is seen mostly in Sattras of Nika Samhati. For details see, Kesavananda Dev Goswami, "The Jhumura in Assamese" (Sangeet Natak No. 76, April-June 1985).
There were scheduled timings for bathing, eating, sweeping the rooms and going to school.

At the age of eleven Gopal received his saran or initiation. By taking saran Gopal became a member of the Sattra and a follower of the Vaishnava faith where he was object to surrender to Bhakti. This implies that he bows and serves the Guru, Deba, Nama and Bhakta. Guru and Deba refers to God who can be served only through Nama - chanting the Name of God and serving/propagating His name through devotion.

Gopal received Bhajan or rather, became a Bhajaniya in the age of twelve. This is the second step from taking saran in which he had to follow a more puritanical conduct of life. The cleaning of the body and mind meant that Gopal had to bathe at least twice a day, pray and chant hymns several times a day and observe commensal restrictions between him and others. For instance, if Gopal had to visit a house he would accept only kesa food or gakhir pani (milk diluted with water). If he had to have visitors in the Sattra, they too would be served with kesa food and sweet meat like Chaulor pitha or ground and roasted rice cake.

By becoming a Bhajaniya Gopal realised that he
was now a permanent resident of the Sattra and destined to live a life of a bhakat. With a mixture of elation as well as getting a feeling of reaching maturity, Gopai started concentrating on Sattriya duties seriously. He was able to grasp the art of singing borgeets and reading from the Kirtan Ghosha and Nam-ghosha which determined his profession of becoming a Namlogowa in the following years.

Gopai used to go to his village some times. He used to be the Namlogowa for several congregational prayer-meetings in Namghars of small towns and villages. Two things happened to him almost one after the other. He got married and became close to a well known family in Assam which changed his life of a travelling bhakat to a permanent resident bhakat of the family's Namghar. He had become a frequent visitor as well as a Namlogowa to their Namghar and soon he was asked to take care of it. He was given a small piece of land where he lives with his wife and three young children.

Gopai felt the need to get married," as he puts it and decided to tell his Guru about it. The Sattradhikar blessed him and advised Gopai to carry on the right path of devotion to God. To get married meant that
Gopal had to move out of the Sattra but not the Samhati or sect which he belonged to. His companions bid him good-bye. "They were very encouraging and said that my children would be like their children and they would accept the children into their fold."

ii) LIFE HISTORY OF KESHAB CHANDRA HAZARIKA

Keshab Chandra Hazarika (36) was born in Koliabar of Nagaon district. He had two sisters and five brothers. His father held a white collar job in a tea garden for quite a number of years. He died 25 years back. His mother was a simple pious lady and stayed with her eldest son till her death 16 years ago.

Once again, because of a large family, Keshab was given away to the Adhikar of Uttar Kamalabari Sattra at the age of seven in 1957. At that time there were twelve boys between the ages of 8 and 17. Keshab was terrified of his new routine rather than his new surroundings. "I was not really scared as there were many elderly bhakats who belonged to my village. But I just hated staying there because I had to do things that I had never done at home. I had to learn a number of religious norms and often sit with the older bhakats or accompany them during their work."
Keshab ran away from the Sattra three times. He was caught by a bura bhakat in the Nimatighat once, he remembers. Here's an account of his initial stay in the Sattra.

"After I was caught for the third time, the Guru (Sattradhikar) spoke to me for a long time. He made me sit in front of him and asked me whether I would like to go to school right away. I agreed about that and I was sent to the L.P. school regularly. I was studying and playing about like any ordinary boy. We were not prevented from doing whatever the others did. But after school we were asked to bathe and stay within the Sattra. We soon learnt to do household work like sweeping, washing our clothes and peeling vegetables for our elderly bhakat who were in charge of us. Each elderly bhakat would be in charge of three or two boys. We knew most of them as young children as they were either from our village or the neighbouring one. I remember being a naughty child. There used to be a pond near the Sattra. The water used to rise dangerously in the summer. But the water used to be so inviting that I would invariably jump in at any opportunity. I remember doing so after school. Three more boys joined me and we had a good time. We thought nobody would know because we had taken
off our wet clothes which dried soon under the hot sun. But when we got back we were reprimanded in a quiet way that duty comes prior to play. I remember that this mild reprimand was perhaps more cutting than a beating because those words stayed permanently in my mind."

We soon learned to read and understand the scriptures of Shankardeb and Madhawdeb. I become very fond of playing instruments such as the Bor Tal and the Daba.' (Daba - big drum that is hitched up on a stand in the Namghar. It is struck a couple of times to a crescendo and back to a retreat to signify the beginning and end of a Nam).

Because of my keen interest on such instruments I began to play them and accompany the Gayans in our daily prasangas. I also accompanied them to the Shakhas (branches) of our Sattra that are situated in various parts of Assam."

Keshab said that it was only the bhakats with aptitudes for singing and playing instruments who would travel around. Importance was given to boys who could write well and boys who could read well enough to become pathaks. "But boys who showed no aptitude in any of these, remained as helpers to elderly bhakats and
servers to the Sattradhikar and visitors. In other words, they became the functionaries of the Sattrra infra-structure.

Keshab is still living in Uttar Kamalabari Sattrra. He visits his village once a year. He gets pocket expense whenever he comes to towns or the city on duty. His needs are modest and he does not feel the need to acquire a fancy comb to an ordinary one, for instance. His life has been routined and his happiness lies in the fulfilment of all duties to none other than Hari.

iii) LIFE HISTORY OF BHOGIRAM NAMLOGOWA

Bhogiram (61) makes an interesting life history because of his fifty years experience with Sattrriya life. Bhogiram had six sisters and two brothers. His parents were not well off and he was sent to the Sattrra of Uttar Kamalabari so that he could survive. "My parents were very poor and when the Adhikar came to my village in Sonarigaon, they gladly 'gifted' me away to him. I was then ten years old." Bhogiram talks of his life between 1935 to 1985. He was articulate and explained many of my queries about the entire Sattrra system.
In 1935 there were about thirty boys in the Sattra. They came from Jorhat, Darrang district and Sibsagar. But majority of them came from Lakhimpur. Bhogiram received saran in his village and then entered the Sattra.

Bhogiram fulfilled the requirements of various arts that were taught to all boys. It took him fifteen years to master the art of being a Gayan, bayan, learning Kirtanghar duties, learning the Gunmala, being a pathak and a Namlogowa.

But the initial training he got was on household work such as sweeping and cleaning.

"We always got up at six a.m. to clean the boha and our rooms. We used to clean the cowshed and throw away the cowdung behind it. After all the work we had to bathe and then do Sewa (pray) in the Namghar."

Our breakfast consisted of Komal caul, doi or gakhir (milk). Then we were sent to school.

School life was carefree and interesting for Bhogiram. He also recalls that there was complete freedom to mix around with other boys. He did not have to learn Sanskrit privately like Brahmin boys. He had no difficulty in understanding the Sattriya language or religious nuances "because it was the normal spoken
Assamiya that we all are familiar with." Consequently, school training gave an impetus to Bhogiram’s writing and reading knowledge in the Sattriya level too. Bhogiram added that they were allowed to visit their homes only once a year. The reason was two fold - that they would miss class; Too many visits would tempt him to leave the Sattriya. In this context he went on to say good humouredly that many a bhakat at the 'ripe age' had to spend more time in the Sattriya and involve themselves completely in the music and reading instead of going to villages. "Our Gopal was moving around too much at a ripe age; by getting the 'scent' of a young village belle, he fell into the irrevocable trap!"

He hastened to say that a person becomes a Grihasta because of his fate. Marriage is a sacred bond between man and woman that can flourish further if one does duties of a householder well. A bhakat of Nika Samhati can switch over to another after he is married. Similarly Bhogiram’s parents who were sisyas of Uttar Kamalabari of Nika Sanghati, married their first daughter away to a sisya of Letugram Sattriya (Nogaon) of Purush Samhati. The liberal approach of Sattriya infrastructure is indeed remarkable and therefore links bet-
ween the Sattra institutions and the rural lay is very very strong.

Bhogiram is one of the senior most Namlogowa of the Uttar Kamalabari Sattra. He travels about the whole of Assam and organises Nam Kirtan when invited.

He was very particular about my mentioning the word 'invited' because it is related to the meaning of Sakam and Niskam. "We always do some Namghar work when we are asked to. We will not take money for it. This is an act for God with no other material motive behind it."

But the duty of collecting Kar or tithes has a different meaning. Bhogiram being quite a traveller, told me a bit about his experience with people. Whenever I travel by bus or by boat, I do not eat at all. After a reach my destination I bathe, pray in the Namghar. I always stay in the house of a bhakat who looks after a Namghar. We are given shelter for couple of days. I have mostly stayed in Namghars belonging to Nika and Purush Sanghati.

If I go to any Assamese house I am welcome and I get the treatment that any bhakat is deemed to get. The fact that people know about us, what to serve, and what
not to serve is itself a revelation of their familiarity with the Sattriya culture.

On this basis I would say that people of Urban areas give perfect hospitality to us. They visit out Sattra or one of our branches once in a year or two but the bond of respect and allegiance is sealed for ever."

About food habits - Bhogiram said that bhakats of his Sattra eat fish. "Shankardeb had fish cut every week and distributed to bhakats. Sriram Atoi, Sisva of both Shankardeb and Madhavdeb used to take smaller variety fish. We often bake fish in plantain leaves and consume it. But we do not touch goats meat because it symbolises the sacrificial element of Goddess Kali - a symbol of Shaktism."