CHAPTER III

ORGANISATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF THE MONASTERIES

This chapter will attempt to analyse the contemporary socio-economic patterns of functioning in Sattras belonging to the three Samhatis, viz: Brahma, Nika and Purusha. The monasteries under study are the Auniati belonging to the Brahma Samhati and the Natun Kamalabari Sattra belonging jointly to the Nika/Purusha Samhati. The idea here is to analyse the religious life of the bhakats (monks) and the hierarchical status of the Sattras through their influence on and relationship with the village laity. The Sattras have specially been marked in this chapter to show their different categories of land holding which would consequently expose several levels of the monk/laity relationship.

Auniati Sattra:

The Auniati Sattra has the renowned history of being one of the strongest within the Brahma Samhati of the Damodoria sect. It received patronage from the Ahom kings starting with Jayadhāравa Singha around 1654. In
fact, the Auniati, Kuruwabahi, Gormur, and Dakhinpat Sattras, all affiliated to the Brahma sub-sect, were very prosperous because of this patronage and the number of functionaries expanded to a point where they had to be hierarchically graded. Several interviews that were conducted around urban-based people, who are affiliated to Auniati as sisyas or disciples, reveal that the popularity of admitting oneself into this Sattras was high and the monastery permitted non-Brahmins as members without much fuss. This can be explained from both the disciples' as well as the priests' point of view. Disciples of Auniati were often very rich and landed people. Because of the British government's policies of not imposing much restrictions on religious land, these landowners decided to join the monastery as disciples and donated some portions of their land to it in return. Thus, both the monastery as well as the disciples benefitted from this arrangement. Because of the increased monastic members who had to be graded hierarchically, it would naturally follow that Sattras of the Brahma Samhati liberally performed brahmanical rites had a more intensive pattern of rituals concerning the daily life of a monk.

The Auniati Sattras is situated on the Majuli island

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1 M. Neog, Shankardeh and His Times (Gauhati 1965), p. 340.
of the Brahmaputra river and its branches are twelve of which observation has been made of one such branch in the north bank of Guwahati city.\(^2\) The Auniati Sattra on Majuli is situated in a 120 bigha (40 acres) area; the surrounding land, some 140 acres, also belong to the monastery.\(^3\) Similar to the standard structure of monastic premises described in the previous chapter, the Auniati here maintains four hatis (dwellings) around the Namghar. Other structures such as the Bharalghar (granary) and the Sanskrit Tol including the Sattradhikar's quarters are situated in the northern side of the Namghar.\(^4\)

The Auniati branch of North Guwahati in the Silsako village was built about sixty years back and is built on a similar place as to the one on Majuli. But it has only two rows of Hatis and the Sattra is surrounded by high

\(^2\) The Auniati Sattra has altogether twelve branches of which eight belong to Nowgong district, one at north Guwahati (Kamrup district), two in Lakhimpur and one at Sadiya (Lakhimpur district).


\(^4\) Tol is a school initially meant for Brahmin boys to get some knowledge and training in Sanskrit literature and usage. Tols are present in big Satras like Nitun Kamalabari which admit boys who have academic potential even if they are not Brahmins.
walls decorated with carved inscriptions of Krishna and his Gopis. The gateway is impressive, resembling a *stupa* and it leads to the Namghar which is situated in the centre and it appears to be an exceptionally large hall. This Namghar does present a somewhat different character to that of most Namghars as the former has large colourful portraits of Krishna framed all along the walls; secondly, the manikut (shrine) comprises idols and images of Vishnu and Krishna surrounded by numerous lamps. The entire surface of the floor of the hall is mortared which reveals the absence of the conventional clay flooring, so persistent in Namghars irrespective of their being rich or poor. Here, persistence of clay flooring is accentuated to comply with the modest appearance and easily available material for setting up prayer halls as conceived by Shankardeb. However the Sattra does have the monastic atmosphere despite the impression of show and extravagance in the prayer hall.

The Sattradhirkar's private quarters are built to the west of the Namghar and the remaining structures are that of the Hatis. The Hatis are modestly made and they are divided into small cubicles having one common roof. Each cubicle accommodates three to four bhakats who share the responsibilities of cleaning and cooking. All bhakats are udashin (celibate) and they offer their lives and
services to Govinda (the idol of Vishnu) in the Sattra. Many of the lay disciples send their children between the ages of seven and fifteen to Auniati where they are brought up in a disciplined mode of life.

The Auniati Sattra functions independently and does not totally rely on the lay disciples for their monastic work which we see in the Dihing Sattra of Silsako village in chapter IV. The exception is only in terms of leasing out their monastic land to the laity where a system of reciprocity is followed between the two. Visits to the Sattra is purely a reverential act accompanied with offerings in cash or kind. All caste groups like the Kalita, Koch and Keots have full access to Auniati. In the case of the Kaibarta village of Silsako, the Kaibartas, considered to be the fishermen class and of 'low' status, visit Auniati only when the traditional dramatic performances are staged during a festive occasion. The Kaibartas rarely go to Auniati which they term as the 'palace of the Vedic masters' for they have their affiliation to the Dihing Sattra (Kala Samhati), situated in their village and therefore the frequency of going to Auniati is very low.

Functions in the Auniati Sattra are conducted in a traditional pattern. All bhakats residing in the monastery have a prescribed pattern of rituals to perform in
their daily activities. These rituals vary from Sattra to Sattra. Some follow them strictly and some follow them on liberal patterns.

Rituals:

All monasteries which have a well established number of bhakats residing within them have a pattern of chanting verses and hymns called Prasanga throughout the day. These prasangas vary in number and content amongst the three sectarian monasteries. Auniati has fourteen such prasangas of which they are divided into four major sittings in the Namghar. These four prasangas are termed as a) Boragi Nam, b) Bar Nam, c) Bivali Nam and d) Godhuli Nam. The Boragi Nam consists of the chanting of the Vrindavan Lila or the narration of Krishna lore, a part of Shankardeb's Kirtan and the compositions of previous Adhikars of Auniati; the clapping of hands to keep the Tala or beat of those chantings is not done so in this premilinary sitting.

The second is the Bor Nam which is probably the lengthiest and most important. Here the Bhagawat is recited and interpreted besides the Nam (congregational

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singing). In this prasanga the Sattradhikar makes an appearance in the hall and is led to the manikut to offer prayers. Nobody is allowed to enter the manikut at this stage. The Sattradhikar makes his exist after giving blessings to the priests in the hall.

The responsibility of explaining the Bhagawata goes to the Bagish (learned priest who can orate). He is also known as Bhagavati in some Sattras. A quorum of twenty-five bhakats is necessary in this sitting. Seven pairs of Gayans (singers) and Bayans (percussionists) are required to perform the closure of the Bor Nam. 7

The significance of these daily prasangas lies in the importance given to the verses composed by the previous Sattradhikars and the compulsory attendance of bhakats at the Bor Nam in the Namghar. Both these two are interrelated though are held on two different occasions in the day. The attending of at least twenty-five or so bhakats are partly novices and are trained to become Pathaks (readers) and gradually into Bagish. Contents of the Bhagawata are read out by the elder Bagishs of which the content of interpretation is in turn, the 'traditional literary expression' of the previous Sattra-

7 The renowned Palnam which is normally performed during the month of November in Auniati Sattra. The hymns are also recited and sing in parts within the four prasangas daily.
dhikars have been closely associated with the Bagish and hence the latter's assistance to the Sattradhikars literary compositions does not go unnoticed. Hence it follows that the indoctrination maintains a status quo on two levels: spiritual and functional. Firstly, interpretation of spiritual doctrines and the factor of time have focussed sole importance on the practice of Vedic rites within the Sattras of the Brahmin dominated sect; this naturally gave a greater sense of aloofness from the Mahapurushia mode of thinking. The factor of time refers to the years that have passed since the inception of the Auniati Sattra. There was positive stress on the practice of Vedic rites which conformed to the Shaktas of which the Ahom nobility were patrons, and who at the same time had these Brahmin monasteries under them. So Brahmin monasteries did conform to various tenets of Shakta rites. Brahmin monasteries did not stick to the actual Shakta rites such as the practice of the 5 elements (tattva) mentioned earlier. But they did follow the method of citing mantras as well as worshipping deities which otherwise are not practised in Mahapurushia Sattras.

The second reason of maintaining their status quo is functional. Here the superiority of the Bagish and the inherent process of maintaining their (caste) status quo, that of the Kayasthas is marked. This entire process
is however not a rigorous one on the lower level because some of the priests-turned-Bathaks belong to the Kalita group. Yet, the elderly Bagish group are Kayasthas and the selection attainment of the rank of 'Bagishhood' is limited. Therefore we have Bathaks who are both of the Kalita and the Kayastha caste groups and the Bagish only pertaining to the Kayasthas.

As mentioned above, the conformity of the Brahmin Sattras with the Ahom nobility not only have brought about economic gains but also social affinity within them. Sattradhikars have known to appear as prosperous men in possession of riches and their various journeys from one village to another resembled the sojourns of an important minister in the Ahom court.

The following example drawn from the fieldwork done in the Auniati Sattra would aptly illustrate vestiges of a feudal tradition, that expresses itself in the exclusiveness and formality with which the Sattradhikar granted and carried on an interview. On the other hand, the liberalising influence of a more modern era is apparent in the informal and more casual spirit in which he allowed himself to be interviewed in a different context.

The atmosphere of the Auniati monastery in the Silsakho village projected an orthodox or rather a 'brahminised' character, on my field visit there. Being ushered
into the monastery and to the Sattradhikar's place was formally done. To converse with him seemed an anachronism for he talked behind closed doors with one side of the door open just enough to permit a full glimpse of him while he accepted the *dakshina* I had offered. This formal meeting however did not repeat in the following one at Majuli. The same Sattradhikar, on this particular occasion, was seated wholly outside in the *Boha* or porch opposite the Namghar. The conversation was informal and short.

Consider these two meetings; the first meeting was held in a *Sattra* situated in a suburban area while the latter was on the rural homeground which belongs commonly to several *Sattras* of all Samhatis. The question that these two distinct modes of behaviour raises is, whether the formality of the first, which is clearly imitative of the condescending and regal manner of the learned Brahmin of Kamakhya (a temple) while granting audiences, is a deliberate ploy to impress and overawe the sanskrit-ising townsman-devotees and also to attract a large following. This assumption is acceptable if we take into account the great flow of urban devotees to the Kamakhya, *Dol Gobinda* and the *Umananda* temples which fall en route Silsakho village and which are also strongholds of the
Shakti cult, which prescribes the form of rituals concerning the auspicious/inauspicious, marriage and Shraddha (death) rites of the laity. The second query would be: is it simply because it is a Brahmin monastery? On the other hand, the meeting with the Bhakats in the first example, was one of easy communication as would be among bhakats in any village Namghar. Commensal strains were not there during the field visits with the priests. These bhakats are Kolitas and the Majindar, who is the personal secretary to the Sattradhikar of Auniati, is a Kayastha. Discussions between us took place in the cubicle of the Majindar and his two room-mates. Food was provided for, cooked by them. The only ritual performed here was the sprinkling of water on the floor in order to 'purify' or 'cleanse' the place before the consummation of food; a ritual as simple as of a good Christian reciting a short prayer of thanks giving before and after a meal.

It follows therefore, that the Auniati Sattra maintains a combination of both orthodox and liberalised attitudes as seen in the empirical survey. It is evident however, that Auniati maintains a status quo in terms of maintaining orthodoxy on the higher level of religious and administrative posts (as seen in the example given of the Bagish and Majindar being only Kayasthas). But on the ground level, for the sake of practicality and also
for the gradual acceptance of Kalitas as a touchable caste group, the Auniati Sattra does allow Kalitas to work as functionaries in responsible administrative posts.

Kalitas (who place themselves next to the Brahmins even though they are Shudras), hold various posts and duties which are meted out in the Namghar, the Bhoralghor and some take charge of looking after the visiting devotees. Kaibartas are probably the only caste group which Auniati does not accept as their functionaries.

The principal caste groups in the Brahmaputra valley are the Bamar (Brahmin), Kayastha, Kalita, Keot, Koch, Kaibarta, Britial and Dom. The Brahmanical order and the Varna system in the Assamese society is widely prevalent. Yet non-Brahmins are numerically stronger in which we may find one Brahmin cluster of houses against several non-Brahmin ones in the village. This can be observed if we analyse a village dispute which invariably reveals the dominant position of a particular caste group over another. The Kalita group is a good example as it is a very large category of people all over Assam. (Mention of Koch is given in chapter IV).

In connection with the Sattras, division of labour on the basis of the functions meted out to them, emphasised the achieved aspect of status and thus made the system of stratifying the functionaries easy. However
the impression among some scholars that the status of the high priest or priests "is functional and not hereditary or based on caste", seems feeble.  

For instance, succession to the seat of the Sattradhikar in Auniati is done through selection amongst the novices who belong to the Kayastha or Brahmin caste group. Thus anyone deemed competent enough to supervise the working of the monastery (within this caste category) is selected to become the Govinda Puri, a name given to the future chief abbot. His horoscope has to be studied by the elder Brahmin priests to finalise whether he is the 'right one'. Auniati Sattra maintains a pujari, a Brahmin priest who is commonly known as the Bardeuri to supervise rites and rituals followed by the Sattra.

Religious Organisation:

The maintenance of Auniati Sattra is kept under the responsibility of several office holders. These are of course the bhakats themselves who reside in the monastery. Their duties have not really changed from the traditional responsibilities which were assigned to the bhakats earlier. In fact most monasteries have a common pattern.

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of such functionaries such as the:

1) Bhagavati or Bagish/ learned priest and interpreter of the Bhagavata.
2) Deuri Pu.jari or Bordeuri/ idol worshippers.
3) Majindar / personal secretary to the Sattradhikar.
4) Rathak / reader of the verses and compositions.
5) Gayan and Bayan / singers and instrument players.
6) Bharali / storekeeper.
7) Aldhara / person appointed to look after visitors and devotees.

The first three functionaries are confined to Auniati and not to the Kamalabari Sattra.

The maintenance of the Auniati is a bit rigorous not only because of its own upkeep but also of the several branches all over the Assam valley. Auniati still has land to its name which has been leased out to cultivators and sharecroppers, the income going into the common treasury. This treasury finances the Sattra's maintenance/ceremonies and public performances annually.

Tithes:

The Auniati Sattra was given land worth thousands of acres and cattle by Jayadhvaja Singha (1648-1663) who was responsible for establishing this monastery in Eastern
Assam. Several other kings expanded the monastic property by donating land. This, one can say, is the principal income of the Sattra through which it survives today. Other means of income is through the collection of religious tithes called Guru Kar. This practice is an age-old convention by which disciples (Sisyas) are obliged to give such tithes. The system of tithe giving was initiated by Ramunia Sattras only. The significance of this system lies in the fact that it can be equated to the tithe system of the Brahmin priest who demand, or anticipates gifts in kind or cash after he conducts a puja or a ceremony on a family occasion. There are several categories of tithes, such as: (a) Bijadaniya; (b) Bar; (c) Seva Janani; (d) Pranami and (e) Dana.

Bijadaniya refers to a tithe given to the monastery on marriage occasions amongst the lay disciples in the village. This tithe is given from the groom's party and each donate an amount to Auniati according to their choice and means.

Bar is a tithe forwarded during a death rite amongst the laity. Here, eighteen articles are offered in the name of the deceased during the shraddha ceremony in which one of the articles goes to the Auniati Sattra. This

9 Tirthanath Sarma, op. cit.
tithe is optional. It has been seen that the village/urban death rites are always performed by a Brahmin priest and it is he who prescribes the form and amount of articles that are to be offered and so on. Here, the Brahmin is the most important person and his advice does not go unheeded lest greater misfortunes befall the bereaved family. Thus the Sattra's role in these matters are obscure. The Bor tithe may have been offered to Auniati in the past, but now it is not done.

Seva Janani is a tithe offered to Auniati when any disciple performs rites in his own house. These rites may comprise birth, puberty and several ceremonies concerning man - his life, land and his animals. During such rites performed in the domestic household, Auniati receives a small amount of rice/pulses from the householder. The Natun Nakalabari Sattra does enjoy the same tithe from the laity which is normally called sidha.

Pranami is probably the most popular tithe which is offered by the laity today. It is realised from people who visit the Sattra to pay their reverence to the Sattradhikar/Namghar. The 'Dakshina' given to the Sattradhikar goes to the treasury and the money received by the Namghar is utilised for its own maintenance. This goes under the responsibility of the Bordeuri. Again, this tithe is not compulsory though it is generally given by all.
The last form of tithe is that of Daana or donation of cash or kind. This system, as mentioned before, was popular during the reign of the Ahoms. Most of the land donated by the nobility has been taken over by the State Government since 1959 though Auniati still has hold on a vast proportion of land.

The expenses incurred in the performances of the daily rites and Prasangas comes to approximately Rs. 400/- a month. Ceremonies performed during festive occasions is well looked after by the annual withdrawal of funds from the treasury. Auniati Sattra has a system of paying its inmates in which every bhakat gets a monthly ration of food and supplies to his name. Some of them get paid depending on the nature of work they do. About two hundred and fifty bhakats have to shoulder responsibilities of maintaining the monastery and they get a fixed amount of wages. The Bagishes, for instance, receive ninty puras of rice annually. The amount distributed to others vary between forty/thirty/twenty-four and

10 Tirthanath Sarma, op.cit.
11 Pura is a measure both in weight and in regard to measuring land. In the context above, pura refers to a weight of approximately 15 seers represented by a standard rounded cane basket (Don). Pura, in terms of measuring land, is equivalent to a little over an acre (four bighas).
twelve puras. Any profits made in the Sattra is shared by the Sattra's superiors such as the Sattradhikar, the Adhikar and the Medhis. Profits in this context means monetary gains derived from the missions made by the Ha. Medhis all over the Brahmaputra valley in a bid to collect Guru Kar.

There is a hierarchy of tithe collectors such as the Raj Medhi, Pachani, Bar Medhi and Pakhi Medhi. While the former two are free to extract a certain percentage of the money collected, the Bar Medhi and the Pakhi Medhi get the fixed amounts payable to them. Similarly, bhakats in charge of land matters get a fixed salary from the Sattra. The entire accounts of the granary, treasury and the Namghar are kept by the respective office holders though the overall review is done by the Majindar.

This entire system of salaried priests seems unconventional from the standard norms of a religious institution. Buddhist monasteries survived on the system of alms-giving though well established ones show immense hold on landed property and affluence. Some monasteries in Thailand live on because the laity serves as the backbone. For instance, a person is 'qualified' to go into wedlock provided he has had a few years' education in the

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Buddhist monastery. But of course there are monasteries which are linked up with politics of the country just as in Burma. The Auniati Sattra has a history of its establishment, developments and in each phase one can observe the working system where bhakats were hierarchically placed according to the work as sign to them. During the Ahom period these Brahmin Sattras had so many functionaries that they had to be graded into the upper, middle and lower classes.

So there is a system of class hierarchy in the working patterns of Auniati which also includes the perpetuation of the Kayastha class in the offices of the superior functionaries. Secondly, the monastery's close association with the nobility accentuated the living style of the Sattradhikar with the king and faint traces of this grandeur are still noticed.

Natun Kamalabari Sattra:

Natun Kamalabari Sattra belongs to the Purusha subsect which means that it has a direct following of Shankar-

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13 Jane Burmang, Buddhist Monk and Buddhist Laymen (Cambridge 1973), p. 36.
14 M. Mendleson, Sangha and the State in Burma
deb’s Mahapurushia Dharma. It is yet a part of the Niks Samhati as it also pays reverence to Madhavdeb’s works, the Namghosha and the Ratnavali. The original Kamalabari Sattra in Majuli, which was washed away by the floods, followed the Nika group and now the new (natun) one adheres to both sets of sectarian beliefs. This Sattra admits Shudras as religious teachers and abbots and does not formally stress on caste distinctions while not entirely rejecting it.

The Natun Kamalabari Sattra is situated in the southern part of the island. Majuli has been known for these Vaishnava monasteries which have been established there since the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, the yearly floods of the Brahmaputra river have done considerable damage whereby the island’s size has come down to seventy miles lengthwise and an average of five miles in width. Habitable land in Majuli was about five hundred square miles previously; but in 1950, due to the earthquake, erosion started and now the area has shrunk to a mere 350 square miles. Old Sattras have been washed away and new ones have been set up. One can well imagine in these Sattras the decline of the traditional architecture witnessed by the older generations.

There are two Sattras with the name Kamalabari of which one is the Natun and the other the North Kamalabari.
The Natun Kamalabari Sattra (which was established in Majuli in 1936\textsuperscript{16}) is under our study.

The Natun Kamalabari Sattra is managed through the authority of the Sattradhikar and under him come the bhakats who are appointed to look after the monastery. This Sattra has a hundred priests and their daily routine is primarily ritualistic. There is a prescribed time for congregating in the Namghar and also for monastic education which is an important feature in this Sattra. Management of the Sattra is similar to that of Auniati though there are slight variations in the type of work designated to the office bearers here. For instance there is a Bora who manages almost all the requirements necessary during the important ceremonies in the monasteries. Being of the Purusha Samhati the Sattra regards the birth/death, anniversaries (tithi) as the principal ceremonies. Hence the Bora's responsibilities are fairly heavy.

The daily maintenance of the Sattra is meted out by the several bhakats such as the Bharali, Deuri, Aldhora

\textsuperscript{16} The original Kamalabari Sattra was established by Badula Ata who was sent by Madhavdeb to preach the cult in Upper Assam. He set up a Sattra on Majuli around 1673. This Sattra came to be known as Kamalabari after Badula Ata's second name; (Kamala Kant\textsuperscript{a}). The present town of Kamalabari has shifted to the east of Upper Katni village in the last fifty years. Now the town is the life centre of administration, business and education, with Majuli as the fourth Mahukuma Parishad of the Sibsagar district.
and so on. The Bharali in this context is a storekeeper and a Keot by caste. He is designated to take care of the granary and the treasury which comprises the original texts and other valuable belongings of the Sattra. Under the Bharali comes four Deuris to whom are assigned the responsibility of distributing the 'prasada' or blessed food during ceremonies to the laity and bhakats. The term 'Deuri' refers to a 'pujari' or an idol worshipper in the Auniati Sattra. Most other monasteries refer to them as servers or distributors.

It is possible to expose the heterodox nature of caste distinction in the functionaries of this Sattra. Their work responsibilities show an inclination to assign such jobs according to their interest and ability rather than of choosing them on the basis of their caste superiority. In regard to the four Deuris mentioned above, the 'Ghai' or principal Deuri is a Keot and the other three are Kalitas. Keots fall much below the Kalita in the caste hierarchy and here a Keot is being given the assignment of a supervisor. One may well argue or ponder that

17 Granary here refers to a sort of a godown where rice and pulses are kept in huge amounts. In the context of Auniati the granary would convey the same meaning with the inclusion of an attached rice mill to the granary which produces threshed rice grains amply for the monastic residents.
the job of a deori is that of a server who is to distribute the 'prasada' to the variety of low caste groups and tribals who pay their visit to the Sattra; but this deori is specially assigned to serve any Brahmin priest or visitor too. We have the Alohal-Dhora or the person who receives visitors and pilgrims to Kamalabari. He is a Kalita and a close associate of the Sattradhikar. All visitors are escorted by him to the Sattradhikar's quarters which are situated on the northern side of the Namghar; and this hati can be distinguished from the others by the extended verandah or boha which accommodates visitors who pay respects to the Sattradhikar. Finally, the maintenance of the Namghar is done by four people of which each person does duty twice in the week.

Religious Organisation:

Since the Kamalabari Sattra follows the doctrines of both Shankar and Madhavdeb, we find that the daily rituals consist of a number of religious sittings or prasangas in the Namghar. Both doctrines of Shankardeb and Madhavdeb are the same though a major part of Madhavdeb's compositions of hymns depict Lord Krishna's childhood while Shankardeb stressed more on the equality of castes of praise to one God. These prasangas which have been a long-drawn process have now been reduced to three
major sittings in order to consume more time to monastic learning and the daily work. These three prasangs are held from 8 am. to 10 am. in the morning; 1 pm. to 2 pm. in the afternoon and from 5 pm. to 7 pm. in the evening.

There are three important features of imbibing monastic learning by the newly recruited bhakats. These bhakats are brought to the monastery either by their maternal uncles or sent by the consent of their parents in order to lead a life of discipline and knowledge.

Monastic learning can be categorised as threefold: vis. academic training in the Tol or religious school within the monastery and also in the government aided schools to which forty young boys have been admitted (in the latter). The second branch of learning is that of a Bayan or a percussionist who is given intensive training in the art of playing the mridanga and cymbals which are indespensable in the Vaishnava dance and music. The third school of learning to that of singing or the Gayan. Along with the Gavans, dances such as the Oja-Pali, Jhumura nac are taught too.\(^{18}\) The capabilities and talents

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18 There are three principal forms of dance included in the dramatic performances: the dance of the Sutradhara; the dance of Prishna or Rama and the dance of the Gopis of Vrindavan. They exhibit a number of movements of the head, hands and particularly gestures with the fingers. In Kamalabari
of the bhakats are observed in the initial months after which each person is given his respective training. It is however understood that all bhakats should be familiar with the Namghosha and the Nam-Kirtan which are normally sung out during the prasangas.

A person with talent is given special attention in terms of his training to become a Pathak (a reader, but in this context, the leader of the singing group). Such training is given in the morning hours. The majority of them have to attend discourses on the Namghosha in the late hours of the evening.

The performances of the Gayans and Bayans can be observed during the Tithis which fall during the months of August and September. These ceremonies are held for twelve days in which four Gayans participate, each leading the prasangas and dances every three days. The months of August and September attract almost all the villagers in the region of Majuli. Many of them are Muslims, Kiris, Kaibartas, Keots and Kalitas. The spectators watch the performance from the lead porch or Boha of the Namghar, whilst the participants perform inside the hall.

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SATTRA these dance forms have a peculiar form of bol or slokas which are uttered through the mouth and then played on instruments and danced out. For details see M. Neog, Sattriya Dances and Their Rhythms (Gauhati 1973).
Brahmin priest/Bhakat:

In the village Namghars the Vaishnava chants are recited in medieval Assamese just like they are chanted in the Sattras. These chants of hymns are not alien to the village folk and they can understand the content of these chants. The question of memorising these chants comes in when they have to be recited in a fixed order. Mention has been made to this particular aspect as we can relate this system of chants to that of the Brahmin priest or pujaris who do so in Sanskrit. This analysis puts forward the basic differences and distinctions between the bhakat of the village and the Brahmin in perspective of the laity around them. The question raised here will be as to which is popular/ritually necessary to the laity.

In many religions a feature of the priest is his knowledge of the religious doctrine and texts. In the Indian context the knowledge of the religious doctrines amongst the priests is understood and an accepted norm. But to grasp the knowledge of Sanskrit texts and being an authority on the language on the part of a priest is looked at with great reverence by people. So the bhakat, in order to perform his monastic role, only acquires literacy in the traditional Assamese script and language,
his relationship with the laity is that of projecting himself as a follower of the 'Sankari' cult, including its arts and that of being a monastic member to the order. The Brahmin priest on the other hand, is associated with the inherent code of rituals connected with the village. He receives recognition because of his literary expertise in the Vedic samaskaras so important in marriage rites, astronomy and the almanacs.

The education a bhakat gets develops parallelly with the nature of education a Brahmin priest would get, and this is positively distinct from each other. Literacy is crucial here of a monk chanting in traditional Assamese and hence respected; whereas the Brahmin is equally respected for his knowledge of the language different to village literacy and closest to the Vedas. Furthermore the Pujiari is normally known to be an experienced and well travelled man. His association with the Kamakhya temple or his pilgrimages to Banares would mean a qualification in the eyes of the villager. It is more the knowledge of rites than the nature of language which holds the Brahmin as an indespensable factor in rural lives. The bhakat transmits spiritual knowledge to the laity in free form while the Brahmin priest with fixed form. This fixed form is direct in the sense that the
Brahmin utters Sanskrit mantras in occasions of marriage and death rites. He observes the horoscope (that is written in Sanskrit) and applies it to people consulting him for ritual purposes.

From the rural view one would clearly notice the unconscious or rather an underliberate form of Sanskritisation taking place within the people whereby they try to identify themselves to the norms of the great tradition; (Sanskritised only on this aspect which I have rather magnified). The process of Sanskritisation within them starts on the simple claim over the Brahmin as a lay ritual expert; and an indifferent attitude to the bhakat in the context of marriages, rituals connected to soil, etc. Contradictorily, the Namghar stands out to be an indespensable place of prayer/meeting place to the village. The Namghar is closely connected to the life of each rural inhabitant, where rituals performed in the house or the fields are ultimately made known to the Namghar through their offering or 'sorai.' It is however common to many Namghars situated in more 'Assamised' villages to perform rites, even that of puberty rites (Phuliguri village, Kamrup district), where a young girl is led by her father and several village elders to the Namghar to be blessed on the attainment of her 'womanhood'. Here the importance of the Brahmin pujari is
shaded, though not totally in other village matters. Some Sattras and Auniati to be precise, keeps a pujari who is paid to perform some rituals and therefore obliged to reside within the Sattra. He is however not allowed to perform rituals anywhere else other than the Sattra. He is termed as the Bor Deuri as mentioned before. (Note that the term Deuri in Kamalabari Sattra has a different meaning).

So we have the bhakat/Brahmin pujari, Namghar rites/Vedic rites; all of which are interrelated and to the norms of village religion. A Brahmin priest's association with the village elder or Gaonbura is stronger in the matters of the Raiz or village meetings compared to that of the bhakat's in such affairs. Whatever the case, be it a village elder/priest meeting of the Raiz, the Namghar serves as the meeting ground and very often such gatherings stimulate chanting of Nam-Kirtan in the Assamese (traditional) language. During a Bhaona presentation a large gathering of people can be seen in the Namghar, who not only benefit from its entertaining and educational display but also in terms of socialising among themselves throughout the Bhaona right. In a different context, minor quarrels that may erupt between village inmates are often settled in the Namghar infront of village elders.
It can now be understood that the Brahmin priest poses as useful or indispensable to the village requirements though the bhakat does have a popular impression towards the village. Considering his birth, which is generally from a Kalita household, his sendoff from the village to the monastery, his identity of being a 'Sankari' follower and his continuous association with his relatives keeps him at a close bay to the village people. The villager identifies the bhakat as his own kind. The tie between the Vaishnava culture and the village appears strong enough for the relationships to be informal rather than of awe and fear. Secondly, historical evidences show such ties and bonhomie amongst the monastic members and the laity with the inception of the Moamaria revolutions.\(^1\) Marriage alliances amongst the kin of Vaishnava priests are arranged with the kin of such priests from other villages. The Sattradhikar of Natun Kamalabari Sattra has four sisters who are married to Sattradhikars of other monasteries of the Purusha sub-sect, situated in Majuli, Nowgong and Lakhimpur. These particular Sattra are run by particular families and the system of celibacy is absent here. Therefore villages around these Sattras do show their affiliation.

\(^1\) See details in Amalendu Guha, op.cit.
tion to Kamalabari Sattra. The entire Assam valley comprises a greater number of Sattras run by particular families and this system has perpetuated the social relationships with the rural population too.

**Economic System of Monasteries:**

Most Sattra lands were revenue-free since the Ahom times and continued to be so during the British period. The Mill report gives names of the Sattras which were revenue free under the Brahmoottar, Debottar and Dharmoottar system. Because of this monasteries have been able to survive the economic strains which they would have otherwise gone by. Field observations in the land organisation of monasteries, belonging to various sects, have exposed the different categories of land ownership and consequently the difference of social and economic relationships between the monastic members and the laity.

Firstly, there are monasteries of the Brahmin sect whose vast lands and property fall under the authority of the chief priest or Sattradhikar and formally under the name of 'Govinda' the chief idol of the Sattra. The

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entire monastic organisation is under his (Sattradhikar) control. Succession of the Sattradhikar is not through inheritance but by nomination of a person who is brought up from a young age to shoulder the monastic responsibilities. The total amount of land in the Auniati Sattra is 9,321.21 acres in the Sibsagar district, and approximately 60,000 acres all over Assam. This Sattra is a good example to show the large lay following it has because of its equally large possession of land, all over the valley. These lands are normally cultivated by peasants at Rs. 2.50 per bigha. Inferior land is rented out at Re. 1.50 per bigha.

The second category of monastic land holdings is the ownership vested in the name of the bhakats. Though the Sattradhikar has authority over the organisation and the lands gifted to his Sattra by the government or the disciples, the bhakat has his independent choice of selling or leasing out his land. Natun Kamalabari Sattra is an example mentioned earlier in this chapter.

The third category consists of monasteries run in the family ownership, with the Sattradhikar as the paternal head of the family and his sons being the functional...

ries of the Sattra. This category of monasteries largely belong to the Purusha sect and most probably the largest found in numbers compared to the other two. These Sattras have noticeably failed to remain as 'monasteries' in the real sense of the term and one does come across attempts made by such abbots to secure entire control over the monastic property and passing on the responsibilities of maintaining the 'household' through the son. These monasteries are vested in the ownership of the family; but the monastic rites, monikut property and its maintenance plus the library does have the partial hold of the disciples as they are the sole source of radiating life and functions within the Sattra. As mentioned earlier, the system of reciprocity between the laity and the Sattra members is indispensable without which the entire working of the Sattra (religious or social) would come to a halt. Nevertheless these Sattras have declined to note out any social function to the laity. Occasionally there is a feat of upsurge or revivalism in some of the Sattras during 'Tithis' and major festivals.

Lands belonging to religious institutions were revenue free and these were known as the Lakhira\* lands which was introduced by the ruling Ahoms in the late part of their rule in the nineteenth century. Since
then their right over these lands have been recognised by the successive governments.²²

**Nisf-Khiraj:**

This form of land system previously owned by the gosain (monastic head), had been given to others on a regular payment of half of the actual revenue. In this context the revenue collector is the Gosain himself or the agent he chooses to employ. Such people possessing Nisf-Khiraj land have the right to sell to others or kept the ownership for generations.

The British government established for itself the proprietary rights in all lands and "allowed their occupants only permanent, heritable and transferable rights of occupancy subject to a regular tax payment."²³ Lakhira lands were classified under three classifications: (a) Debottar: Lands granted for the maintenance of temples; (b) Brahmoottar: Personal land grants for the Brahmin; (c)...

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Dharmottar: Lands granted for religious and charitable purposes. Lakhira\(_1\) landholders were normally deemed as owners of the temple property and have appeared to be actually private 'landlords' by means of managing the property in favour of their interests. When the lease was not less than ten years, such men enjoyed a permanent, heritable right of use and company.

Parallel to the various categories of landholdings (besides the Lakhira\(_1\)), the system of hired labour which was present traditionally too, was firmly established by the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, there was the **Bandha** system of labour which referred to a loan advanced to a borrower. (Most often the peasant), who in turn tilled the owner's land and worked as a general servant. The procedure of deducting from the loan depended on the 'emoluments' the servant would get from the owner. This included the servant being fed and clothed and accordingly the deductions would be executed.

The other form of labour was known as the **Marakiya** where the service of one's plough bullocks was lent out to a needy peasant during the ploughing season. The borrower ploughed the lender's land for two days and his own for one day and in that proportion for the whole season. In a situation like this the **Marakiya** did not really benefit much from the **Bandha** as he had to work
for the season and that also in the morning hours (a traditional ploughing time), mostly in the lender's land. The remaining free time was solely his choice of working on his land or on somebody else's to earn an extra bit. It is very likely that the monastic lands were leased out according to the Narakiya labour which will be explained later in this chapter.

Thus the Brahmins, Gosains (Vaishnava head priests) and temple priests took rent in cash or kind from their tenants and at the same time owed no military or fiscal obligation to the state, despite complete exemption of tax and the acquisition of huge grants of lands in the earlier times.25

However, now the Sattras have lost a large amount of land in which the Assam Government has acquired such an amount for distribution to the landless people and also to ensure fixity of tenure. The Auniati land has been appropriated by the Government accordingly and therefore received compensation plus the retainment of about twelve thousand acres of land. An Act was passed by the State Government in 1959 whereby it gives land to

the following categories of people:26 a) To a cultivator who has been rendered homeless due to ejection by the landlord or due to floods and natural calamities. b) To a cooperative farming society formed by landless actual cultivators, and c) To landless cultivators. Normally the tenancy of the actual occupants of the Sattra and the Namghar lands are regularised. Otherwise, nine bighas of the portion of land is given to each landless family. At present, the government has fixed a ceiling for the Sattra lands which is limited to fifty bighas only.

The economic feature of Natun Kamalabari Sattra concerning the occupancy of land is vested in the bhakats as mentioned earlier.

Land was given to most Sattras by the Ahom nobility or through donations from lay disciples. Of course, the former donated land mainly to the Brahmin monasteries. The old Kamalabari Sattra owned 6,485.28 acres in the Sibsagar district. But in the case of the Natun Kamalabari Sattra, it was developed by the British Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar district in 1936. It was built

under the name of Kamala Kanta Atoi, a Sattradhikar of the old Kamalabari Sattra. In 1936, a hundred and eighty acres of land was donated in favour of a hundred and forty bhakats, i.e., approximately four bighas of land to each bhakat. In 1966, the Indian Government donated eighteen acres of land to the Sattradhikar in the district of Lakhimpur and in 1977 ninety bighas (30 acres) was donated once again by the government in the name of the Sattra in Kakojan, a place which is situated about twelve miles away from the town of Jorhat. This land has been donated particularly for the permanent transfer of the Natun Kamalabari Sattra from Majuli, in view of the floods that are posing a threat to the island.

Land in Natun Kamalabari Sattra is not given out to share-croppers on long-term lease but temporarily only. For instance, six acres of land is leased out to villagers who are not bhakats and they till the land, of which an acres yield is retained by the tillers and the rest given to the 'landlord' bhakat. Another system is that during the harvesting season, three days of yield is given to the priest while two day's goes to the farmer within the ratio of five working days in the season and more if the average ratio is increased respectively. This system does seem to have affinity with the Marakiba system of hired labour.
There is no such thing as temple services to be performed by the non-bhakats or the laity in return of the monastic land that they use. Nevertheless the bhakats who we can understand as absentee landlords, have to pay a tithe in kind during each important ceremony that is held in the Sattra throughout the year. The tithe is roughly $\frac{1}{2}$ kilograms of pulses, 5 kilograms of rice and a rupee during Shankardeb's tithi or birth/death anniversary. In devotees come to the Sattra for a visit, each bhakat owning land has to donate $\frac{1}{2}$ seer each of pulses and rice.

The social system in the Sattra is similar to that of the Buddhist monastery in Lankatilaka. The primary factor to be kept in mind is that the members of the Kamalabari Sattra are males - there is no marriage and therefore property cannot be distributed among their children. As I have mentioned already, property is privately owned by a priest and his earnings are his solely. He is allowed to buy his own clothing and other...

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28 The system of celibacy in Vaishnava monasteries in Assam came to be established after the death of Madhavdeb, who was a celibate. However, he preached that celibacy was not to be adopt by any of
personal things, but is obligated to inform or take partial permission from the Sattradhikar.

An interesting aspect of 'rooming in' of several young novices in the Sattra leads to certain factors of economic interaction between them and the bhakats. These young boys stay with their maternal uncles in particular whom they regard as their foster fathers, along with three other bhakats who share their meals together. Needless to say, the division of labour of maintaining the room is well organised where the young boy is obliged to sweep the house thrice a week while the others arrange to work out other chores like cooking, cleaning utensils, etc. The responsibility of looking after the hatis is performed independently and the Sattra's authority is not voiced here.

Two points emerge out of my observation of the economic and social aspects of Natun Kamalabari Sattra. Firstly the independence of owning land and secondly, the recruitment of young boys from the villages as novices and potential priests. Both these two aspects, to a large extent, determine the social relations between the

Cont'd... f.n. 28

his followers. Grihasrama was never to be denounced by any. In spite of this recommendation, celibacy became a customary practice in most Sattras belonging to all the sects.
Sattra and the village. Furthermore they hold informal or rather close relations with the village. I have come across bhakats who poses a good proportion of land, which brings them a fair earning. They take their agricultural produce to their village and get it sold through a second person or distribute it to their close relatives. So the bhakat, in the eyes of a village inhabitant may appear to be a bepari (trader) rather than a representative of a religious cult. However, the bhakat's religious allegiance to his Sattra is not really hampered as he is bound to his religious duties. Simmel had observed that:

"... religious behaviour does not exclusively depend on religious context, but it is generally a human form of behaviour which is realised under the stimulus of ... other motivations. Even in its autonomy, religious life contains elements that are not specifically religious but social."

Coming to the social aspect of bhakats, the means of recruiting the boys in the monastic arena is twofold. Firstly, the young recruit is invariably a nephew of the elderly bhakat who is henceforth regarded as the foster father. Secondly, he is sent probably by impoverished parents of a large family. The boys recruited in their early teens follow celibacy but they are free to leave
the Sattra if they choose to marry at a later stage or join another Sattra of the same sect, where celibacy is not practiced. The first point may have economic leanings whereby the boy, who is reared in the Sattra gets his piece of land and thereon carries on the line of profiteering through his land yields, guided by his maternal uncle. The second point gives a rather paternal image on the part of the Sattra to bring up a child into the folds of discipline and education. Needless to say, that the boy's services towards the Sattra are as important a responsibility as it is of his parents giving him away to the Sattra. 29

29 In Appendix I there are elaborate life histories of bhakats who joined Sattras at young ages. Interviews were spontaneous and no tape recorder was used. I did not use a questionnaire because the respondents were reluctant to speak much. A questionnaire would have yielded no results.