CHAPTER VI

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF THE SATRA

A. DAILY ACTIVITIES:

A Typical concrete day at the satra:

Prayers have occupied the foremost position among the list of observable duties of the satra around which all other activities are arranged. A Vaiśnava personally is to observe certain manners which include prayers and remembering the guru.

Different congregational services form the daily religious routine of satras. These services continue from early morning till early hours of night. The singing of hymns and songs, the chanting of prayers to the accompaniment of musical instruments and the reading and explaining of scriptures including the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and the Gītā constitute the chief features of the services. The whole programme is called nāma-prasāṅga, i.e., prayers and the functions connected with the prayers. Most probably the day's performances were divided into three different programmes in the early stage of the movement. These were the matins (puwār prasāṅga), the afternoon services (biyali...
prasāṅga) and the evening service (rātur prasāṅga).

In the Kathāgurucarita¹ it is stated that after the passing away of his guru, Mādhavadeva lived at Sundarīdiya and did certain organisational works. He installed the guru-āsana there, systematized the prasāṅgas into fourteen, fixing up the order in which they were to be performed. He also demarcated the lines² for the devotees assembled in the satra to sit in various rows (nāmar sārī). The tradition is still maintained by the devotees at the time of prasāṅga even today. Mathurādāśa Burhā Ātā is said to have organised the fourteen units of prasāṅga in the Barpeta satra.³ But the old way of referring to the prasāṅgas as three persisted till later times. When Mathurādāśa went to Cooch Behar to meet Mādhavadeva there, the latter wanted to know of the former if the three prasāṅgas were still duly performed in the Barpeta satra.⁴

A typical concrete day in the satra as I observed is described. This shows the daily round of activities in the

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2. The impress of the lines drawn by Mādhavadeva is still kept in the plastered floor of the prayer hall of the Sundarīdiya Satra.
satra in the course of a normal day (other activities being added on various festival days).

For my proposed visit to the satra I enquired Śrī Thānurām Ātai Burhābhakat few days ahead about the exact time of beginning of the day's activities. It was said to be 5 A.M. in the morning in the winter season. I fixed my date of visit on Sunday (10.2.91). Accordingly I prepared myself by taking bath at about 4-30 A.M. Though I should have dressed in dhūti and kurtā to visit the satra, I preferred to wear long pant and shirt with woolen garment due to cold.

The normal activities in the satra start with the beating of drum in the early morning (by the pālādhariyā). About that time old women attend to cleansing the two varandas of the Kīrtanghar (so they are called Kāthimochā). As I reached the gate of the Kīrtanghar I saw five old women coming out after completing that task.

I did not hear the sound of the drum (dabā). I approached the northern gate of the Kīrtanghar as the front door on the western side was still not opened and could hear the voice of
someone singing a Bargīta. The day's prayer services have just started. The Pāṭhaka (Śrī Gopal Ch. Pāṭhak) was singing Bargīta. I could realise that his singing, as it was fitted with a loud speaker created a devotional situation in the surrounding.

The morning prasaṅga is constituted of five units —

(1) The first unit consists of singing of two Bargītas by the Pāṭhaka in front of the Guruśāsana facing towards it. It is called jāgarana gīt because it depicts the scene of rousing Kṛṣṇa from his sleep. (2) The second unit is known as calanar gīta, i.e., songs associated with Kṛṣṇa's preparation for starting towards Vṛndāvana to tend cows.

The second unit is always associated with singing of a Bhatimā (a devotional song written in Brajāwāli language) which describes how Yasodā used to send Kṛṣṇa everyday to Vṛndāvana to tend cows. At the end of the singing of a Bargīta and a Bhatimā in the single sitting the Pāṭhaka comes out for presenting similar performance inside the matha and the two house sites of Mathurādās Burhā Ātā and Badulā Ātā. At that time I was sitting inside the Kīrtanghar. The Pāṭhaka enquired me of

5. Śrī Gopal Ch. Pāṭhak, a man from the Pāṭhak family.
my purpose of such visit. The Pālādhariyā and the Ghāideuri greeted me.

The Ghāideuri (Śrī Halirām Ātai Burhābhakat) pointed out that the prasāṅgas held inside the matha and also two Ātār bheti were not included in the fourteen units of prayer (Caṅḍhaya prasaṅga). All the services done inside the Kīrtanghar only were counted to constitute the main prayer services of the satra.

The Ghāideuri then replaced the wick of the oil burner (akṣay banti) and poured more oil. Three oil burners were lighted by the Ghāideuri in front of the guru āsana. While lighting these burners the Ghāideuri was holding a pitcher made of pure silver, full of mustard oil and a silver stand with another burner kept burning on it. Flower garlands were placed on the āsana. Then he placed the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa arranged on a wooden tray and also the Pātha (the religious book to be recited) in front of the āsana and near the place where the Pāthaka used to take his seat. Before that he wiped a portion of the floor with a little

6. The Gītā when it is to be recited.
water. The ghāideurī then lighted oil burners in each of the two Ātār bhetīs and also in the mathā. He then placed a decorated metal tray of prasāda consisting of soaked pulses, unboiled rice, ginger and cocoanaut cut into small pieces, banana, salt etc. in the store house near the oil store and another in front of the image of Kālīyā Thākūr to be offered by the Brahmin priest. Other trays offered by individual persons or families (in the form of special offering called sarāī or thāgī) were also arranged and forwarded to be offered to Kālīyā Thākūr.

It was already nearing 7 A.M. and the day's activities in the form of prayers were going to be started. The Brahmin pujārī arrived in the meantime (Śrī Munindra Nāth Bhāgavatī of Sundarīdiyā). Opening the lock of the door enclosing Kālīyā Thākūr he took his seat inside the enclosure and arranged the articles necessary for giving a ceremonial bath of the deity and begin the worship. The pālādharī in the meantime had kept ready all the materials necessary for the daily worship including flowers, leaves and water etc.
The gosāi bhārālī then took his seat near the eastern gate of the bhājghar, with the locked cash-box into which the visitors' pranāmī were put, being placed near him. He also kept another metal tray in front of him with flowers and leaves smeared with mustard oil which were offered to the visitors as nirmālī by chanting blessings by him.

In the meantime women devotees began to assemble for offering morning prayer to be held on the stipulated place on the southern vārāndā of the Kīrtanghar. One old woman brought a metal tray with a sacred book on it being wrapped with a red cotton cloth and placed it on the raised floor being wiped with water. Another tray with flowers and leaves was also placed. Then Smti Bimalā Pāthak, the initiator of the womens' prayer started to sing along with seven other women. The number of women gradually increased. Thus the prayer service of the women devotees started before the male devotees (bāpu sakal). I took a photograph as the prayers were going on. After a while the morning-prayer inside the main prayer hall began. The Burhā satrīyā attended the prayer and took his seat beside the
The morning nāma-kīrtana consists of different parts. (i) The Pāthaka taking his definite seat began recitation by calling the names of God. This part is known as nāmadākā (Names and epithets of Kṛṣṇa being repeated). (ii) Next item consists of reciting a portion of the combined section of Mādhavadeva’s Namaghośā known as Yugalapatala. (iii) One or two chapters of Saṅkaradeva’s Kīrtana-ghośā then recited followed by (iv) Nāma-Kīrtana sambarana or closing the nāma-kīrtana with repetition of God’s names in rhythm. As I observed the prasāṅga going on all the devotees joining the chorus solemnly with clapping of hands, I realised that a unique devotional situation was created. (v) Finally, this unit of prayers ended with Jayapātha or saying in chorus, glory be to Kṛṣṇa, Rāma etc.

Elderly persons generally attend prayer services in the morning. Before coming to the Kīrtanaghar they take bath in the early morning, do not wear any garment except the dhuti and a chādar (wrapper) around the bare body. In some cases

7. Nearly 40 elderly men take part in the morning prayers normally. There were 36 participants on the day of my visit.
they even do not take anything before coming to join the prayer. The devout old men take care so that their particular dresses are not contaminated by anybody at home. It is observed that the devotees coming to join the morning prasānga by holding small mats (made of ribs of dried leaves of plantain trees or made of a variety of grass) for their personal sitting arrangement during the time of prayer. While coming to the sātra the devotees (male and female) after passing through the main gate stop for a while, offer obeisance with folded hands towards the matha, and move to join the prayers.

I took a few photographs of important events including the worship of Kāliyā Thākur. As I came out of the Kirtanghar the prayer of women were already over and I saw their numbers greatly increased. At the eastern gate of the bhājghar several ladies were exchanging their views with the gosāin bharālí in support of their entry into the prayer hall when they came to know that their entry was prohibited. They offered their obeisance in kneeling positions with folded hands at the door step
and the Ghăideuri offered blessing. On enquiry I came to know that a hired bus came to the satra on the previous day from Nagaon area who stayed the night at the satra guest house. They also offered special offerings (thagi) to the satra along with mustard oil and salt. Several female visitors from the nearby area were also assembled. It is the prevailing tradition that one should visit and offer something when the prasaṅgas are in progress.

While the fourth unit of the morning prayer was going on Burhā Satrīyā Chandra Kānta Miśra read few chapters from the Bhāgavata. From the day of Māgh Domāhi the recitation of the Gītā in this unit of the morning prasaṅga is commenced till it is completed. (5) The Pāthaka then read few chapters of

8. The Ghăideuri offered blessing in the following way:

On this day Mr. so and so has come with his wife and children and offered a little cash as the cost for the oil burner and offered praṇām to this place (thān) of the guru on the occasion of his ... . Let the two gurus be satisfied with them and fulfil their wishes, grant them long life with sound health, let them be successful in all their pursuits including the study of the young ones. For all these bāpu-sakal are blessing while singing in the praise of God.

9. Mustard oil offered by visitors are preserved for future use and the salt thus accumulated are distributed among the devotees from time to time.
Kirtanghoṣā. From other religious books also one or two chapters are to be read.

Then the deuri took away the book recited. He also removed the Bhāgavata which was brought for recitation. Thus the morning session of prayer came to an end. None moved from the seat till to the ending of prayer and the devotees then started going after bowing down themselves towards the āsana.

By the same time the day's worship of the deity was also completed in the adjoining house (bhājghar). Dabā (kettle drum), borkāh (gong), saṅkha (conch shell), joyaghantā etc. were sounded to mark the end of morning session of prayer in the satra. It was 9 A.M. in the morning. After completion of day's worship the pujārī gave blessings to those who offered individual thagi and supplied the necessary things on the previous evening. The Ghaideuri also came out to the eastern gate to give prasāda and blessings to the women.

10. The religious books to be read one after another are:
A group of visitors were still there near the eastern gate. I took a photograph there when few women bowed down near the door facing west. The Burhā Satrīyā came out of the Kīrtanghar and moved towards the office of the Secretary, Managing Committee, where he talked to someone. The pujārī called me as he was preparing to leave. Coming there I first put a coin into the cash box and reverentially bowed down towards Kāliyā Thākur, he then uttered some words of blessing on me. He gave a little pad-jaal (water from the feet of the deity), nirmālī (offered flowers and leaves) and some prasāda on a piece of paper. The pujārī then locked the enclosure of Kāliyā Thākur and left. While coming out the Ghāideuri also gave me some prasāda which I packed on my handkerchief. He was distributing the prasād-nirmālī to the waiting visitors and going to complete the duties of the morning shift. It was nearing 10-30 A.M. in the morning when the Ghāideuri locked the store room and went to his residence in the Kewalīyā hāti on the northern side. There was for a time being no visitor. As I moved towards the place of the prayer of women there was the initiator of prayer along with another
lady and they were talking with few ladies who came on the hired bus. They were talking something about Bardowā Satra by way of comparing with the practices prevailing in Barpeta Satra in respect of women's participation in prayers.

Thinking of going towards the office of the Secretary, Managing Committee as I passed by the side of the eastern gate I saw a newly married couple handing over their offerings of mustard oil and salt. The Ghāideuri was called again. As I advanced towards the office the Chowkidar was coming with a bundle of grass for the pet deers.\(^{11}\) He supplies grass to the animals twice a day. Sri Dayāl Ch. Das, Mazumdār was there in the office with Sri Māmaleswar Das, a Senior member of the Managing Committee. Sri Dayāl Ch. Das informed me that he came to the office at 7-30 A.M. and would stay upto 12 Noon, he also said that in case of any necessity he stayed till late. Such a period of heavy duty may come at the advent of Deul festival when each member of the Samūha is required to pay kar before

\(^{11}\) There were six deers and two pairs of peacocks kept in separate enclosures.
the festival. Sitting by their side I wanted to know why
during all the time of prayer some devotees (numbering eight) 
with similar dress of those taking part in prayer inside were 
sitting on the northern varanda of the Kirtanghar, facing 
towards south (āsana inside) and joining the chanting together 
by clapping of hands. Šrī Kamaleswar Das said that they were 
the regular participants of the morning prayer. But due to 
some cases of impurity like child birth or death of someone in 
their lineage they were not allowed to participate in the prayer 
services inside the Kirtanghar. I was informed that there would 
be no religious observance at noon, as such I should leave along 
with them and come again before 3 P.M.

While talking with them I saw an old lady with a bag 
accompanied by a young boy taking a pair of cocoanuts in hand 
came towards the office room of the satra. The lady was from 
Cooch Behar of West Bengal, She heard about a big temple in 
Assam and she had come with a hope for visiting it. By this 
time the gosāin bharāli was also preparing to leave. He called 
the nāideuri who was preparing his food. The Ghāideuri came
and received the materials she brought with her.

It was nearly half-past twelve when the Secretary's office was closed. Then I moved towards the bank of the tank on the eastern side and saw the eastern gate of the Kirtanghar was already closed by the ghāideuri. There on the bank of the tank a few young boys were sitting on the flat stones under the sun. Staying there upto 1 P.M. ultimately I decided to leave for home to take lunch. As I walked by the southern side of the Kirtanghar I saw one man of the neighbouring area spreading rice on the cemented courtyard to dry. Thinking in mind to return in a minimum possible time I came home with my bicycle. While coming I saw most of the shops in front of the Kirtanghar were closed.

I reached the satra again just before 2 P.M. The man was sitting on the varanda along with Sri Kalicharan Atai, a resident celibate devotee who was known to me. I also took seat by his side. On enquiry about the next item of prayers he said that it was to start at about 3 P.M. While talking with me he also dwelt upon such matters as the present law and order.
situation in Assam and the comparatively less number of outside visitors to the satra. He expressed unhappiness on the situation saying that there would have been 2 or 3 hired buses of visitors daily in the satra in the month of Māgh (January-February). By this time an old lady came and wiped the altar on the vārāndā for the women's prayers and brought the tray with the sacred book on it and placed on the altar.

Leaving him back I moved towards the other side. The gosāin bharāli was sitting in his position and the ghāi-deuri just came out from the bhājghar by pouring oil to the burner, as he said. He also took seat along with two other Kewaliyās, the third one being a non-Kewalīyā relaxing under the sunshine sitting on the big flat stones by the side of the entrance to the Kewalīyā hāti. I took a photograph of them. Their topics of gossip were ranging from AGP Government, ULFA activities, President's rule and the resulting situation in Assam. I expressed my purpose of observing the religious activities in the satra to Sri Dharmeswar Ātal of Kamalābārī Satra who used to stay at the Barpeta Satra. At the moment I saw the Chowkidar
of the satra coming with a bundle of grasses with a view to feeding the pet deers. I complied with their request to sit with them. By that time the Secretary of the Managing Committee Sri Sadananda Das came to his office and took a seat in the varanda along with the Mazumdar. By this time eight devotees with mats in their hands came and sat in a line in front of the matha.

Just before 3 P.M. the Pāthaka (Sri Gopal Ch. Pāthak) dressed in dhuti and a chādar on his bare body with a mat on his hand came and after showing reverence entered the Kirtan-ghar. For the afternoon prayer the ghāideuri already kept the sacred books to be read in proper place. (6) The afternoon pātha consists of reading one section from a number of selected works to be taken one after another.¹² (7) The next item of the afternoon prayer consists of recitation of one section of 'Nama chanda'. (8) On the single sitting the Pāthaka completed the afternoon prayer by reading one chapter from the Nāmaghoṣa.

¹². The sacred books selected for reading as part of prayer services are: (1) Nāmaghoṣa, (2) Bhaktiratnavali, (3) Bhakti ratnakara, (4) Nāma-mālīka, (5) Bhakti Pradipa, (6) Janma-rahasya, (7) Bargita.
In the afternoon service there is no performance in the matha and in the Atar-bhetis of Mathuradās Burhān Ātā and Badalā Ātā. I noticed that the old men were sitting in front of the matha on the stoned courtyard as the afternoon prayer was going on inside the Kārtangāhar. While enjoying the winter sunshine they were clapping with their hands and reciting the verses to the accompaniment of cymbals. The cymbals were played by the pāthaka.

It was nearly 4-30 P.M. in the afternoon and I was still sitting there. Then I left the place and moved towards the other side of the prayer hall. Near the eastern gate of the bhājghar I noticed that the Gaideuri/receiving the materials to be offered next day in the form of thakīs from two persons.

Moving further I came to know that the women devotees who performed the afternoon prayer had already let. The pālādharīya was sweeping the floor of the Bhāgavatghar in preparation to hold the evening session of recitation of the sacred books. He then placed the holder of oil burners and a big decorated tray on a fixed place. The sacred book on a tray was then
placed. There were several other persons who were the organizers of the Bhāgavat-kholā.

From there I saw through the decorated cornices of the wall somebody lighting the burners in front of the āsana inside the Kīrtanghar. I hurriedly came over to the other side and saw that the qhāideuri unlocked the door and entered into the matha. He swept the floor of the matha and collected the coins which were thrown inside as praṇāmi. When counted it came out to be Rs. 41.15 paise only as that day's praṇāmi. He then took the silver stand on which an oil burner was burning and a silver pitcher of mustard oil to light another oil burner in front of the āsana inside. The qhāideuri lighted all the burners including those of the sites of Burhā Ātā and Badalā Ātā. It was already fifteen minutes past after five in the evening, when the pālādharīyā sounded the big drum (dabā) indicating the time for the evening prayer.

Śrī Ramani Ātai, a celibate devotee entered the matha where he performed the prayer as scheduled by reciting some verses in an indistinct voice, to the accompaniment of the
playing of a pair of small cymbals (khuti tal). He did similar performances inside the other two houses also.

By this time the reading of the religious book in the Bhagavatghar started. Listeners both males and females took their seats covering the southern varanda of the Kirtanghar also. It was a rare devotional scene, all were absorbed in rapt attention listening to the chanting of the religious book. The great epic Rāmāyana being read, the particular chapter that day was Sita haraṇa. The reciter Śri Bāsīstha Deva Sarma could make the nearly one thousand strong devout audience spell bound through his melodious loud voice and the style of chanting. There was also another gathering for the same purpose of listening to the recital of sacred books who assembled in the Śaṅkaradeva Adhyāyanāgār on the northern side. It is said that this gathering includes those persons who are non-believers of the service of the Brahmins in their ritual performances. On the belief of such practices people are divided into two factions in this satra.

Side by side with such recitations the evening prayer service also started. (9) The ninth item of daily prasaṅga
or the first item of the evening service consists of reciting one section of *Gunamālā*¹³ by the Pāthaka in front of the āsana.

(10) In the next item one section from *Lilāmālā*¹⁴ is recited.

(11) Recitation of the gūrubhatimā, performed by Ramaṇī Ātai.

The gathering at the Bhāgavatghar broke up at nearly 6-30 in the evening and the old men and women hastened towards home. On the other end the ghāideuri kept the eastern gate of the bhājghar locked as the gosāīn bharālī already left. The office of the Secretary of the Managing Committee was already closed as they were also in the habit of listening to such recitals.

(13) The next item of prayer is called Sewār kīrtana in which the gāyana-bāyana presented two bārgītas in specified rāgas to the accompaniment of kholś and tāls in front of the Guru-āsana. At the end the gāyana-bāyana came out moving back-step through the western gate.

The Pāthaka came again to perform the last two prasāngas, (rātir prasānga). (13) He recited one section each of Nāma-

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13. *Gunamālā* is an abridged Assamese version of Book X of the Bhāgavats Purāṇa by composed by Saṅkaradeva.

14. It is a section of Saṅkaradeva's *Kīrtana* which depicts the early life of Kṛśna at Gokula.
Chanda and Sarana Chanda along with the playing of cymbals.

(14) The final item of prayer is called rātir-pāth, i.e., the reading of sacred book at night. For this item one section each from the works selected for reading in the morning (fifth item) is read one after another. In this arrangement the book to be read (on the day of my visit) was Kīrtanaghoṣā from which the Pāṭhaka read the Haramohana section.

As the Pāṭhaka completed his reading the pālādhārīyā sounded the dābā indicating the end of the day's prayer service at 8 P.M. The Pāṭhaka then finally offered obeisance in a kneeling position by touching forehead on the ground. He reverentially gave few steps back and left the Kīrtanghar.

The prayer services being over, the pālādhārīyā began to cleanse the Kīrtanghar by sweeping. For this purpose he made a device. He tied a big bunch of jute strings at the end of a long bamboo stick (nearly 4 ft.). Pouring water he swept the floor by moving the wet jute strings to and fro with the help of the handle. After completion of sweeping the floor he again sounded the dābā to mark the end of the day's religious activities of the satra. I then bade farewell to him and left for home.