CHAPTER- IX

ASPECTS OF CHANGE

Changes in Physical Structures:

Changes have occurred in the structural as well as in the organisational aspects of the satra during the long course of history since its establishment nearly four centuries ago. Of the various structural changes the question of the main prayer hall (Kīrtanghar) itself comes first. It had to be restructured several times due to the ravages of fire till the present structure was raised. The present Kīrtanghar is the sixth stage of its reconstruction. Before it was roofed with iron sheets the prayer hall was a thatched house and was in the north south direction. Among other later additions of the satra the main idol (Kaliyā Thakur or Shyāmrāi) installed in a separate house called bhājghar may also be mentioned. It was presented by Koch king Raghudev Narāyaṇa (1581-1603 A.D.).

3. Neog, M. : Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaiṣṇavas, p. 8
site of Mādhavadeva was constructed much later than his passing away, during the eighteenth century. The Deul (dome shaped concrete structure) was also constructed by the devotees of Pathak hāti and the big hall attached to it (called sabhāghar) was constructed by the devotees of Āmbārī hāti. Structural additions are also found in respect of the big hall (nearly 80 ft. long) parallel to the main prayer hall and used for holding the recitation of the Bhāgavat and other holy books every evening and also for distribution of ration to the visitor guests at the time of Deul festival. This house was again renovated (1987) and another house was constructed perpendicular to the original one at an estimated cost of rupees seventy five thousand. A stage for holding dramatic performances constructed on the northern side of the Kirtanghar (1973) along the office of the satra Managing Committee is an important structural addition. A tank was dug (in 1984) on the eastern end of the satra compound at a cost

5. Pathak, G.: op.cit., p. 59
of rupees seventeen thousand blocking the Hārijān, the small rivulet which was flowing beside the Kīrtanghar. Existing sātra guest house is being extended near the southern Kewalīyā hāṭī while another guest house also has come up on the other side of the new tank with the financial assistance of the Department of Tourism, Government of Assam. A grant of Rs. 5 lakhs was sanctioned to the Barpeta Sātra by the Chief Minister of Assam for establishing a Cultural Training Centre for the preservation and study of Vaiṣṇavite tradition and culture. The Secretary of the sātra Śrī Saḍānanda Das received the cheque on 18.2.92. Construction work for the centre has already started.

Changes in organisation and Management:

Mathurādās Burhā Ātā took several persons from outside and placed at Barpeta to perform the daily religious activities of the sātra. Descendants of such persons are even now continuing the tradition. Families performing such duties are known as

6. Of these rupees seven thousand were given by the āisakal (the female devotees) from the collection at their place of worship, rupees five thousand from the collection of thiyanām (congregational prayers) and the rest from the sātra fund.
bānśaras at Barpeta. The various bānśaras are directly associated with the performance of the fourteen units of the daily prayer service (prasāṅga). Representative persons from the bānśaras are to perform the prasāṅga, according to the time-honoured tradition. But at present due to the lack of persons having due proficiency and integrity such duties are being done by hired persons in the name of the particular bānśara.\(^7\) The various such families are now lacking in cultural activities and economically also they are very much hard hit. They feel the lack of skilled artists in presenting dramatic performances in the satra in the name of the particular family.\(^8\) This is due to the growing disinterest of the new generation in acquiring the honoured Satrīyā tradition.

There was a time when all matters of the satra were settled easily, even the selection of a Satrīyā was done unanimously. One's opinion was communicated by raising of hands. But now-a-days the elections become very sharply contested. Groups or factions are formed on the consideration of caste or

\(^7\) Late Padmaram Pāthak Ātai was doing for the Pāthak family till his death in 1987.

\(^8\) As reported by Śrī Nilakānta Das of Sutrādhār family
matters relating to believing or non-believing in the Brahmanical faith. The recent elections of the **satra** Managing Committee and election of the **Satriyā** (1982) are examples in this regard.

After Mathurādās Burhā Ātā the post of **Satriyā** of Barpeta Satra was held by Govardhan Ātai, a celibate. For many years after him there was no **Satriyā** and as a result the religious activities of the **satra** were upset. Gopāl Dev Misra was then made the **Satriyā** and he was the first Brahmin **Satriyā** of the **satra**. During the tenure of several other **Satriyās** after him the religious atmosphere of the **satra** again deteriorated on matters of election to the post of **Satriyā**. Devotees from various hātīs of Barpeta placed written appeal in the court to interfere in the affairs of the **satra** and arrange for smooth conduct of the religious activities. This scheme case (Barpeta Satra Scheme Case No. 7 of 1912) took several years (1912-1939) to declare the final judgement. A


provisional committee consisting of twelve members was formed in 1920 to urgently take up the matter till a scheme of management of the satra was framed as a part of the final judgement in 1935. Under the provisions of the scheme a committee for the management of the secular affairs of the satra was elected. The first elected Managing Committee was formed in 1939. Thus a great change took place in the management of the Barpeta Satra. But the system of taking the opinion of the women voters in an open system on a different date instead of secret ballot was continuing till 1977.

Celibate devotees form an important element in the religious affairs of the satra from the earliest time. There were substantial number of such bhakats in those days at Barpeta Satra. References may show that Madhava took 180 bhakats with him to work at Patbasi for Sankaradeva's wife.11 As late as 1851, E.T. Dalton found 157 monks in the two inner hātīs of Barpeta Satra. He also noticed two other sets of cloisters in other parts of the holy town of Barpeta, one with 55 and

   Neog, M.: Sankaradeva And His Times, p. 235
the other with 26 monks. But such a substantial number has greatly reduced -and at present (1988) there are only 5 resident devotees in the two Kewaliya hātis of Barpeta Satra and one each in two other huts outside the satra precinct.

Eighty years old celibate bhakat late Dhanirām Atai Burhā-bhakat narrated (in 1985) that there were 140 bhakats in the two hātis while he joined celibacy being attracted by the life of a bhakat sixty years ago. Late Padmarām Pāthak Atai said that there were the days of plenty when the local people used to keep aside a share of the season's first harvest for the bhakats.

Control over the society:

Among other changes that have crept in it may be mentioned that the satra has lost its past hold and the character building influences on the Barpeta society. The particular means of influencing was known as Dharmadanda, the judgement offered by the religious community. It was instituted in the open space in front of the matha, the small brick temple of the satra. Paithakī samūh bhakat or the devotees attending the daily

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prayer services met in front of the matha with the Burhā Satriyā and Dekā Satriyā in their due positions. Such sittings used to hold discussions about social problems including measures for the spread of the Vaiṣṇava faith and also tried the petty social offences such as taking of alcohol and chicken, insulting the senior etc. Someone should have reported the community of devotees about committing of such an offence by some other in the locality in the traditional way of kneeling down with folded hands in front of the gathering while in sitting. Then the guilty person would be called for through the messanger (pācāngār or pācnār) of the satra. The offender thus brought to book was morally bound to divulge the truth in such a situation. Nobody could defy the judgement thus pronounced and was obeyed by all sections of people. How strictly the satra exercised its influence on the society could be inferred from the instance that one local person (dealer in illicit liquor, opium etc.) was fined rupees three hundred and excommunicated. Even persons taking tea in such a family was liable to be punished.13 It may be mentioned that

13. Śrī Sadānanda Das (78), a literary pensioner of Barpeta said that his share in the satra was cancelled for such an offence.
there was no written law of such a community of elders. There was traditional rates of fine to be imposed on the guilty persons for various offences. At present such Baithaki samūh bhakat is not found to institute Dharmadanda. Various reasons are assigned for its non-institution. People now-a-days find it easy to move the court of law seeking judgement and have lost faith in Dharmadanda. But it must be admitted that it was an unique feature of the Vaiṣṇavite institution. The satra institution having the aim of social and cultural upliftment of the people Dharmadanda could help in making them morally sound. The horizon of influence of the Baithaki samūh extended to far off places also for decision of controversial issues.

An evening scene in the satra where nearly a thousand old men and women assemble daily for the purpose of listening to the recitation of religious books is pleasing. But it is not at all encouraging to see the arrangement of such a sitting in two separate places, and it is a later development.

14. Late Balobhadra Pathak of Barādi Satra near Barpeta, informed me (1980) that he knew of one party from Suāl-kuchi (about 100 kms. north east) who came during forties of this century to Barpeta Satra for decision of a controversial issue by the Baithaki samūh.
There are certain things which are held sacred considering them to be related to the life and deeds of their religious heads at one time. Showing reverence to these sacred relics is a particular characteristic of the Vaisnavite faith. Barpeta Satra has a strong tradition of sacred relics in the form of writings of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. Such relics are exhibited from time to time for public view where from a change is noticed in their numbers probably due to the lack of proper preservation. In recent times such occasions were the 500th birth anniversary of Śaṅkaradeva organised by Barpeta Satra, Assam Sahitya Sabha held at Barpeta in 1969, the 533th birth anniversary of Śaṅkaradeva (1981). Another such exhibition of sacred relics was held in the month of February, 1987, coinciding with the Assam Sahitya Sabha Session at Pāthsālā (30 Kms east of Barpeta). Similarly certain things are regarded as sacred which are considered to be associated with the memory of various gurus of the satra. As for example in the Barbāri or Ketekibāri, a garden within Galiya hāti, it is believed, Mādhavadeva had planted a mango tree and Keteki herbs. It was
customary that people willing to have a flower from Barbārī, the Ghāideuri of the satra was to be requested ahead and he also plucked the flower in the next morning after remaining on fast at the previous night. But now people are seen to be least concerned in preserving the sacredness of Barbārī. Young boys use to play various games inside its compound. Similarly, inside the satra compound also people are seen to move and play without least regard for its sanctity.

People of older generation say that the old enthusiasm among them specially on the occasion of festivals are now decreasing. Particularly in time of Deul festival, a section of young boys feel hesitated to join the procession with Deul Govinda singing the type of songs (holīr git). According to the same version there are less number of participants now in the procession. It is only among the older section of the residents of the various hātis of Barpeta that they feel proud of saying that they used to participate in the procession held in connection with the holy festival and they were always in

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15. As reported by Śrī Sadānanda Das, Literary pensioner of Barpeta.
Data collected on 13.6.79.
the front row pushing through the crowd while they were young. There was a time when they used to join the pek jātra or bokā-bhāona on the day of Nandotsava. Wearing freshly washed white clothes. It is to be noted that due to the religious influence on their mind they did not hesitate to destroy even a fresh white cloth with mud stain. While talking about the wave of change Śrī Hari Bāyan, an expert in traditional satrīyā music noted with concern the serious disregard to the learning of satrīyā art, by the young generation. It is, according to him, a degradation to Barpeta Satra and Barpeta as a whole to note that the young boys and girls are devoid of such enthusiasm to learn the preliminaries of playing a khol or presentation of a Bargīt by maintaining the correct and traditional form and tune of Bargītas.

It was once the tradition of holding boat races in time of Kīrtan festivals on the water sheet flowing beside the Kīrtanghar or in the Marānadi, another rivulet flowing through Barpeta. It is pertinent to note here that along with the boat race competition a particular type of song was sung which was an element of culture that developed in the area that was
once much dependant on boats. Boat races now are rarely held where people take part with ordinary small boats with a limited number of competitors, the two rivulets being closed by blocking on two ends and the seat of water near the Kirtanghar being converted into a tank. Khelnāo or boats specially made for competition are fast disappearing because people now cannot afford to prepare and keep such a boat for the purpose of competition only. But once it was treated as a symbol of dignity and status to keep a khelnāo.

Entry of women into the Kirtanghar of this satra is forbidden. But when the underlying principles of the Vaiṣṇavism of Assam and the general outlook of the founders of the movement and the satra are taken into consideration this practice reveals a contrast. Saṅkaradeva was a great social reformer with an open mind who initiated to his faith men of different ethnic groups even the Muslims. He propounded the idea that even the lower creatures possess equal souls. Therefore it is possible that Saṅkaradeva or his apostle did not impose any restriction on women for religious purpose. It can be assumed that the ban on entry of women into the Kirtanghar was imposed in a later period.
reference can be found on this ban in any of the writings of the founding fathers or in any of their biographies.

No proper answer is found as to when this prohibition was imposed in the satra and for what reason. At the beginning the satra was started in a cottage made of thatch and bamboos in a secluded place. Mādhavadeva himself being a celibate, in his satra also such monks were permitted to assemble. It can be presumed that women at that time perhaps generally avoided such places of their own or for fear of public criticism. Such practice, it is probable, in the course of time became a prohibition on the entry of women into the Kīrtanghar. Of course, there is the reference to admittance of women during the time of Mathurādās Burhā Ātā. The story is that one day in the absence of Mathurādās the prayer hall of his satra caught fire when his wife collected certain important things from the ashes and the oil burner kept burning. From this single instance, it cannot be inferred the prevalence of the practice, but it shows

the generosity and help of a women in keeping the eternal lamp burning. The most commonly prevalent argument for not allowing admittance to women in the Kīrtanghar is for fear of sudden menstrual occurrence which may pollute the religious atmosphere. That is why immature girls are allowed to enter. Only on the day of initiation women are allowed to a definite place (near the first pair of pillars). But here the fact remains that women themselves are very much careful regarding their bodily purity when going to a place of worship.

During the pre-independence days the question of not allowing entry of women attracted least attention of general public. There was still another practice of not allowing scheduled caste people into the Kīrtanghar. With the initiative of the Barpeta District Congress Committee such ban was lifted on 2nd October, 1947, allowing entry to all Hindus\(^{17}\) during the tenure of late Chandra Kānta Dev Mishra as Burhā Satriyā. After this success the same organisation also took initiative for lifting the ban on women but could not acquire due response.

In this regard the first attempt from the women's side came

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\(^{17}\) Letter of Śrī Bholā Das in the Assam Tribune, an English daily, dated 12.1.76.
in 1948, through women's organisation under the leadership of late Ṣāradābālā Das. But this attempt also could not draw due response even from the women devotees of the satra instead she was deprived of getting a share of prasāda. In 1975, the international year of women, in the annual meeting of the women's organisation of Barpeta a resolution was adopted to this effect and a copy sent to the satra authority. In the second annual meeting of the All Assam Women Writers' Convention held at Mangaldai (125 Kms east of Barpeta) on 10.10.76 a similar resolution was adopted to this effect. On this perspective, a meeting was held in the satra campus on 5.11.76 under the Presidency of late Chandra Kānta Dev Mishra, in which nearly five thousand women devotees attended and resolved to maintain the traditional practice. They were determined not to enter and never to allow others to enter. Very recently on 1 to 3 January, 1988, the 8th annual sitting of the Women Writers' Convention was held at Barpeta in which nearly 200 delegates from various parts of Assam participated.

On 4.1.88 a team of 12 delegates under the leadership of Smti Sheela Barthakur visited the satra, placed a memorandum to the Burha Satrīyā demanding lifting of the ban on entry of women into the prayer hall. They also attempted to enter through the eastern door whereby a scuffle ensued. Anticipating such a situation the women devotees of the satra were picketing at the gate of the satra for all the days of the convention. It is to be recorded that female devotees only are putting stiff opposition in this regard, the menfolk not raising any voice, whatsoever. In the following two months various arguments and protests were published in different news papers the main contention of which was that the satra being run under the democratic principles there should be equal provisions for male and female alike. Women have got equal voting rights in the satra election but the plate bearing 'No admittance for female' is a sheer violation of the democratic principles conferred by the constitution of India.
Changes due to modernity:

Changes in ecology have taken place everywhere. There were numerous rivulets flowing within the Municipal area of present Barpeta. At that time almost every family, at least those who could afford, used to keep country boats as their only means of transportation in the locality. There are references that even the founding fathers of the faith also came to Barpeta by boats. Staying at Barpeta and other neighbouring satras they made occasional visits to other distant places through water routes only. In the Katha Guru Carita we get innumerable place names and references to the religious leaders and their disciples going to such places by boats. Visitors to the satra also came by boats. Such condition continued till first half of the twentieth century. But at present those rivulets of Barpeta are gradually filled up and converted to roads, some of them also pitched roads. Similarly along with modern developments communications of Barpeta and other important places of N.E. India and also with various interior places have been established with motorable roads. Visitors to Barpeta Satra come now-a-days with hired buses.
Local people including my senior colleagues say that their classmates in school and college nearly 50 years ago used to wear dhuti as their lower garment with bare foot. Very limited female classmates in the college, as they say, used no other than mekhelā and chādar and never used any foot wear. But with the influence of modernity and change in the pattern of culture dress habits have changed and people now-a-days go to the Kirtanghar with long pant and shirt also.

It seems that the attitude towards the satra, specially of the younger generation, is gradually changing due to the impact of modernity. At least a section of them bear least regard to the satra as a religious institution, instead they find pleasure in joining the gatherings there during the festivals. Such section of new generation do not feel obliged to follow the traditional practices such as observing fasts on certain occasions and do not hesitate to violate those practices.

Various indigenous crafts developed in Barpeta due to favourable ecological conditions and also for economic
conveniences. But at present such small industries are running only in skeletal forms due to various reasons. Products of these industries could not compete with the finished products of modern industries. Moreover these small industries are suffering from the problem of the supply of raw materials.