A. Spiritual function:

The satra is a living institution to the Hindu population of Barpeta. They look upon the satra as the Dvitiya Vaikuntha. To them the āsana inside the Kirtanghar is a form of Vaikuntha, the various entrances to the Kirtanghar are the manifestations of the places of pilgrimage. Various spots within the satra compound are believed to bear special powers and visit to such places are considered to get certain desired things in life. The Matha, the one time residence of Madhavadeva, bears the potency of granting anything desired. Devout old men say that a visit to Badalā Ātā's Bheti (residential site of Badalā Ātā)\(^1\) with due reverence, can give eye sight to a blind man and a male child to a parent if so desires. Devout visitors pay obeisance to the deity and reverentially bow down in a kneeling position with their heads and folded hands upto the elbows touching the ground. They also put coins in the name of the deity into the cash boxes.

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1. Badalā Ātā was an apostle of Mādhavadeva and the founder of the Kamalābārī Satra of Mājuli in Jorhat district of Assam.
kept for the purpose under lock and key.

There is a definite tradition of dress for visiting the satra. It is expected that the people coming to pay a holy visit should come in their national dress. Anybody passing through the road in front of the main gate of the satra, stop for a while, bow down the head towards the Kirtanghar in reverence with folded hands.

Influences of the satra that bear upon the life of an individual of any particular háti of Barpeta can be noticed through some activities which may give clear impression of the socio-religious life of the people. At the beginning of the life-cycle after child birth the parents take the new born baby together with them to the Kirtanghar after the monthly purificatory rites. The baby is also laid down in front of the sacred altar or in front of the idol of Kṛṣṇa (Kalīvā Thākūr) and thus blessing is sought in the form of Padadhūla or bhakatar dhūlā (dust from the feet of the devotees are held sacred by the Vaisnavites).

2. Traditional Assamese dress for male and female.

3. A signboard at the approach to this area forbids anybody riding on bicycle, motor vehicle, horses, elephant etc. on this part of the road.

4. Dust from the feet of the devotees are held sacred by the Vaisnavites.
devotees) and which are given on the head of the new born from near the foot-step of the Kirtanghar. Such visits to the satra by the parents after child birth are undertaken with two aims in view, as if that visit completes the monthly purificatory rite and earns blessing for the new born and the parents. Those who do not perform the marriage rites in accordance with the Brahmanical system collect garlands and floral parts from the Kirtanghar, place them on the temporary altar together with the sacred book (thāpanā) arranged in the courtyard and hold nāmakīrtana in front of it on the day of marriage. On the occasion of marriage, a groom party irrespective of any allegiance to Brahminic or non-Brahminic practices on way to the bride's house visits the Kirtanghar to pay obeisance to the supreme deity and get blessing on the moment of proceeding to a new life. It has been the prevailing practice at Barpetā that the bride coming to the groom's house after taking bath next morning should visit the Kirtanghar. The newly-weds are to take blessings of the bhakats at the moment of their new married life. As a part
of the purificatory rite at the death of somebody in a family a visit to the satra is customary. All these holy visits at different occasions in the life-cycle of an individual manifest the way of their social life. On such events the visitors take mustard oil, salt, incense sticks etc. for offering.

It becomes a regular feature of daily life of the old men to attend the morning prayer services at the satra. The evening service at the satra compound held in a separate house (for the recitation of the sacred books) attracts nearly a thousand devotees gathering both men and women. Most of them have retired from household life and they find spiritual satisfaction at least for a short period (one hour) in a day.

For any eventful moment in life of the people of Barpeta the satra is regarded as the source of spiritual power. Anybody going to join a new job, starting a new business establishment, putting a new motor vehicle into service a visit to the

5. Nearly 40 bhakats attend daily prayer service in the morning.

6. Reciting and expounding of the sacred books are completed one after another. Sri Basistha Dev Sarma is the choiced person for this recitation due to his loud voice as he can cover the gathering without using any loud-speaker. This recitation is not included in the daily prayer service.
satra and offer something is considered indispensable. For achieving certain desired thing in life it is the general tendency in Barpeta to take a vow to offer a definite quantity of mustard oil to the satra in the name of the prevailing deity (Kaliyā Thākur). Such offering may also be in the form of a Thāgi or Sarāil consisting of a definite quantity of pulses, salt, mustard oil, any fruit: in the season such as banana, papay, apple etc. The things of the Thāgi or Sarāil are given in the previous day afternoon to be made ready for offering by the ghāideuri with the help of the pālādharīyā. Such offerings are made in the morning while the morning prayer is held and the worship of the deity performed. The person concerned should attend the morning service to get a share of his offered things (prasāda) and blessings from the priest.

7. Śrī Arabinda Dās, along with their members of family while going to put his new diesel truck into service (1986) dressed in freshly washed cloths after morning bath. The vehicle was taken near the steps of the main gate facing the Kīrtanghar. As a special offering mustard oil was given in a pitcher containing nearly 1 litre, salt in a bigger vessel containing nearly 2 Kgs., incense sticks etc. Offered floral parts were placed on the engine of the vehicle.

8. There is no fixed rate of such offerings. One can offer a large amount, in that case the offered things being distributed among the attending devotees of the morning prayer.
Persons having allegiance to the satra, falling ill, take a vow to visit the satra and make offering after recovery and also to sweep a portion of the floor of the Kirtanghar one day in the early morning. It is believed that he will be completely recovered and will be protected from any further illness if he sweeps the floor of the Kirtanghar. ⁹

Offering of golden flower is another prevalent form of special offering in this satra. People make promise to offer golden flower to Kaliyā Thākur if they get any aspired thing. In some cases flowers are offered in anticipation of getting such benefits. Those who cannot afford golden flower they also offer silver made flowers. Flowers offered in the name of the deity are to be deposited to the satra-majumdār and a receipt to be collected to avoid possible misappropriation. For such offering an auspicious day is sought to get proper benefit. In most cases Deul festival is regarded as the right occasion

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⁹. Śrī Biren Barman of Nalbāri (50 Kms east) was suffering from a protracted illness. He took a vow to wash the floor of the Kirtanghar if he got cured. Ultimately he got relieved of the suffering and did the work accordingly.
for such offering.  

Making donations to the satra is another way of aspiring for gaining spiritual favour. With this aim in view various well-to-do persons go to donate in the forms of certain things which are used in the celebration of festivals in the satra. Construction works are done in the satra compound and certain accessories are also donated by devout persons for the same purpose.

The satra is held in a definite position in the socio-religious life and the people of Barpeta have got a tendency to pay occasional visits. For a visit to the satra an auspicious day is calculated. "Of the two heavenly bodies (the Sun and the Moon) that apparently moves round the earth, the

10. During the Deul festival (1985) altogether 84 golden flowers were offered. Silver flowers were not counted and simply put in a bamboo basket. The purposes of such offerings were varied. Some of these were to get jobs, for doing good results in final examinations or well-being of one's son. These offerings are one time in some cases and annual in others.

11. An additional florescent light was donated by Bhupen Kakati and was fitted on the way through which the old men and women go to attend the recitation of the Bhagavata every evening. The amplifier system which is used in the matins was also donated a few years back.
Moon, because of its many changes in form, has everywhere afforded convenient periods for timing the religious observances. In the Hindu calendar all the fifteen phases of the Moon, lunar days or tithis are distinguished as occasions for particular ceremonies. Every tithi has its special association and appropriateness for particular observances ....". 12

For the Vaisnavite people of Barpeta the tithi of ekadasi, the eleventh day of every lunar fortnight and the days of transition from one month to another, the sahkranti days have been held sacred. Three of them (sahkranti) are specially so when prayer services are arranged. On such occasions women devotees at the satra generally outnumber the males. On the sahkranti of Magh and Kartik, which are believed to bear special significance and visit to sacred places on those days bring spiritual benefit, nearly five hundred devotees flock at the door step near the eastern gate of the Kirtanghar to offer their obeisance in the morning when the prayer services are in progress in side the satra.

The people of Barpeta also show as much reverence to the seat of the satra, as the Mohammedans to Mecca, though their great saints and founders of the faith, Śaṅkaradeva or Mādhavadeva neither died nor were born there. Many people, though they have shifted to some other places for business purposes or holding Government jobs outside, have their permanent residence here and never move out from the sacred place of Barpeta. To them death at the sacred soil of Barpeta is the ultimate desire which according to them, gives complete liberation from the Samsāra, i.e., cycle of re-birth.

Social functions of the satra:

Vaiṣṇavite satras of Assam are the social facts and cultural realities. Assamese society cannot be represented without referring to the satra institutions. Being intricately related with the Assamese society and culture the satras also perform certain social functions.

Most of the performing art forms of India including Assam are evolved out of a religious urge. The satra has been working as a context of various art forms such as bhāona, thiyanām,
ojāpāli, ghosā-kīrtana etc. Secondly, performing art forms can validate culture. The social context of these art forms cannot be ignored as the performing arts certainly emerged out of men and society. These art forms present various myths in different forms and try to safeguard and enforce morality and tells the practical rules for the guidance of man. The texts of these myths, no doubt, are extremely important but it is also correct that without the context the texts remain lifeless. The interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is told. The whole nature of performance, the voice, the stimulus, the response of the audience are to be taken into account. The performance again has to be placed in its proper time setting, the hour of the day and the season. The Bhāonās and the dramatic shows with mythological themes that are enacted in the satra compound depict stories showing the success of goodness over the evil. In the other art forms such as ojāpāli and ghosā-kīrtana the names of God are sung in chorus.

13. Alan Dundes: Essays in Folkloristics, p. 28
To spread education to the non-literate rural population was also an aim of the Bhakti Movement of Śaṅkaradeva. Satra institutions located at different places also served as centres of learning and played an important role in imparting informal education. The village folk do not know how to read and write but they are very often well versed in various episodes of the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata as well as the Purāṇas. The Kathā Guru Carita states that Gopāl Ātā taught the entire Assamese version of the Book X of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa to one Laksmana Ojā without the help of even a slate and pencil.15 We may refer to another instance where an old couple arranged among themselves that the wife would manage the household duties and the husband daily attend the Nāma-kīrtana party held by his disciples during the day and would in the evening recite the verses learnt during the Kīrtana to his wife.16

The educative role of the Barpeta Satra may also be seen in its day to day activities. Other than the daily prayer

16. Ibid, p. 332
services there is arrangement for reading and explanation of various religious books in a separate house (Bhāgavat-ghar) every evening. Nearly a thousand old men and women attend such evening sitting. Such reading and explanation impart moral knowledge to the masses.

The rural folk are mostly busy with different affairs such as domestic, agricultural and such other works related to their day-to-day life. Above all, they have to struggle continuously for their subsistence. Like the urban elite the non-elite rural folk did not have scope for recreation or amusement like the movie or television or regular theatrical performances.

The satras and nāmghars besides being religious institutions also served as centres of recreation and amusement. Śaṅkaradeva introduced Bhāonā performance as it can serve as the medium of religious propaganda but also came to be a source of pleasure, and recreation. Unable to read and write the rural folk both men and women as well as children use to enjoy the performance forgetting all the woe and suffering of the poverty stricken life. The stories, riddles, proverbs etc.
unfolded by ojāpāli, Bhāonā etc. are endless source of joy and amusement to the unsophisticated rural folk.

There are references that Mādhavadeva successfully staged Rāmājātra, Nṛsimhajātra Bhāonā performances in this satra. Such Bhāonā performances have been continuing in most of the satras where these are held in all ceremonial occasions. It has become a traditional feature to stage Bhāonā in the contexts of Māgh Bihu, Bahāg Bihu, Kīrtan and Deul festivals at Barpeta Satra.

The performing art forms of the satra seem to be highly effective in exercising social control among the rural folk. These art forms and the reading of the religious texts in the satra try to teach the people what is right and what is wrong and thus they control the social behaviour. Episodes sung and presented by these performing art forms and the texts of various religious books described the consequences of sinful acts done by the demons and giants. Such episodes and stories exercise far reaching impact upon the non-elite rural folk so much so that they fear to act sinful deeds in their personal as well as social lives.

The performing art forms of the satra comprising ojāpālī, Bhāonā etc. are important and powerful propaganda media to direct the attention of the people towards a particular programme. Even in the days of Śaṅkaradeva the help of ojāpālī art form was taken to preach his new doctrine among the illiterate rural folk. The art form propagates the utility of religious rites of the Assamese people. Outside the satra also these art forms can be applied for national development and national integration. To give a developmental orientation to administration, administrators are to work among the rural folk. These art forms are important passport to go to work with the masses and thus national development projects can be popularised and initiative can be established to achieve success.

The satra with the performances of these art forms contribute immensely in enreaching the social cohesion and social integration. The two epics and the Purānas have been serving

as instruments for national cohesion. By way of their performances in the form of Bhāona, ojapāli, dramatic shows and reading and expounding the texts in the satra they try to bring unification among the people.

Barpeta Satra also took part in national integration. During the time of national distress due to Chinese aggression in 1962 the satra donated 1 Kg. of gold from the satra treasury for the defence of the country.

From time to time devotees of Barpeta Satra including the āi-sakal expressed solidarity with the general people. They joined in various protest rallies and processions during the time of Assam Movement for the deportation of illegal foreign nationals.

Satra as an agency of social control:

The organisation of Barpeta Satra tries to attract the people towards every aspect of the satra affairs. One such affair is maintaining of social justice amongst all. The Samūha bhakat of the satra is concerned in preserving social
norms among the people of Barpetā. It is such an organisation through which Barpetā Satra could ensure justice in case of any social offence. To know about such activities of the Samūha in the past I approached several old personalities in and around Barpetā. Sri Sadānanda Das, an old litterateur of Barpetā while remembering his past experiences narrated that their bhāg in the satra was discontinued because he was guilty to the satra as he once took tea in one family which was boycotted by the Samūha. The person concerned was reported to have indulged in trade of liquor, opium etc. He had to pay the imposed dar to the satra in order to revive his own lost bhāg. Late Balobhadra Pāthak of Bārādi Satra near Barpetā informed me another case of imposition of fine amounting to Rs. 300.00 by the Samūha on one late Keshab Ch. Das of Na-hātī for certain offence. From such instances it can be inferred that the Samūha bhakat of Barpetā Satra once had a character building influence on the society and the horizon of its

influence was extended to other far off places also.

The method of institution of the trial of any offence by the **Samūha bhakat** used to sit in front of the **matha** after the **prasāṅga** in the morning and afternoon. Someone should have reported the **Baithakī Samūha** about committing of such an offence. The traditional mode of reporting is with the knees touching the ground and with folded hands. The guilty person would then be called in through the messenger (**pācnār** or **pācanṛār**) of the **satra**. As the accused person presents himself in front of such a holy gathering of elderly **bhakats** with the **Satrīyā** and the **Deka Satrīyā** in their respective seats, he could not but confess his guilt. The judgement thus pronounced was obeyed by all sections of people. Participants of such a sitting say that there was no written law of such a community of elders. There were traditionally specified rates of fine to be imposed on the guilty persons for different cases. Such offences, viz., drinking of liquor, taking of chicken or breach of the code of performance of daily **nāma-kīrtana** were brought into the trial by the **Samūha bhakat**.
At present such an institution of dharmadanda (punishment given by religious brotherhood) is not found in practice for various reasons.

Another comparatively recent case of bringing to book by the Samūha was reported by late Umā Kānta Das of Vṛndāvan hātī. In this case the accused person was the then Dekā Satriyā of Barpeta Satra, late Dharmeswar Mahanta. The story of the case, as narrated, was that one day while the Dekā Satriyā and the Burhā Satriyā were sitting on their own stipulated seats inside the Kīrtanghar, difference of opinion arose between them and both of them engaged in heated exchange of views. They got enraged very much and by way of argument the Dekā Satriyā dwelt a blow on the decorated tray (Sarāi) in front of him and as a result the tray got a little bend. At such an act of the Dekā Satriyā the Samūha bhakat felt insulted because the Sarāis placed in front of the Satriyās were presented by the Samūha as a mark of respect to them.

21. Informant: Late Umā Kānta Das,
Data collected on 17.3.76
A case was instituted against the Dekā Satriyā. He was summoned before the Baithaki Samūha by sending a messenger. After prolonged deliberations the Dekā Satriyā was suspended for fifteen days. Late Umā Kānta Das himself was present in the meeting of the Samūha and it was he who pinpointed such an action against the Dekā Satriyā and supported by all by clapping of hands. It was a taboo to talk vehemently or raise hands in front of the Samūha while in sitting. It was believed that by such an act the Dekā Satriyā committed a crime against the religious brotherhood and as a result he fell ill, ultimately he succumbed to his illness.

From the aforesaid discussion it would not be illogical if we say that Barpetā Satra, as a whole has been functioning as an agency of social functions amongst the people of Barpetā.