CHAPTER XI

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the preceding chapters a short historical aspects of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement in Assam, growth of satra institution in general, establishment of Barpeta Satra and its inter-relation with the society have been traced. During the later part of the fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century the wave of Vaiṣṇava renaissance also touched the north eastern state of Assam under the leadership of Śaṅkaradeva (1448-1568 A.D.), the guiding personality. He was not only the initiator of the new faith called Ekāśarana nāmadharma but also a great social reformer. Holding of general religious discourses was the mode of spreading the faith among the non-elite village people. As a means of propagating his new faith he established a number of religious institutions known as satras and nāmghars. In their functioning it has been proved that besides being primarily religious institutions, the satras acted as aids in the task of social reform and as repositories of Vaiṣṇavite tradition and culture.
In the fifteenth century Assam there were people of diverse religious faiths, chief among them were the followers of Śaiva and Śākta cults. As against these diverse religious formalities the primary importance in the Vaiṣṇava order was laid on faith and devotion. On the eve of the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement Assam was divided into a number of political units which were under the control of some ethnic groups such as the Ahoms, Chutias, Kacharis etc. Thus the background of neo-Vaiṣṇava movement was characterised by infra-group conflict, political instability, cultural heterogeneity and tendency for dominance.

In the initial stage of the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement by satra it was meant a religious sitting, sometimes in the open field, or an association to hold religious discussions rather than a systematic institution. In the course of time this infant institution began to develop on a distinct line and ultimately emerged as a well developed institution having structural features and characteristics of its own. The importance of the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam does not lie in its religious aspect alone. It also contributed much to the social unity and
reform, and cultural development of the Assamese people. It gave a rich literature, introduced a new type of music, dance and drama and contributed in diverse other spheres.

Barpeta Satra, the venue of this research study is located within the Municipal boundary of Barpeta. It has been the centre of communication and business of the surrounding area before Barpeta was made the sub-divisional headquarters and subsequently the district headquarters.

Mādhavadeva, the able disciple of Sāṅkaradeva established Barpeta Satra in the later part of the sixteenth century. Mathurādās Burhā Ātā, the first satriyā, nominated by Mādhavadeva gave Barpeta Satra a definite shape in its structural as well as in organisational matters. Burhā Ātā also arranged the residences of the people into different paths or lanes called hātis. Services of the people of different hātis are drawn towards the satra for daily religious activities as well as in the time of festivals.

After the death of Mathurādās Burhā Ātā some sort of irregularities took place in matters of management of the
Court case was instituted in order to determine the validity of appointment of the satriya and to bring an end to such irregularities. A definite change in the pattern of management of the satra came in after the judgement of the scheme case during pre-independence days. A scheme of Management for the satra was accepted. According to the provisions of the scheme a Managing Committee elected by democratic principles look after the secular affairs of the satra. Involvement of the people of Barpeta in the satra affairs can be seen from the analysis of the election cases.

While studying the social organisation of the satra the articulation and functioning of different groups of people of Barpeta becomes evident. The celibates are a class of people having a distinct devotional life style and close relation with the satra, live within the satra boundary. In the changed circumstances now-a-days the number of persons leading such a devotional life is diminishing. The traditional functionaries are maintaining their relations with the satra since the days of Mathurādās Burhā Ātā and performing their duties even to day. There is the still wider group of the community of devotees (Samūha) who maintain an overall
supervision on all matters of the satra. These are the different social segments of the satra.

Vaisnavite satras being the primarily religious institutions prayers have occupied the foremost position among the list of observable duties around which all other activities are arranged. Fourteen different units of prayer services constitute the complete round of activities of the satra in a day. The satra being an unique example of co-operative system participation of the society in the prayer services is arranged. Various religious festivals are also held within the satra in which the local Hindu population take part. Cohesive influence of the satra on the society is evident in these festivals.

The satra also performs certain functions. Its social function includes in keeping the society clean and disciplined. Through the staging of certain Bhāonās and dances the glory of goodness over the evil is shown and encourage the people to follow the right path. The satra also has its spiritual aspects and is a living institution for the people. As socio-religious institutions the satras acted as agency of social
control. Barpeta Satra exerted its character building influence on the local people and its pervue extended to other places also.

Saṅkaradeva as a great social reformer established the satras within the human habitation, those were made the part of their social life. Barpeta Satra established by his able disciple is located within the habitational units -- the hātis. These hātis, shaped by Mathurādāś Burhā Ātā have got their own social organisations. In the economic sphere also the hātis have developed sound organisations aimed to benefit the local inhabitants. Services of the hātis are drawn towards the satra. The satra being the place for their religious activities, some kind of inter-community relations at Barpeta in religious sphere are seen, on the other hand such relations in social and economic context in their day to-day life are also noticeable.

Ecology of the place helped Barpeta to grow as a centre of trade and commerce in the whole area comprising the modern district of Barpeta. A few traditional crafts are also found
in Barpeta maintaining a definite link with the satra complex. Various audio-visual art forms also emerged centering round the satra circle.

As in all other fields various changes have taken place in Barpeta Satra during the long course of its existence. Such changes are noticeable in structure, organisation, management and so forth. Though the satra is maintaining its traditional character in religious activities very important change in the management of the satra came as a result of the judgement of the scheme case during pre-independence period. To cite few such changes the past hold or the character building influence of the satra on the society is not so strong as it was in the past. Participants in the traditional functions of the satra say that there is some disregard among the young generation due to the impact of modernity for the cultivation of such traditions. As a result there is lack of skilled artists in various art forms of the satra. The once famous crafts are suffering for want of raw materials and somehow continuing in skeletal forms.
Continuous close observation shows that bad effects of election is apparent in respect of the satra complex. Originally there was no election in selecting *Deka Satriyā* and *Burhā Satriyā*. But due to the impact of political elections the satra elections are also politicised. This tendency has lessened the religious impact of the satra to some extent. Even the incident like stealing the images of *Kāliyā Thākur* and *Deul govinda* do not indicate a healthy atmosphere. The principal aim of establishing the satras by Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and Dāmodaradeva was to strengthen the unity among the diverse ethnic people of Assam by eradicating the caste distinctions and recognising the equality of all beings. But now the differences on the basis of such feelings as Brahmanic and non-Brahminic are evident in the satra arena. This is perhaps not a good sign for the proper functioning of the satra. Moreover several adverse comments have been heard in some quarters about the greed of some members of the committee who take charge of any construction or renovation works in the satra. But in the long run Barpeta Satra has been found functioning as an instrument of social,
cultural and religious cohesion among all the people of Barpeta as well as Assam.

The study reveals that the religious control over a community declines with economic and technological development. The religious organisation itself tends to decline as a result of urbanisation, modernisation and commercialisation. Even then the symbolic value of a religious organisation persists though it may itself disintegrate in the course of time.