CHAPTER- I
INTRODUCTION

Anthropology is a comparative newcomer to the study of contemporary complex societies and civilizations. As the scope of anthropology has been extended to the study of peasant societies and cultures, the need for revising the traditional methodological tools was realised. Such an extension of the field emerged with the study of village India by American anthropologists. Redfield's concept of civilization as a complex structure of Great and Little Traditions and his collaborator Milton Singer's definition of cultural centre, cultural specialist, cultural performance etc. and McKim Marriot's concept network and centres in integration of Indian civilization offered useful guidelines.

Religious beliefs and practices constitute the universal features of human society. Naturally, it has been one of the fascinating areas of human enquiry giving rise to different types of knowledge crystalized as theology, philosophy of religion, comparative religion, sociology of religion etc.

1. Vidyarthi, L.P. : The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gaya, p.xv
2. Vidyarthi, L.P.; Jha, M.; and Saraswati, B.N. : The Sacred Complex of Kashi, p. 11
Such religious fields have also attracted the attention of social anthropologists.

An important function of religion is to bring about integration in society through the establishment of certain norms. Religion institutionalises the social norms and persuades the members of a society to accept these norms. In this way, religion strengthens social relations between individuals. The members belonging to a religious faith have a sense of security because they form a relatively stable social group.3

According to Radcliffe-Brown "Any religion is an important or even essential part of the social machinery ... part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations. From this point of view we deal not with the origins but with the social functions of religion, i.e., the contribution that they make to the formation and maintenance of a social order."4

A wave of renaissance in the fields of religion and society swept over Assam during fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Saṅkaradeva (1449-1569 A.D.) was the initiator of this movement known as the neo-Vaishnavite movement or Bhakti movement. The religion he preached was simple in form and in performance. Singing God’s name in congregation or individually is the main characteristic of the new faith propounded by the great saint poet. Saṅkaradeva translated most of the scriptures connected with the new faith from original Sanskrit to Assamese so that these could be used by even the illiterate devotees. He also organised religious discourses which were occasionally held in open spaces in the shades of trees. The doctrine propounded by Saṅkaradeva proved to be a great unifying force in the plains of Assam. Over and above the caste Hindus, people of other ethnic groups were also brought within the fold of neo-Vaishnavism which could play important role in the process of cohesion and integration among the diverse groups of Assam. Thus he could bring the various ethnic groups to the national main stream in the context of Indian society and culture. The
methods adopted by the saint for communicating the messages among the masses have not lost their relevance even today.

Sāṅkaradeva established two types of religious institutions – nāmghar and satra. The term satra did not convey the sense of systematic institution which developed after the death of Sāṅkaradeva. The former is a village level institution while the latter is a more central institution. Nāmghar and satras also acted as agencies of social control and in the course of time these institutions have grown into cultural centres. In fact, the satras in contemporary times have given a distinctive flavour to Assamese culture which will be evident in the subsequent pages.

Biographers of Sāṅkaradeva referred to such a temple in the early stage as devagṛha and satragṛha in the sense of a house where he could sit together with other people, discuss religious matters and hold prayers. The establishment of satra, each having a body of followers, together with the emergence of distinct residential communities centering round

5. Ramacaran: Gurucarita, V. 2153
Sarma, S.N.: Neo-Vaisnavite Movement And The Satra Institution of Assam, p. 104
Neog, M.: Sāṅkaradeva And His Times, p. 106
them have been a characteristic feature of neo-Vaisnavite movement started in Assam by Śaṅkaradeva in the fifteenth century and shaped by his disciples later on. Vaisnavism as a distinct religious movement found its full expression in Assam through such central institutions as the satras. Among the various means to spread and consolidate Vaisnava faith, the founding fathers resorted to the satra institution. The institution has been connected with the formation of modern Assamese Hindu society. The satra served as a focal point in the formation and development of the regional society. It helped in bringing about unity among dispersed segments in the Assamese society. Vaisnavism offered a common fold to the people of the Brahmaputra Valley.

The locale of the present study is such a religious centre which is well known as Barpeta Satra, situated at a distance of about 100 Kms to the south-west of Guwahati city. Barpeta is the headquarters town of the former sub-division of Barpeta and now (from 1.7.83) of the district of the same name.

Barpeta Satra was established by Mādhavadeva, the chief apostle of Śaṅkaradeva in the later part of the sixteenth
century. It is one of the few satras holding an exalted position among nearly five hundred such institutions in Assam. It is said that Sāṅkaradeva, while travelling by boat westward from his abode in upper Assam first set his foot at Barpeta. From Barpeta he moved to the nearby village of Patbāusī where he established a satra in 1546 A.D. This became his seat for a little over 18 years. At that time Pāṭbāusī emerged as a glorious seat of learning where religious preachers like Dāmodaradeva, Harideva and scholars like Baikunţha Nātha Bhāgavat Bhattācāryya, Rāma Rāma guru assem-bled. Like Patbāusī there are a few other satras around Barpeta. But none of these acquired the exalted position like Barpeta Satra in the subsequent periods.

The Barpeta Satra is situated in a place which is also a well known centre of communication and business. The satra is well planned, probably there was wide publicity about its importance and as a result a greater number of devotees visited the satra and thereby the satra earned a considerable income. The Kṛtanghar of the satra was also known for its magnificent construction.
Satras were established and planned with a view to making them as a part of the social life of the rural folk. Religion in the neo-Vaishnavite plan was treated as the daily affair and not a thing of esoteric spiritual life. The followers of Śaṅkaradeva established different satras and nāmghars within the human habitation. Barpeta Satra, too, is located within habitational units.

The study of the satra organisations in Assam have so far received scant attention of the anthropologists and the sociologists. How these important centres of the Hindu religion are functioning in contemporary times, what roles are they playing in the perspective of the community and what specific types of community the satras have created are aspects about which we have very little scientifically collected objective information. The present study is a venture to look at the social complex centering round the satra organisation.

While it is true that historically the growth of the township of Barpeta has depended much on the satra institution, it would not be correct to assume that even at present
this is primarily based on the satra. Originally a satra-based community, Barpeta emerged as a non-peasant community in the course of time. Due to the peculiar geographical condition of the place, the people of Barpeta have taken to petty business instead of agriculture as it was the only centre of such pursuits in an area comprising the present district of Barpeta. Lowland topography of the place also played a great role in giving a beginning to the growth of the township. As the satra institution itself is taken up for study its ramification on the social organisation and cultural life of the township is also covered to a very considerable extent. The study encompasses the investigation of the social organisational aspects and the various social components of the satra. These social components are the celibate devotees, the traditional functionaries, the wider community of devotees (Samāha) who live in different lanes called Ḍāris, each such Ḍāri having its own social and economic organisations.

In this study an assumption is that an institution like a temple or a satra would be a focal point in the social
structure of the community. It is further assumed that despite considerable secularisation of the field of social relations due to the impact of modern developments in education and other fields, the **satra** still has far reaching impact on the community centering round the **satra**. The **satra** institutions of the sixteenth century spread over entire Assam have given rise to traditions in definite forms of art and culture. Barpeta Satra as one of the chief religious centres of Assam has maintained its religious impact on the local people and a set of traditional functionaries grown centering round it. It is also a point of study how the **satra** situated within the human habitation with its compact organisation is functioning as the focal point of religion and culture for the urbanised residents of Barpeta and how it influences the life cycles of the individuals of the area.

The manner in which the **satra** influences the community and their social relations as also the articulation between the sacred complex of the **satra** and the community have been brought out through detailed empirical study. As the study progresses it would be evident how the centuries old religious
institution maintains its original character, even though certain changes have crept into its organisational aspects during pre-independence days. One important aspect of this study is to observe how the affiliation of the social life of the Hindu population of Barpeta to the satra is maintained almost unchanged.

Although there are some historical descriptions of Hindu religious places by indologists, Orientalists and travellers written before the middle of this century, it was not until the early fifties that they began to appear. Indian social anthropologists while studying religion have given emphasis in the formulation of some new frameworks. Such frameworks centre on the structure and functions of Hindu religious groups. The empirical study made by L.P. Vidyarthi (1961) on the sacred complex of Gaya provides a new approach for the study of religious centres. Gaya was perhaps the first religious centre to attract the attention of an anthropologist. Bhubaneswar, another sacred centre of ancient origin was taken up (Bose 1955-56) in the first phase of the anthropological study of holy places in India. Later in 1967, The Anthropological
Survey of India launched a programme to study the complex religious institutions at a number of sacred centres such as Kamakhya in Assam and Kalighat in Calcutta (S.C. Sinha 1970), Chamundeswari temple in Mysore (B.B. Goswami and S.G. Morab 1968, 1970, 1975) and Kashi (Sinha and Saraswati 1969). Kamakhya was also studied by M.C. Goswami independently (Gauhati University Journal 1960). Under the auspices of The Anthropological Survey of India Surajit Sinha and B.N. Saraswati (1967) took up the study of the organisation of ascetics in Kashi. In the meantime the study of the sacred complex of Janakpur (in Nepal) was taken up by M. Jha which ultimately came out in the form of a book entitled *Aspects of a great traditional city in Nepal* (1971). Thus the study of sacred complex over the last two decades has become one of the major activities of Indian anthropologists. For the reappraisal of the concepts of Gaya model another study of the sacred complex of Kashi was undertaken (1979) by Vidyarthi

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and others. In all these works the religious organisations are viewed as sacred complexes.

The present study of satra institution is in line with the study of sacred centres which throws some insight into the organisation of sacred complex of the satra and its relation with the social system.

The objectives of the study are:

1) To trace the origin of satra and its social basis, its growth in terms of its numbers, their geographical distribution, the satra-samhati affiliation etc. This has been done with reference to satras in general and Barpeta Satra in particular.

ii) To study organisational aspect of satra, specially of Barpeta Satra at its inception and changes that it has undergone from time to time.

iii) To see that the satra would be a focal point in the social structure of the community and to study the cohesive influence of the satra on the Barpeta society.

iv) To bring forward how the various groups or segments of the local community are maintaining the articulation with the satra in a traditional manner. Some sort of inter-community relations are also noticed at Barpeta through the religious field.
v) To record the educational and cultural contributions of the satra institution in general and the cultural contributions of Barpeta Satra in particular.

vi) To show that being situated in a low land area Barpeta emerged as a centre for trade and commerce and a number of small industries grew in the course of time.

**Term and concept:**

The institution of satra, historically speaking, is a product of neo-Vaiṣṇava movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva in the early part of the 16th century. The word satra has had a sacred connotation. It is derived from Sanskrit word satra used even in the Vedic literature. In the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa the word satra was mainly applied to mean an assembly of sages in the Naimiṣa-kṣetra to perform sacrificial rites.

In the initial stage of the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement by satra it was meant a religious sitting or an association rather than a systematised institution. Bhusan Dwija, one of the biographers of Śaṅkaradeva has applied the words satragrha to denote a house where Śaṅkaradeva after his
return from first pilgrimage used to hold religious discus-
sions with his followers. 7

According to Kaviratna Vaikunthanātha Bhāgavata Bhaṭṭā-
cāryya, the distinguished follower of Dāmodaradeva, satra is
an assembly of holy persons where Bhakti in all its aspects
is practised. Sociologically speaking, at the initial stage
of the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement satra indicates a particular
type of social relationship consisting of speaker and liste-
ners centering round the ideology revealed in the Bhāgavata-
 Purāṇa. In the course of time, this infant institution "began
to develop on a distinct line and ultimately emerged as a well
developed institution having distinct structural features and
elaborate paraphernalia and practices. Henceforth, the term
 satra began to signify a distinct type of institution with
characteristics of its own." 8

Field work:

Barpeta is a place where I am staying for the last twenty
years since I joined the local college as lecturer in Anthropo-
logy in 1971. During these long years of my stay at this place

7. Sarma, S.N.: op.cit., p. 104
8. Sarma, S.N.: op.cit.,
some aspects of social life of Barpeta attracted my attention. Such life styles have been moulded by the satra institution located at this place. Life at Barpeta takes a different turn during the festivals in the satra which draws thousands of people. During leisure time sitting in my department with some of my senior colleagues I occasionally enquired them of some specialities of Barpeta Satra and the society and such matters drawn my inquisitiveness towards the satra and its unique social setting. Before I began this work I was looking for a topic whose field would be located within a cycling distance from Barpeta. For this purpose I began to sift through a number of allied topics. I preferred to take a shift from the traditional social anthropological field of studying tribal society and culture and ultimately decided to come for this topic. One of my colleagues who happened to be from the family of earlier Burhāgatriyā (religious head of the satra) came out to extend me all possible help when I disclosed in a subsequent sitting my intention of taking up an individual research project on the Barpeta Satra. Living at Barpeta though I had facilities to visit the satra and observe its
functioning, my active interest in them dates back to 1985.

Being a lecturer in the local college and having permanent establishment in Barpeta I was in an advantageous position to identify myself as a resident of the place. This gave me special opportunity to make rapport with the local people and start my field work not as a stranger but as one whom they identified as co-resident of the place. As I entered the field I found most of the known faces whom I approached for collecting informations regarding the satra organisation. In case of any confusion in processing the material or writing up the chapters I could approach anyone related with the satra activities or call him to my residence as I live in the field itself.  

My investigations were carried out at Barpeta primarily through the application of standard anthropological techniques. These are — (i) consultation of records and documents regarding past management, (ii) prolonged field investigations at Barpeta for qualitative data. Consultation of records and

9. Sri Dharmakanta Das, an ex-member of the satra-committee, who takes interest in satra affairs, is my neighbour. I visit him off and on for any clarification.
documents has been necessitated in order to draw a continuous history of the satra from the past. Some such records on past management by the participation of various functionaries and the community of devotees, some materials on the economic aspects were collected from the satra, while some others such as records of the scheme case (Barpeta Satra Scheme case No. 7, 1912) the judgement of which brought some major changes in the manner of its management were collected from the office of the District Judge, Guwahati. Similar other materials were also collected from the office of the Sub-divisional Magistrate, Barpeta.

Prolonged field investigations were carried out through direct observation and participation. Data on daily activities and performances by the functionaries were collected by direct observation while through participant observation I gathered much information in case of various festivals and prayer services. Most of the informations regarding annual round of activities and festival cycles were put to test by subsequent observations next year. Living in the field situation itself the investigator got the opportunities to make acquaintances
and friends among the people having relations with the satra and also visited them in their homes. Made occasional visits and observed the activities in the satra, listened to and participated in formal and informal meetings and had ample opportunities to gather informations regarding their manner of participation in the satra affairs. On several occasions I invited persons to my residence to know from them about old time management of the satra, the functionaries and their participations and the wave of change they have noticed. During the course of my field work I attended all kinds of ceremonies and festivals, took extensive notes on its observances, activities by various stipulated persons and took photographs of important and rare situations.

This is in a nutshell a critical study in a community to which the investigator belongs. In such a situation there is always the possibility of getting involved or be drawn into the local norms and patterns of life. There is every likelihood of ignoring relevant facts by the local ethnographer. My close proximity with the local people, however, did not refrain me from being as objective as possible in collecting datas.
and also in presenting the report. I had my utmost endeavour

to eliminate the subjective elements as best as I could by

virtue of my professional training.

Language, which is of high importance in studying a society

as medium of communication between the investigator and the

informants, posed practically no problem to me as Assamese was

the mother tongue of the people and the informants as well as

the researcher himself.