CHAPTER-V

SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF THE SATRA

ACelibate Devotees:

Celibates are a class of devotees who lead an intensely devotional life, by keeping a close connection with their respective satras, living usually within the four walls of the satras and sometimes outside it. They sever all connections with their families for the sake of devotion, so to speak, they are above all worldly bondages and they always keep certain differences from other people in respect of their mode of living, dress habit, way of talking etc. Such devotees are known as Udāsīn bhakats or Kewaliyā bhakats in Assamese. They are indifferent to any worldly attraction and the sole object of their life is the absolute devotion to God. Such devotees are called Keulā in the Barpeta Satra.¹

It is correct that Sānkaradeva did not advocate such type of extreme form of devotional life. Sānkaradeva himself led an ideal householder's life along with his wife and children. Most of his disciples were also married persons

¹ Keulā is a corrupt form of Sanskrit term Kaivalya which leads to Assamese term Kewalīyā.
with the single exception of Madhavadeva. Even Madhavadeva was also advised by Sankaradeva to marry. But Madhavadeva declined to accept the suggestion of his Guru Sankaradeva by counter arguments.

Though Madhavadeva was a life long celibate he did not recommend celibacy to be a general practice. He advised his disciples not to take him as their model and adopt celibacy. But in spite of his negative recommendations celibacy came to stay as a customary practice in satras. Many of the later proselytisers were also celibates. The ideals set by them and the advantages of celibacy towards devotional life helped to increase the number of Vaishnavas adhering to this mode of life. Furthermore, Damodaradeva lost his wife in his early life. As such most part of his life he remained as a celibate. Most of the followers of Damodaradeva being influenced by the ideal of their spiritual preceptor made up their mind to spend their life as celibate devotees. Thus the tradition of celibacy entered into the four walls of the satra.

3. Ibid, p. 304
4. Surma, T.N. : Amīnī Satraśārāmāḷī, p. 21
On the four sides of the namghar or kirtanghar there are usually four rows of huts known as carihatl, where the bhakats reside. The residential quarters in the hatis are called bahā. The system of carihatl, however, is not the general feature of all satras. In the monastic satras like Āuniāti, Daksinpat, Kamalabārī etc. only celibate devotees are allowed to reside in the peripheries of the hatis.

There were only eight celibate devotees in Barpeta Satra during the course of my investigation in 1985, six within the satra campus and another two in two other sets of cloisters situated near the satra. From my early investigations (1980) it was found that there were fourteen such devotees in total. One such devotee staying in another separate hut died (5.1.81) at the age of 101 years. The celibate devotees residing at Barpeta as in 1980 and 1985 are of various age groups as seen in the table.
The reduction in the number of celibate bhakats in the Barpeta satra is not a special characteristic related exclusively to Barpeta satra but this happens to be the case of all satras having provisions for celibate bhakats which is

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age from</th>
<th>No. of celibates in 1980</th>
<th>No. of celibates in 1985</th>
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<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>45-50</td>
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<td>56-60</td>
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<td>70-75</td>
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<td>91-95</td>
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<tr>
<td>96-100</td>
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</tbody>
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Total No. of Celibates = 14 in 1980; 8 in 1985

Source: Field observations during 1980-1985
posing a problem. The satras that are well known for celibate residential bhakats are Āuniyātī, Barpeta, Bardowā, Bhogpur, Dakṣīnpāṭ, Gārmur, Kamalābārī and so on. A senior celibate devotee of Barpeta Satra (Śrī Mohan Ātai Burābhakat) said that there were not less than sixty bhakats in the two inner hātīs at the time of his entrance in the satra nearly fifty years ago. As late as 1851, Dalton found 157 such celibates within Barpeta Satra campus. In the two other sets also he saw one with fifty five and the other with twenty six monks.⁴ According to one old document of Dakṣīnpāṭ Satra there were 325 Kewaliyās in 1904 corresponding to 62 in 1985.⁵ Cantlie found⁶ 20 bhakats in Bardowā Satra when he visited in 1971 as against only one in 1985. Same case exists in other satras too. The major causes of diminishing the strength of bhakats in satras in general are:

1) Insufficient economic support provided by the satra to its bhakats.

⁴ Dalto, E.T. : 'Mahāpurusīyās a sect of Vaiṣṇavas of Assam' in The Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, p.459
⁵ Goswami, M. : Satra And Society, p. 67
⁶ Cantlie, A. : The Assamese, p. 162
ii) General deterioration of economic status of satras.

iii) Lack of initiative among the disciples for offering their sons to lead celibate life in the satra.

iv) Growing tendency for pursuing new job opportunity among the educated section.

Residences of the monks:

Their residences are arranged on long two roofed sheds with a long front varandah, divided into individual apartments. In each apartment opening to the front varandah and also to the back, the monks live. Within the same such room on one corner there is the cooking arrangement. On another corner a monk keeps his altar for offering his daily prayers. Due to minimum height of the roof and less number of windows, the inside of the room looks dark all the time. Generally a celibate devotee cooks himself and keeps the floor of the hut finely plastered with earth and the inside look perfectly clean and disciplined. They also keep the surrounding of the hut neat and clean. The celibate bhakats generally keep a small garden near their huts. In this small garden they plant
certain flower-plants and others which have certain medicinal value.

**Household utensils:**

Things of daily use of the bhakats are very simple, wooden furnitures of various heights are never used, but they use rushmats and mattresses (kath, dhārā) made of grass, bamboo slits and ribs of withered plantain leaves. Such type of mats are specially kept for guests. Anybody paying a visit to a bhakat is to take such a mat spread out by himself on the ground to sit on. They use utensils made of metals or earthen vessels for cooking, and various other purposes.

**Food:**

Food of the Kewaliyā bhakats is simple. Their food items consist of the things that grow in the garden and those offered by the individual families. Almost all the reformers including Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva were non-vegetarians. A Vaiṣṇava should not indulge in killing animals for the purpose of food but they can take meat of animals killed by others.  

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the daily market held in front of the Kirtanghar.

Dress habit:

Celibate devotees residing in the satra circle are very scrupulous in maintaining the traditional practices. Their usual dress consists of three pieces of cloths such as dhuti (lin cloth), a cādar (wrapper) and a gāmochā (towel). Other than this general dress sometimes they use sewed garments also when they go out of the satra campus. Though ordinarily a celibate's dress consists of cotton cloths, silk garments are also not infrequently seen to be used. Emphasis is always given to the simplicity in their livelihood. Coloured cloths are never used by the bhakats. Foot-wears of hide skin have never been in use, instead wooden footwears, i.e., pāḍukā and sandals made of koir (phānati) are commonly used. But in day to day duties within the satra devotees are seen bare footed and also bare bodied during summer months.

The celibates living within a satra are in the habit of keeping long hairs but not the matted hair like the ascetics. Like the fair sex they tie their trailing hair to the back of
the head. They are clean-shaved and keeping of beard and moustache is against their tradition.

Manners:

The celibates are very much polite and polished in manners and dealings. A devotee irrespective of his age is generally addressed or referred to as ātā or ātai. The fraternal relationship between one devotee and another is also noticeable. A senior devotee behaves a junior with utmost civility. Celibates while talking to someone within their own fraternity or outsider never speak in terms of the first person as it indicates some sort of egoism. The use of first person in singular number is rarely seen. In case of necessity they will rather use the plural form as 'we' or 'ours'. There is a peculiar form of use of the passive voice in sentences in ordinary discussions with the bhakats. It is seen that there is a class of special Assamese vocabularies within the Vaisnavite satra circles which are used to express the general euphemism.
The celibate monks remain scrupulously neat and clean, they do not take a cup of tea, even do not chew pān or tāmbula (areca nut with leaves together with a little lime) without taking their morning bath. While in the campus they never touch anybody. The bhakat acting as ghāldeuri or main priest becomes very careful so that he is not touched while handing over the nirmāli (offered flowers and leaves) to someone. Whenever a celibate goes out of the satra compound for some business he must invariably take bath after coming to his residence. When someone visits a celibate in his residence, he is very careful so that his clothes, wet after bath and spread on a rope is not touched by any non-celibate outsider.

Eating anything in other's house is regarded as taboo by the celibates. Thānurām Ātai, Dimbeswar Ātai when they came to my residence refused to take even a banana. Mohan Ātai Būrābhakat did not agree to cook himself at the house of

8. When I visited Dhanirām Ātai Būrābhakat he just returned from the bazar area and requested me to hurriedly finish my talk and went to take bath.

9. I found them very careful in this regard when I visited Thānurām Ātai Būrābhakat and Padmārām Pāthak Ātai.
his related sister. According to him a celibate should not take anything when he comes down the steps of his residence.

**Bringing into the fold:**

The usual practice of bringing into the fold of the celibate devotees is that a senior celibate devotee acquires young boys of 10-12 years old as his assistant (āldhara) and keeps with him in his hut. An āldhara learns the traditional practices by staying along with a senior celibate. In due course an āldhara is elevated to the rank of a celibate. Secondly an āldhara is also elevated to the status of a celibate on the death of a senior celibate. At the event of death of a senior celibate, the āldhara of the deceased gets the ownership of the hut of the senior celibate. The procedure regarding the ownership of the hut is that the junior one gets it when the senior devotee makes such a deed before his death. Otherwise the near relatives of the deceased may claim the hut. In the absence of any claimant the hut and the properties, if any, may be taken over by the satra.
Why they join:

Various circumstances lead a person to accept the life of a celibate. In this connection three special cases may be noted. Sri Thānurām Ātai Burhābhakat, a senior celibate of the satra is nearly eighty five years old and spent 77 years in the satra. He joined celibacy when he was a boy of only eight years of age. Elder brother of his father was also a bhakat residing in the same hut (bāhā). His parents were disheartened when they lost several of their children in the cruel hands of death due to some unknown disease. When Sri Thānurām was born his parents took vow to send him to the service of Lord Kṛṣṇa as a life long servant of Him, so that He may grant their son a long life. Thānu Ātai said with humour that for this reason he is undying (amar). He comes from a village called Sandha near Nalbari, 40 Kms. north-east of Barpeta.

The inhabitant of the Pukhuripārar bāhā is Sri Mohan Ātai Burhābhakat. He comes from a village Bamundi near Hajo, 60 Kms. east of Barpeta. On being requested to inform about the
event which led him to join in the satra as a bhakat he narrated thus. Late Jagannāth Mahanta Ātai, his predecessor in the bāhā was also a man from his own place. His father and late Mahanta were friends having mutual respect for each other. Once Jagannāth Ātai requested Mohan Ātai's father to send one of his sons to live with him at Barpetā Satra. Ātai's father agreed to his request but he died without complying with his words to send one of his (five) sons. Thereupon he had been advised in dream by Madhavadeva himself regarding a bhakat from his own place. Similarly elder brother of Mohan Ātai's father was also advised in dream regarding the agreement to send a boy to Barpetā Satra. But he was hesitating to tell their mother about such happenings because, they might think otherwise, that for fear of the burden of maintenance he was proposing to send one of her sons like this. The Bhāgabati of the satra whose residence was close to Pukhuripārār bāhā, also received identical reminder in this regard which was communicated to Mahanta Ātai. He then hastened to Bamundi where Mahanta Ātai was informed of the happening. Among all the five brothers, Mohan Ātai,
On another occasion I approached a young celibate of the satra Sri Dimbeswar Pāṭhak Āṭai to know the circumstances leading to his joining celibacy. He comes from Dahāṭī, Barpetā. He came to satra in July 1971. Before that he was a student of local M.C. College. He could not come out successful in the Pre-University final examination and for that his elder brother rebuked him and asked him to give up study. Such treatment of his elder brother hit his sentiment. As he had earlier acquaintance with late Padmarām Pāṭhak Āṭai, a resident celibate devotee of the satra, Dimbeswar expressed his desire to stay with him. After a continuous stay with Late Pāṭhak Āṭai upto November 1973 he used to stay separately in an individual apartment in the Kewalīā hāṭī of Barpetā Satra. By this time he made acquaintance with the then Dekā Satrīyā late Dharmeswar Mahanta and after a month he used to stay with him with the understanding of being the inheritor of his residence and the properties. But Dimbeswar was pushed to a state of indecision when the Dekā Satrīyā died only after seven months
of his staying with him. Dimbeswar was ousted from his residence by the near relatives of late Mahanta and he took a new residence. On the question of inheritance there was a legal suit which ultimately Dimbeswar lost. For such matters he became much disheartened and ultimately made up his mind to leave the satra.

From the above consideration it can easily be guessed that the celibacy may seem to have a safety valve, indeed it is an escape from the various human injustices or the rigours of life. In another sense it is the noble life— the service of God to which only few are requisitioned. Attracted by such a life someone comes to join this life.

Daily life of a celibate:

Generally the most part of the days activities in the life of a Kewalīyā is occupied by religious activities. This may be seen from the daily routine of a celibate (Dimbeswar Ātai).

After getting up from bed early in the morning he attends the call of nature (bāhir-phurā) and after usual process of
cleaning with earth and water (māti-pānī), he takes bath.
At about seven in the morning he attends the morning
prasānga (prayer services). After the Prabhāta prasānga, i.e.,
prayers offered in the early morning he cooks his daily meal. Then he occasionally engages himself to some handi-
crafts. After taking meal generally he takes rest for a while.
It follows by a religious deliberation held at his residence
along with four or five non-celibate devotees, i.e., house-
holders at about 2 P.M. and it continues till the biyalir
prasānga, i.e., prayers offered in the evening. The house-
holder devotees also go home and come back again to attend
the recitation of scriptures which is held daily. Being free
for a while at the end of the recitation he goes out to
collect essential materials from the market and so forth.

Relation of the celibates with the local society:

The celibate bhakats are not a neglected section of the society, instead they are most needed in the various spheres of life of the society. They are sought at the time of dis-
tress, illness in the family, at the event of death of
someone and similarly at the happy moment also.

The celibates are invited to the individual families to perform certain functions which are religious in nature in the form of reading or recitation of some holy books. On certain cases congregational chantings are also arranged in which elderly persons who generally attend nitya-prasāṅga, i.e., prayers offered daily in the satra are also invited. Celibate devotees are regarded as special invitees on these occasions. They generally initiate and lead the congregational chanting. The purpose of organising such rites are varied, such as, well being of the family, recovery from illness or any other misfortune, marriage, birth and death anniversaries or inauguration of a new building. Such rites with the association of these holy persons are believed to have the effect of averting any misfortune and the power of making a happy beginning. The celibates invited for such purposes are offered new cloth (one handloom towel), a little cash and some eatables (rice, dal, potato etc.) which are termed as sidhā. As the celibate bhakats do not eat anything in other's house, hence softened rice, curd, sugar etc.
are given at their residence in the satra while other householder devotees are entertained in the host family.

Other than these household religious services celibates are also required for some other purposes. Some of them also know the art of calculating the fortune by reading the horoscope and some again give consecrated water by uttering of spells for curing certain diseases. Again some such devotees know the art of calculating and to find out the culprit for any kind of black magic or misdeed. If such situations arise the local people may solicit the assistance of the celibates.

The nāma-kīrtana, i.e., congregational chanting, of the names of Lord Kṛṣṇa are held publicly in various places of Barpeta on different contexts. Such congregational chanting held without break for a definite period is called pālnām. The celibate devotees take leading part in this context as initiators or leaders of the chorus.

World views:

Though they live within the satra compound the celibates are not completely secluded from the outside world and they
keep a constant touch with the happenings outside. They even try to focus on the matters like the formation and functions of the new government and CRPF repression let loose on the student leaders. According to them such repressions may be compared with that of the British rule meted out on the freedom fighters. They also liked to talk on students indiscipline and student-teacher relation citing references from Vedic age. On several occasions I met senior celibate devotees to know their reactions on the prevailing situations of the society. Reacting to the changed situation prevailing everywhere Śrī Padmarām Pāthak Ātai made a comment on the problem of the decreasing number of celibate devotees at the satra and the difficulties arising out of that problem. He also made certain comments on the present scarcity of the essential commodities. Further he said that there was a time when most of the things of his daily necessity were offered by the local people. They used to send to the bhakats a share of new vegetables of their garden, milk and all other essential commodities. According to him the days of plenty have gone and the days of scarcity have come. He did not
fail to ascertain the causes of such scarcity. To him the abnormal growth of population has paved the way of scarcity. As such the abnormal growth of population should be checked. Then he said that being the disciples of Śaṅkaradeva the people of Barpeta should not show inclination towards the Durgā-Pūjā as this sort of Pūjā is contrary to the ideals of the doctrine propagated by the great saint.

B. Traditional Satra Functionaries:

There are a number of functionaries in Barpeta Satra who are articulated with the traditional functions since early times in regard to daily activities and also in time of various annual festivals. It can be gathered that various persons were closely associated with the affairs of the satra in the early stage, the descendents of whom are still continuing such duties.

The various families (which are locally known as barāšara) and the names of their ancestors are given below:

- Pāṭhak family
- Sūtradhār family
- Bāyon family
- Bharali family

... Basudev Pāṭhak
... Kajalā Māji Sūtradhār
... Bhīma Bāyon
... Dhwaja Ātai
Tradition goes that it was Mathurādās Burhā Ātā who, by way of giving reorganisation to the satra, brought from various places the persons proficient in different activities of the satra and settled at Barpeta. The families of the traditional satra functionaries are the lineal descendants of those persons. Their activities were fixed by Mathurādās Burhā Ātā for smooth running of the satra. This tradition is still current in the satra. Their specified duties are related with the daily prayer services and can be noticed in the time of annual festivals such as Deul festival, i.e., festival of colour, Domāhi or Bihu, Kirtan (death anniversary of the founding father) festival, Janmāstami (birth anniversary of Lord Kṛṣṇa etc.). They are very sincere in performing these duties and that is why the satra is running without any fault. It may be noted that these families played important role in the affairs of the satra management before the scheme of management came into force.
It can be said that the bansaras are directly concerned with the day-to-day religious affairs of the satra because out of the fourteen units of daily prayer service six are performed in the name of Sūtradhār family, five are confined only to the Pathak family and the rest are done by men of the Samūha. From this assignment it may be assumed that there was a time when Pathak family together with Sūtradhār family took greater responsibility in running the religious activities of the satra. In the evening service Bargītas are sung to the accompaniment of the beating of khol and the playing of tāl by the gāyān-bāyān. It is known as Sewār-kīrtan. This performance of gāyān-bāyān is shared by the bansaras according to a three months term in a year.

The degree of involvement of the various families in the affairs of the satra can be seen from the round of activities of the Sūtradhār family during the course of a year. This is over and above the six different units of daily prasāṅga.

10. Gāyan-bāyan is a troupe of satrīya music. Performance of gāyan-bāyan indicates the beating of the khol and the playing of tāl in particular rhythmic beats. In this context they are to wear a particular traditional dress.
Activities of Śūtradhār family:

Bahāg
(April 16th - May 15th): Performance of gāyan-bāyan during the seven day programme of Bihu festival, Bhāonā performance in the satra compound on the final day.

Jeth
(May 15th - June 15th): During the birth anniversary of Mādhavadeva the members of Śūtradhār family are to play the roles of gāyan-bāyan (after every four years).

Bhādra:
(August 16th - September 15th): They have got very heavy programme as gāyan-bāyan during the seven day Kirtan festival of Saṅkara-deva. They are to stage Rāmavijay Bhāonā on the final day of the celebration. Karbhār is presented to Pātbāusī Satra from Barpetā Satra. Members of Śūtradhār family are to carry the Karbhār to Pātbāusī Satra at the interval of four years.

11. Members of the Sutradhar family generally taking part in the stipulated special function (bāb) at the satra are Sri Hari Bayan, Biren Sutradhar, Gadadhār Das, Golap Bayan, Ramani Sutradhar, Tilak Das, Nilakanta Das and so on. Late Dayal Ch. Sutradhar, an expert in Satrīya Bargītas was a man of this family.
During Janmāśṭamī celebration also the member of Śūtradhār family are to take active part as gāyan-bāyan and to enact the Bhāonā relating to the theme of Kṛṣṇa's birth.

Āhin
(September 16th-October 15th): During birth anniversary of Śaṅkaradeva and also during Mathurādāsa Burhā Atā's five day Kīrtan festival members of the Śūtradhār family act as gāyan-bāyan. They are to stage Kamsabadha Bhāonā on the final day of the Kīrtan.

Māgh
(January 16th-February 15th): Duties to perform gāyan-bāyan in the five day programme of Māgh bihu is reserved for the men of Śūtradhār family.

Phāgun-Chait
(February 16th-April 15th): In the three day Deul festival programme they are to perform gāyan-bāyan in the evening of the first day and also to stage Bhāonā after this role (in every alternate year). In case of a four-day programme their duty fall on the final day.
Other than these schedule of participation there is an annual schedule of the various families for presenting dramatic performances (Bhāona) in the satra as a part of special observances during the Bihus, Deul and Kirtan festivals. The members of the Sūtradhār family are to stage Bhāona at least five times round the year.

The families (bañsarās) having the stipulated turn to stage dramatic performance (jātrār pālā) get dasturi (honorarium for the service) from the satra (in the form of one pon of arecanuts numbering eighty with twenty bundles of betel leaves each containing twenty leaves) after the show. If the dramatic performance by any family, for some seasons, has to be postponed, they perform the dhemāli portion a particular musical stage of the Bhāona and receive the tray of dasturi. A subsidiary grant is also given to a Bhāona troupe from the satra fund.  

12. Sūtradhār family received ₹ 400.00 for staging drama (Rājā Harischandra) during the Deul festival (1981). As Sri Narayan Gāyan (participant in family performance) reported such subsidiary grant from the satra was ₹ 5.00 only when Late Chandi Gharan Kākāti was the Secretary of the satra Manag Committee nearly fifty years ago. This grant was later raised to ₹ 20.00.
religious theme pertaining to the win of goodness over the evil. Inclusion of a role of Kṛṣṇa in any particular drama is to be informed earlier to the satra authority because it is customary to present a new cloth to the actor who represents the character of Kṛṣṇa. At the very outset of a play Kṛṣṇa dance is essential and one who plays the role of Kṛṣṇa is offered respect by giving a new cloth.

Generally the young boys of the concerned families take part in such dramatic performances, the elderly section always extend their constructive suggestions and co-operations. Sometimes hired actors and hired dresses are also procured. Co-acting is not allowed in the satra precinct and as such young boys play the female roles by wearing female dress and taking long hair. The show is generally held in the open space on a temporary stage.

There are various legends regarding the ancestral persons of the different families who were acquired by Mathurādās Burhā Ātā and settled at Barpetā. Basudev Pāṭhak is said to be the man from whom the Pāṭhak family originated. The story goes
that one Lakṣmīkānta Ātai, a celibate devotee from a nearby satra came by boat to Barpetā satra who was accompanied by one Basudev. After having formal talks with Mathurādās Burhā Ātā Lakṣmīkānta Ātai stayed that night on the boat. At night Basudev started singing Barga, Bhatimā etc. with proper rāga. Burhā Ātā woke up from sleep and heard the song sung by Basudev. On enquiry next morning Burhā Ātā came to know that it was Basudev who sang such melodious songs. So he wanted to bring the boy to Barpetā satra who was then staying with Lakṣmīkānta Ātai. At first Lakṣmīkānta hesitated to hand over the boy on the plea that he had no father and if he stayed at the satra there would be no continuity of his family. Burhā Ātā promised to arrange his marriage. Thereupon Lakṣmīkānta Ātai gave the consent to part with the boy. Basudev was trained as Pāthak of the satra and was entrusted with the duty of reading the various renderings of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa at the daily prasāṅga. His descendants are till now performing

13. River route touched Barpetā Satra from early times till the tributary flowing beside the satra was closed and converted to a fishery recently (1984).
such duties. But at present due to lack of experienced persons in the field of traditional performance (there being no facility to train new hand in the _satriyā_ art form) from the Pāṭhak family, such activities are performed by hired persons.\(^{14}\)

According to Śrī Tilak Chandra Das, a retired Government employee and a direct descendant of the Sūtradhār family these duties are mostly being performed for the sake of sentiment only. Young and educated sections of the various families are always hesitating to take active part in these traditional performances. This also involves a considerable expenditure which is met from a fund known as _Baṁsārā_ fund, i.e., family fund. Every family, therefore, maintain a fund for the same purpose. The fund of the Pāṭhak family amounting to Rupees ten thousand was raised by an one time collection from the individual families. Another source of the fund is the collection of money from the marriage party either of boy or girl of that family. The rate is always fixed. From the side of the

\(^{14}\) Two celibate devotees perform these art form on the basis of monthly honorarium of Rs. 50.00 each. Śrī Gopāl Pāṭhak of the same family also read the scriptures in the morning and in the afternoon.
bride the amount is rupees five only and that from the bride
groom side it is rupees ten only. There are nearly two hund-
red individual families of the Sūtradhār family at Barpetā
and some have already shifted from Barpetā to other places.
Some local individual families have promised to pay a sum of
rupees ten to rupees fifty per month to this fund. But the
poor families cannot contribute such amount of money. Monthly
collection is generally not possible. The amount is collected
by appointed person for which the collector gets 25% commis-
sion on the total amount of collected money. The families
who reside outside Barpetā contribute an amount to the fund
voluntarily. There are various heads under which money from
this fund is spent. In the case of Sūtradhār family money is
spent under the following heads in a year.

Annual expenditures of the Sūtradhār family fund:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For daily prasānga</td>
<td>Rs. 600.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For staging Bhāonā in the Deul festival</td>
<td>Rs. 600.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For staging Bhāonā at the time of Bōhāg Bihu</td>
<td>Rs. 600.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparations for Saṅkaradeva Kīrtan</td>
<td>Rs. 150.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying Karbhār</td>
<td>Rs. 100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burhā Ātā's Kīrtan</td>
<td>Rs. 50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total annual expenditure</td>
<td>Rs. 2100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The procedure of spending the amount on different heads is decided in a general meeting. The fund is operated by a Secretary and a Cashier.

The members of the Pathak family are actively associated with the two committees in respect of the management of the fund. Sri Pavitra Pathak is the President and Dayal Ch. Pathak is the Secretary of one of the two committees. Only the interest of the amount is taken out from the fund yearly to pay the honorarium to those who perform prasāhgas on behalf of the baṅśarā. The other committee is to look into the traditional performances of the baṅśarā and to hold the death anniversary of Basudev Pathak. Furthermore, contributions are also collected for this celebration. The excess money of the celebration is again kept in the bank account.

With a view to preserving the art of Sūtradhāra and to keep alive the Satriya music some concrete steps have been taken by some enthusiastic persons of the family, such as recording of performances with the help of expert hands and to encourage the young generation to undergo training in this.
field. Śrī Hari Rām Bāyan, an expert in this field takes the initiative in this regard. He is helped by people like Chandan Das, Gadadhar Das, Akan Bāyan, Paresh Das, Dambaru Das and so on.

C. Samūha bhakat:

The community of devotees of Barpeta Satra is known as Samūha bhakat. They are the resident disciples of the satra. Samūha is the elective body of resident disciples, the religious brotherhood. Samūha bhakat conveys the sense of the bhakats in assembly or the bhakats who are entitled to vote in the assembly.

Persons who is initiated to the Mahāpurusīyā faith and wishes to take a bhāg, i.e., share in the offerings in the satra by paying a fee of ₹ 5.25 only may be able to enlist oneself as a member of the Samūha. Thereby he is entitled to vote in the election of the satra. Moreover they are bound by the norms relevant of the Vaiṣṇava fold and must have to pay kar and dar to the satra. Kar is the annual payment to be made by each member of the Samūha to the fund of the
satra in accordance with the prevailing custom. Every member having a bhāg in the satra must pay twice in a year certain quantity of rice fixed by the Managing Committee. The quantity of rice is equal to that payable at the time of taking a bhāg. Dar is the punishment in the shape of fine imposed by the Samūha on the individual members for infringing the rules of the Mahāpurūṣiyā faith.

Acquisition of Bhāg:

Any person professing Mahāpurūṣiyā faith shall be entitled to get a bhāg or more on payment of a certain amount of admission fee fixed by the Managing Committee. Taking a bhāg is through a barā who serves a definite number of share-holders under him. In certain occasions such as in Kirtan festival he is to receive the shares of the offered things in Karbhār on their behalf and distribute the same among them.

Every member who has a bhāg (share) in the satra shall have the responsibility of performing the pālā or to pay the amount in lieu of it. Pālā means certain services to be

15. Pālā was originally fixed for one month. Subsequently it was reduced to fifteen days. The duration of pālā was further reduced as the number of share-holders increased.
rendered to the *satra* by every individual member (shareholder) when his turn comes or he has to pay certain amount of money fixed by the *Managing Committee*. The services to be performed on one's *pālā* are to be rendered for three consecutive days. On default the person concerned is to pay Re.1.00 daily for those days. The amount is to be paid to the *satra Mazumdār* (Cashier) and have a receipt for it. This amount is again paid to the person who actually performs such duties for the defaulter member.16

i) *Pālā* includes the services of washing the floor of the *Kārtanghar*.

ii) Beating of the drum (*dabā*) and playing on other musical instruments.

iii) Collection of *tulasī* (sacred basil) leaves and flowers for daily worship.

iv) Collection of plantain leaves for daily use.

v) Collect the things offered by the visitors.

vi) Keep watch day and night over the *Kārtanghar* and its movable properties and such other duties as may be decided by the *Managing Committee*.

16. *Śrī Krishna Kānta Dās of Iswapurhātī* is the man who generally serves as *pālādharīyā*, renders necessary services for the shareholder whose *pālā* falls due.
Payment of kar or gurukar is open to all. A man not being a direct disciple of the satra may pay any amount as gurukar. There is no maximum limit of the amount of gurukar, but the minimum limit of it is fixed at Re. 0.50 paise. Anybody who pays gurukar is entitled to get nirmālī. A piece of new cloth is given in the form of nirmālī. Generally the size of this new cloth varies in accordance with the amount of gurukar paid. Tradition has it that the people of Dhobā Caste (washermen) residing in Barpetā used to supply the pieces of cloth. These were known as Raṅgākhārā. The pieces of cloth were made in equal number as the total number of shares (bhāg) in the satra. This tradition is no longer in force in Barpetā Satra. Of course, now the new cloths are bought from local weavers.

The tradition of paying gurukar has been current from the time of Mādhavadeva. Even Mādhavadeva appointed Mathurādās Burhā Ātā as the Satrīya of Barpeta Satra by offering two silver coins, as gurukar. Mādhavadeva hoped that taking

17. Late Mahendra Mohan Chowdhury, ex-Governor of Punjab used to pay Rs. 100.00 annually as a gurukar and so he was given a chādar (wrapper) as nirmālī

this as an example other people would also offer gurukar.

The organisation of Samūha bhakat is at present almost non-existent. There was the practice of the Samūha sitting regularly in front of the matha just after the Puwār prasaṅga and also in the afternoon. This sitting was known as Baithaki Samūha bhakat. Except on certain important occasion this Baithaki Samūha is not held now-a-days.

That the Samūha bhakat are very much concerned with the organisational matters of the satra is evident from the records and proceedings of some of the meetings of the Samūha. A meeting of the Samūha was held on 23.11.81 in front of the matha. The meeting was presided over by the then Dekā Satrīyā Istodev NQbis. The purpose of the meeting was to consider about the acceptance of the donation to the satra offered by Sri Basanta Pāthak of Dahāti, Barpeta. He is a rich man having sufficient landed properties. He wanted to donate an amount of Rs. 5005.00 to the satra. This donation was in addition to another amount of Rs. 1025.00 already accepted by the general meeting of

19. There was no Satrīyā at that time. The former Satrīyā died on 5.7.81 and the election to the post held on 19.9.82.
the Samūha held on 25.10.81 and attended by 140 bhakats. The aim of the donor was to perpetuate his name in the satra circle after his death by a special offering (thagi) and an oil burner to be lighted in front of the altar (āsana) on his death anniversary. Such a desire of Śrī Pāṭhak was interpreted otherwise by several members of the Samūha and that is why many of the bhakats of the Samūha did not attend the second meeting and only 63 bhakats were present. The prayer of Śrī Basanta Pāṭhak and the object of the meeting were vehemently opposed by Śrī Hargovinda Dās and supported by several others. His argument was that observance of a tithi (death anniversary) was a tradition prevalent in the case of Ātāpuruṣa or those devotees who were contemporary of Mādhavadeva or Mathurādāsa. On this ground the prayer of Śrī Pāṭhak should not be granted otherwise it would create a bad precedent. This would also encourage others, even a widow, to offer an amount to observe her death anniversary. The members of the Managing Committee represented by the Secretary Śrī Harendra Nath Das, Assistant Secretary Śrī Chandi Charan Das and the majumdar Śrī Mahānanda Ojā including the dekā satrīyā Istadev Nobis argued that
there was no similar prayer ever received by the Samūha.
Secondly, the decision of the meeting was announced that the amount had been accepted and thereby the Samūha had ultimately given shelter to Sri Pāthak as he had no son to observe his death anniversary. The Dekā Satrīyā declared that special offering or lighting an oil burner might be done only after getting due permission (ājñyā) from the Samūha by any of his relatives.

The proceedings of the meeting were written (by Sri Chandī Charan Das, Assistant Secretary) stating that the donation had been accepted in accordance with the decision of the previous meeting of the Samūha held on 25.10.81 and decided to keep the amount in a Bank or Post Office. The meeting further decided that at the expiry of the term of the deposit the Managing Committee would not be entitled to withdraw and spend the amount without prior permission of the Samūha.

By another resolution the Samūha conceded to a request of the wife of Sri Basanta Pāthak to get the courtyard of Mathurā-dās Burhā Ātā's residence cemented. But the meeting reserved

20. Cemented Varandas of the Kirtanghar and the mosaic work there, were done at the behest of Sri Basanta Pāthak.
the permission of engraving any name of donor on it.

I happened to watch the proceedings of another general meeting of the Samūha bhakat held on 26.12.82 at 2 P.M. in front of the matha which was attended by nearly three hundred people both male and female. The meeting was convened to discuss about various organisational matters of Barpeta Satra.

One of the important items of the agenda was to discuss about the management of the Barpeta Sākhā Satra (sub-satra) at Guwahati. A proposal was sent to the Managing Committee of Barpeta Satra from the Barpeta Ānchalik Sanskriti Sahrakhyan Samity, a newly organised (1980) committee of Guwahati to take the responsibility of looking into the maintenance of traditional character of the sub-satra. That proposal was discussed in the meeting and was gladly accepted. For the management of that satra representatives of Barpeta Satra were named including the Burhā Satrīyā.

Another purpose of the meeting was to make known the general public of Barpeta regarding the present position of the management of the satra. A list of assets of the satra including
the landed properties was read out in the meeting. A picture of the present financial position of the satra was given to Samūha by the Secretary. It was also pointed out about the various unrealised money. For the last eighteen years no attempt was made by the previous Managing Committees to collect revenue of the satra land. Proposals were put forward to arrange for more safety of the satra by making high boundary walls on the back side and to keep the front gate under lock and key at night. Another important proposal was to renovate the guest house of the satra to make provision for greater number of visitors.

Another meeting of the Samūha bhakat was held on 11.8.85 (Sunday) at 4 P.M. in front of the matha in which important organisational matters were taken up for discussion. The announcement for the meeting was made more than fifteen days ahead. The Burhā Satriyā and Dekā Satriyā were present in the meeting. The following were the agenda of the meeting.

i) to accept the annual budget.

ii) to consider the application of three hātis. (na-hāti, Vrindāvan hāti and Dakshin hāti).
The budget was read out by Sri Ghanashyam Das, Accountant of the satra. It was accepted after few queries.

On the second agenda of the meeting the majumdārs of the three hātīs prayed for consideration that they were unable to supply areca-nuts and white gourds in the karbhār from their hātīs due to the high prices of these articles. There were several oppositions on the point that it was the time bound practice to supply these articles along with the karbhār. Ultimately, after prolonged deliberations it was decided to agree to the request. The decision of the meeting was announced by the Burhā Satrīya that for that year only the concerned hātīs were granted the concession regarding the supply of the said articles.

21. According to a tradition the three hātīs are to present karbhār to the satra in the time of kirtan festivals of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Mathurādāsa Burhā Atā. The karbhār consists of definite quantities of eatable things of banana, areca-nuts and betel leaves, white gourds, pulses etc. These are carried in processions from the respective hātīs to the Kirtanghar.