CHAPTER VIII  
ARTS AND CRAFTS 

1. Performing Arts: Introduction:  

(a) The Satrīyā Heritage: It is an established fact that during the last few centuries the existence of satra institution has been contributing a great deal to the realm of Assamese arts and crafts along with other spheres of Assamese life. The neo-Vaiṣṇava movement brought in its train a vigorous culture of music and other fine arts for the propagation of bhakti (devotion) for drawing people into its fold. 

Three incidents narrated in the GCK exemplify how music played a decisive role in attracting sensitive people to the Gurus:  

(1) Bavānanda alias Nārāyandās Thākur was attracted by a melodious song composed by Śaṅkaradeva and sung by a band of monks (bhakats) and thereby he received the information of the saint's stay at Cūnporā of Barpetā.  

(2) Cīlārāya, the brother of King Naranārāyana one day happened to hear his wife Kamalā- priyā alias Bhubaneswari's (who was the daughter of Rāmarāya) 

1. GCK, p. 76
singing a song composed by Śaṅkaradeva. The connoisseur as he was, Cilarāya was so immensely impressed by the composition that he resolved to secure initiation into Bhakti from Śaṅkaradeva.² Had Cilarāya not been drawn towards the saint and towards his bhakti-dharma, the history of Vaiṣṇava movement in Assam would have taken a different turn. (3) Thirdly, Dāmodaradeva was charmed on hearing the recitation of prasaṅga held daily in the satra of Śaṅkaradeva at Pāṭbāusī which attracted the former to the Śaṅkara's faith of Nāma-dharma or Bhakti-dharma.³ Inclusion of Dāmodaradeva to the faith added much to the propagation of the Vaiṣṇava movement.

The GCK also gives us information that Mādhava himself coached Lakshmana on the art of recitation and singing and made him bar-chakravati-ojā, the head of choral singers.⁴ Mādhava also coached Kānāi in the technical art of a Pāṭbāk (choir leader). Thus in course of time such coaching or training turned

2. GCK, pp. 92-93
3. GCK, pp. 526-27
4. GCK, pp. 223
5. GCK, p. 233
into a tradition of the satras to use them as the training ground for imparting instructions in different fields of music. Following this custom Mathurādāś Budhā Ātā in the later period, imparted instructions to young monks having musical aptitude. He imported and kept Bāsudeva and Kajalā Māji and trained them up in the art of singing bargīt and reciting verses.5

Since then, it has been treated as the custom of the Barpeta Satra and as such the elder generations of Gāyana-bāyana have been traditionally imparting training to young boys having good musical aptitudes in the satriyā system of music. The custom of playing on musical instruments and singing of satriyā music in the satras has extended its sway over the village nāmghar too.7 It also deserves mention that expert artist devotees of the Barpeta Satra went to and trained their counterparts at Kamalābāri and Madhupur Satras in all branches of satriyā music. Such music is said to have been preserved in the Kamalābāri Satra even now.8

6. Jagannath Mahanta : Mathurādāś Budhā Ātār Jivan Carit, p. 112
7. S.N. Sarma : NVM & SIA, p. 170
8. N.C. Goswami : Satriyā Saṁskritir Svāmnarekhā, pp. 326-27
Secondly, as we have seen already, Barpeta has its own tradition and distinction in the art of music, dance and dramatic performances. On the one hand there is the satriyā or Śāṅkari-tradition and on the other the folk-tradition.

Satriyā Tradition: In respect of satriyā tradition the role played by the families or lineages popularly known as baṅgārā in the Barpeta group of satras is worthmentioning. According to prevailing custom the functions of sutradhār, gāyana, bāyana, pāthak-pāthakenī, ojā, bhāgavati etc. have continued to be performed in the satras by the respective baṅgārās or families hereditarily. In Barpeta Satra each function is conducted according to the aforesaid custom since the days of Mathurādās Būḍhā Atā who is said to have been responsible for introducing the codes and conducts of the baṅgārā.

The primary tide of ankīyā-bhāona arose during the days of Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva continued to reach its high mark in this region till the infamous Burmese atrocities over the Assamese people in the beginning of the 19th century i.e., 1817 A.D. Moreover, the imposition of Bengali as the state language of Assam by the English in 1935 created a
chaotic condition in the development of language, literature and culture, particularly in the rural areas. The remarks of Dr. S.N. Sarma regarding the influence and foundation of ankīyā-bhāonā are worth quoting. "Though Mahāpuruṣa Sāṅkaradeva, Nādhava-deva, Gopāldeva, Rāmacaran, Daityāri Thākur etc. laid the foundation of ankīyā-nātas in the state of Koch Kāmrūp, yet in course of time its performance and practice began to decrease gradually. It remained limited in one or two satras like Barpeta, its influence and importance could not enter deep into the villages."

Even then, it is to be admitted that the totality of Assamese satrīyā culture in its dynamic nature through centuries it is expected to get a glimpse of the totality of Assamese culture preserved and practised in the satra with certain influence. The expert view is that the tradition of satrīyā culture is seen preserved and practised in three centres of Assam with certain specialities.

(a) Barpeta group of satras has been maintaining the artistic quality of music like bargīta, ankīyā-gīta etc. and few items of dances, while performance of ankīyā bhāonā has

9. S.N. Sarma: Asamīyā Nātya Sāhitya, p. 86
suffered heavy decline although it developed here initially.

(b) The Kamalabari group of satras has been preserving and practising vigorously the tradition of satriya form with its originality.

(c) In the Bardowā group of satras on the other hand, the tradition of ankiyā bhaona has been most vigorously maintained even now.

The followings are the musical items prevalent in the Barpeta group of satras.

(i) Bargīta (the great devotional songs' or songs celestial):

As B.K. Barua observes, "the growing popularity of music and the requirements of congregational prayers and devotional services made Saṅkaradeva compose a large number of Bargītas, the beautiful prayer songs in our literature even to-day." 10 This satriya music of Assam may be divided into two classes: (a) Bargītas and (b) ankiyā-gītas (songs of ankiyā nāta).

10. B.K. Barua: Saṅkaradeva, the Vaiṣṇava Saint of Assam, p. 55
Each Bargīta is tuned to particular rāgas (melody) though the style of singing may differ from satra to satra due to traditional procedure of preserving rāgas orally. The total number of Bargītas and ankar-gītas as is noticed, composed by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhabadeva current till to-day are 191 and 151 respectively. Except a few of the Bargītas composed by Śaṅkaradeva, the rest of the Bargītas i.e., 157 and ankar-gītas were composed by the saints in the Barpeta group of satras as almost all of the ankiya-nātās ascribed to them and Bargītas of Mādhaba are considered to have been written during his stay in and around Pāṭbāṣu satra. It is noticed that Mādhabadeva devoted himself wholeheartedly to the cause of all-round development of neo-Vaiṣṇavism after his Guru while he was at Barpeta Satra and developed satriya music to a great extent composing songs and verses set to music on the model set by his Guru. According to Dr. M. Neog, "in all the gītas and only three bargītas known as sađ-chandar gīta, tālas (tunes) are also indicated in the written text while altogether

11. B. Datta: Asamīya Sangītar Aitihya, p. 22
12. Ibid, p. 14
13. L.N. Bezbarua: Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva āru Mādhabadeva, pp. 90, 221; GCK, pp. 177-78
twenty six classical rhythms are used in both the types of gītas."\(^{14}\) The rāgas employed in the devotional bārgītas and ankiyā-gītas traditionally current in these satras are Ahīra, Asowāri, Bhupāl, Barāri, Belowāra, Bhātiyālī, Phanosī, Gandhāra, Sarī, Kāmoda, Kalyāna, Kānāḍā, Kedār, Kau, Lalitā, Madhura, Mallāra, Nāta-mallāra, Sindhurā, Suhāi, Śrī, Śāranga, Śyāma, Tur-vasanta and Vasanta. While the band of vocal musicians called gāyanas sing the songs, the instrument players known as bāyanas combined maintain the tāla by playing the khola (drum) and tālas (cymbals of various sizes). Besides these, there are mentioned in the GCK.\(^{15}\) the use of self-employed instrument like the gārinder, rabāb etc. which are no longer in use now-a-days.

Dr. S.M. Sarma\(^{16}\) classifies the musical instruments into four categories that are associated with the satra institution. These are (i) Tata-yantra (string instruments) such as tokāri (ii) Ghana-yantra namely bhor-tāla, khuṭī-tāla, kara-tāla, rām-tāla, ghantā (bell) and kāha (gong), (iii) Anaddha-yantra covered with various skins are dobā,

\(^{14}\) S.M. Sarma : Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and Satra Institution of Assam (NVM & SIA), p. 169

\(^{15}\) S.M. Sarma : Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and Satra Institution of Assam (NVM & SIA), p. 169
nāgarā, or nagra, mridauga, khol and dhol, (iv) Susiras or wind instruments used, are sankha (conch) and kāli (long pipe). But so far as the Barpeta group of satras is concerned, there are some other instruments seen employed in music and dances such as the dotārā (string instrument), khunjari dagar (small one sided skin covered drum) etc.

It also deserves mention here that in respect of music, Barpeta has been meticulously handing down the tradition from generation to generation. The tradition of satrīyā music does not remain confined within the satra but has been propagated in and outside Barpeta even outside the satra chain. In 1906 Sanātan Saṅgīt Samāj was organised at Barpeta in which Ambikāgiri Raychoudhury was the dance and musical instructor and it is said that he is the first person to exhibit bargīta successfully in the public function with a view to making it a popular item of music. 17 Dayāl Chandra Sūtradhār (1879-1978 A.D.) of Barpeta is the first bargīta musician who broadcast bargīta in 1943 through the Calcutta Radio Station and through Gauhati Radio Centre from 1948 to 1974. 18 He is popularly

17. B. Datta: Byakti, Saṃskriti Ityādi, pp. 105, 109
18. Ibid, pp. 49-50
known as the ojā (master) of bargīta. There have been noted exponents who have contributed a lot in popularising the Barpeta system of satrīyā music. Even stalwarts of modern Assamese music like Jyotiprasād Ḍāgarwālā and Bishnuprāsad Rāvā have come under the spell of the Barpeta style of bargīta singing.

(ii) Prasaṅga (congregational singing of devotional verses):

This type of music presents a different spectacle. This is the prayer service in which a large number of people can take part in singing the verses from the kṛtanghoṣā or the nāmaghoṣā conducted in and outside the satra. In prasaṅga the pāthak or the nām-logowā responsible for conducting the chorus sets the goṣā (refrain) and the assembly of singers repeats the same in oneness of voice. This popular variety of music is regular spectacle of each satra in the morning, afternoon and evening hours of the day. It is stated that Mādhavadeva for the first time set the method and mode of conducting prasaṅga in a systematic way introducing fourteen prasaṅgas and rows of singers while he was at Sundarīdiyā Satra. 19

19. GCK, p. 269
The instruments employed in conducting nam-prasanga are khol, nāgarā, cymbals and clapping of hands maintaining tāl. 
Pālnām and bīr-nām are other two events of satrīyā music like prasānga where music and dance are conducted side by side with accompaniment of bhor-tālas, nāgarā and clapping hands. Regarding pālnām and bīr-nām we have discussed already in the earlier chapter as the most entertaining items of music and dance carried on specially in the Barpeta region.

(iii) Ojā-pāli dance and music:

The pre-Vaiṣṇavite ojā-pāli music has been stated as the semi-dramatic institution accompanied by dance and drama.²⁰ This institution can be studied under two different heads: (a) Sukanāni or māregowā ojā-pāli and (b) biyah-gowa or sabhā gowa ojā-pāli. It is stated that Śaṅkaradeva had received the basic idea from the ojā-pāli institution for the production of ankīyā-nātās. It is also noticed in the GCK. that Gopāl Tāti alias Budhā Ātā had once the opportunity to come into contact of Thākur Ātā at Janiā while the former had been travelling acting as an ojā of

²⁰ B. Datta: Asamiya Saṅgītar Aitihya, p. 37
²¹ B.K. Barua (ed.): Introduction to Ankīyā Nāta, p. X
a party of eighteen native chorus singers\textsuperscript{22} which ascertained the prevalence of \textit{ojā-pāli} music in this region during the days of Śaṅkara-Mādhava. Daityāri Thākur\textsuperscript{23} is of the opinion that Śaṅkaradeva himself arranged \textit{ojā-pāli} singing occasionally the style and technique which must have been similar to those of the biyāh gowā \textit{ojā-pāli}.

Generally, the \textit{ojā-pāli} chorus party consists of four to six singers and is divided into two units. One unit consists of the leader known as the \textit{ojā} and other consisting of assistants called \textit{pālis}. The \textit{pālis} again consists of the dāinā-\textit{pāli}, the right hand assistant of the \textit{ojā}, the rest being ordinary \textit{pālis}. The business of the \textit{ojā} is to unfold the story along with hasta-mudrā (hand gesture) while the \textit{pālis} repeat the refrain. It is referred that biyāh-gowā \textit{ojā-pāli}'s music has five organic elements, namely mālitā, rāga, dihā, bānā and thokā\textsuperscript{24}.

The Vaiśnava pattern and form of \textit{ojā-pāli} that has been practised in the satras of this region, specially in the Barpeta Satra, is organised to serve the purpose of satrīya culture.

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{22} GCK, p. 219
\item \textsuperscript{23} Daityāri, pp. 73-74
\item \textsuperscript{24} B. Datta : \textit{Asamīyā Sangītar Aitihya}, p. 43
\end{enumerate}
Dr. Neog gives the following description of the satriyā ojā-pāli — "their dances are much similar with the non-satriyā biyāh-gowā ojā-pāli. One ojā and any number upto 20 or 25 of pālis (the pāli in the right most position being called dāinā-pāli) form the satra chorus. The ojā is dressed in a white dhotī, a pāgri with a garland on it, a metted waist coat and a cādar. But an ojā on being formally appointed as such, appears in the sūtradhāra's costume on the first day." But is stated that there were 19 members in the ojā-pāli team of Barpeta consisting of one ojā, one dāinā-pāli and seventeen pālis wearing a garland of basil (tulasi) on their necks and celines placed like sacred thread (uttari) across the shoulder. The ojā is to wear a jigling anklet (nupur). The pālis prepare to sing and dance making 'U' pattern. The ojā exhibits the meaning of the sloka through hasta-mudrā. Then in singing the barītā, the chorus party gives a performance resembling a nrtya-nātikā, the segments of which are known as dihā, juna, rāg-bānā, kathan, nikhi and thokā. The only instruments for accompaniment are


27. There is a popular verse regarding the qualities of an ojā which runs thus:

"Mukhe gītā hāte mudrā pāwe dhare tāl, Gurudā sadriṣa ghure sehi ojā bhāl."
small cymbals like *kara-tāla*, *thokā-tāla*, *leseri-tāla* and the movements of their feet in order to keep time beat (*tāl*). The choral singing and dancing of *ojā-pāli* continues to be popular till to-day as a very common entertainment of the *satras*. The *ojā-pāli* music and dance in the Barpeta group of *satras* are performed on certain auspicious occasions like *Bahāg-bihu*, *Māgh-bihu*, *Tithi-utsavas* of *Śaṅkaradeva*, *Mādhava-deva* and of the respective founders of *satra*, *Deulutsav*, *Janmāśṭami* of Lord *Kṛṣṇa* etc.

(iv). Other types of music: Over and above *satriyā* music, there are some folk-songs current in this region are *Kāmrūpi loka git*, *Nāo-khelar-git*, *Baramāhi-git*, *Bhāwarīyā git* (humorous song) e.g., *Nāgini-purānar git*, and *Holi-git*. The last two types of music are considered to be recent development of musical forms. These folk-songs sung in *satriyā* or *Vaiśnava* style are very popular in this region about which brief notes are given in the preceding chapter. The musical instruments employed for these songs are few and simple, such as *dotārā*, *khol*, *dagar*, flute small cymbal etc.
(b) **Dances (nāc or nritya):**

Dances are closely connected with music and dramatic performance that create emotional states in the mind of the audience. Here we, like to take the opportunity of drawing attention to the existence of some such dance forms current in our areas of study i.e., Barpeta group of *satras* in the following manners:

(i) **Satrīyā dance**: Perhaps, with the idea of preaching Vaiṣṇavism and attracting more and more people to the faith, the saints innovated and developed a classical school of dances which is known as *satrīyā nritya* or nāc, e.g.

(a) **Sūtradhārī nritya**: This type of *nritya* is associated with *aṅkīyā-bhāona*. Dancing is one of the vital features of the *sūtradhār*, the man who plays the master role in the representation of *aṅkīyā bhāona*. *Sūtradhārī nritya* connected with *aṅkīyā bhāona* may be divided into three parts such as

(i) **Saru-bhaṅgi** (lesser rhythm) which is the initial part of the *sūtradhārī dance*, (ii) **Nāndi sloka** - is the second part of the *sūtradhārī dance* through which he gives the expression to the sentiment and content of the *sloka*,

(iii) **Bara-bhaṅgi** (higher rhythm) - The *sūtradhār* interprets
the whole story and sentiments embodied in the sloka of the aṅkiyā-nāt through different styles of nritya and mudrās (gestures) to cope with the situations remaining in the stage from the beginning to the end of the play. Almost all of the aṅkiyā-nātas of Śaṅkara, Mādhava and Gopāl Ātā of Bhāwanipur were composed in the Barpetā group of satras. The aṅkiyā nātas written by them were also produced on the stage here in this region specially the five aṅkiyā nātas of Śaṅkaradeva viz., Kāliyadaman, Keligopāl, Rukminīharana, Pārijāt-harana and Rāma-vijaya were staged under the initiative of Rāmarāya at Pāṭbāusī. 28 This act of performing points to the introduction and development of Assamese Sūtradhārī nritya in the Bāusī Parganā firmly. Even now, Sūtradhār bangshārā (family) has been carrying on the tradition of playing the role of Sūtradhār in bhāona performances since the days of Kajalā Māji Sūtradhār whom Mathurādās Budhā Ātā trained and settled in Barpetā bringing the former from a village called Belbāri. 29 During the course of bhāona there are other two items of dance. The first

29. J. Mahanta : Mathurādās Budhā Ātār Jivan Caritra, p. 112
one is the Gosāi-prabesār-nāc where the dance of Lord Kṛṣṇa with his twelve companions of cowherd boys is exhibited and the second is Gopī-prabesār-nāc in which the entrance of the dancing milk-women is represented according to Sūtradhāra's bhaṅgis. There is still a type of Sūtradhārī bhaṅgi known as Barpetya bhaṅgi current in some satras of Assam which also points to the unique place of Barpetā in Sūtradhārī nṛtya.

(b) Naṭuwā or Naṭuā nāc (dance): This is also another important form of satrīyā dance performed by naṭuās (dancer boys) wearing a special white costumes in order to depict some devotional sentiments. It is stated in the GCK that Mādhava-deva demonstrated Rādhā-nāc in Barpetā Satra according to direction of Surānanda, an officer of Koch king Raghudevanārayana with help of naṭuās. Present Meṭuākuchi is considered to be old Naṭuahāti of Barpetā Satra where the naṭuās of Ankiyā bhāonā were accomodated in a separate hāti during the time of Mathurādās Buḍhā Āṭā. This also bears the evidence of the reputation of Barpetā in the field of satrīyā nṛtya. Now, Naṭuākuchi is here in Barpetā satra complex without naṭuā in the name of Meṭuākuchi.

30. GCK, p. 355
(c) Cāli-nāc: This form of dance is derived from ankiyā-nāta and is considered one of the characteristic forms of satrīyā dance. According to Dr. M. Neog, "the term 'natuā-nāch' is sometimes applied specifically to the chāli-nāch (dances). The word natuā generally means an actor in the beginning, as we so find it in the biographies of the saints. It would thus indicate that this form of dance was derived from ankiyā drama." His remark also points that along with ankiyā-nāta this cāli-nāc once was practised and developed in the Harpetā group of satras as a popular dance form.

(d) Creative innovations of satrīyā dance: Certain innovative dance forms have been created on the basis of satrīyā dance the most entertaining of which are Dāsavatāra nritya and Bhortāl nritya.

(i) Dāsavatāra nritya: In this nritya the dancer or dancers inscribe the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu through the medium of dance, music and recitation of verses from the Kīrtan-ghosā and the Nāma-ghosā. This dance has been performing traditionally on the days after 'gondha' and before

suweri of doulotsav (deul) i.e., on the days except first and last days of deul of Barpeta and Sundaridya Satras specially. The period in between the above mentioned period is locally known as bhar-deul (prime-deul). During this period the deity of the satra has been installed on the daul griha infront of which dasavatāra nritya is conducted according to custom. It is to be noted that Guru Ojā of Barpeta Phātā-hāti innovated this dance form and brought this creative satrīy dance before the stage for the first time. The musical instruments employed in this dance are mainly cymbal, nāgarā and flute. The dance may be exhibited by a single dancer or by a group of dancers.

(ii) Bhortāl nritya: It is a unique dance item associated with Barpeta Satra carried on with accompaniment of instruments like cymbal, flute and nāgarā. The devotees conduct prayer (prasānga) singing songs in praise of Lord Kṛṣṇa where they occasionally perform dance with bhor-tāla in which this cymbals (bhor-tālas) figure prominently. This particular famous and colourful dance may be conducted either by a single dancer or a group of dancers, playing bhor-tālas with different skilful techniques and styles. The skilful playing of bhor-tāla

33. Information received from Mahadev Bāyan and Thānu Rām Budhā Bākhat of Barpeta Satra.
with subsequent music is the vital and figurative musical instrument of this type of dance and hence, it is popularly known as bhor-tāla nritya. This colourful dance is said to have been evolved out of Bir-nāma or Thiya-nāma (prayer in standing pose). It is stated that bhor-tāla nritya was innovated by Mahānanda Sūtradhār (1862-1953 A.D.) of Barpeta Satra. But Narahari Buḍhā Bhakat, a famous artist in satrīyā dance of Barpeta Satra, gave it a more artistic shape. He transformed it into a popular and entertaining dance item in and outside Assam by performing the same on the stage as a traditional Assamese Vaiṣṇava dance form.

In this connection it deserves mention here that some individual artists and institutions of Barpeta have been carrying on their mission to preserve and propagate some traditional satrīyā art-forms through both individual and collective efforts at different times and levels.

Individual persons like Kāniyā Bāyan (1855-1948 A.D.) and Balo Rām Bāyan (1858-1959 A.D.) of Barpeta Satra were famous artists of satrīyā culture. They coached few bhakats

34. Śaṅkaradeva Kalā Kṣetra : A note on Bhor-tāla nritya.
35. Information received from Mahādev Bāyan, Secy., S.K.K. of Barpeta
of Kamalábārī Satra the lessons pertaining to āṅkīyā bhāonā and barqītas with set rāgas, tālas, rhythms etc. Other reputed artist like Dayāl Sūtradhār, Sehō Rām Bāpu, Narahari Budhā Bhakat, Ambikāgīrī Rāychoudhury etc. about whom brief discussions have been made elsewhere in this project in their respective fields of distinction.

Of the various organisations of Barpētā special mention must be made of the Saṅkaradeva Kalā Kṣetra which is an institution associated with performing art forms of satras. It has been established in 1947 and since then, under the initiative of this auspicious organisation instructions and trainings have been given on various aspects of satrīyā culture. The items adopted by the Saṅkaradeva Kalā Kṣetra for instruction, training and exhibition are (1) Kṛṣṇa nritya, (2) Daśavatār nritya, (3) Bhārtāl nritya (single and group), (4) Jhumurā nritya, (5) Chālī nritya, (6) Guru-vandanā, (7) Nām-prasāṅga, (8) Bīr-nāma, (9) Holīgītas and nritya, (10) Nāc-khelar-gīta, (11) Bar-gīta, (12) Loka-gīta, (13) Shyamanta-haraṇa dance

(c) Drama Performance:

Considering the time factor the art and technique employed in the drama performance, leaving aside its contents or subject-matters, we shall attempt to study the drama performance in this region under the following heads:

(i) Ankīyā-nātas (early one act plays): The great Vaiṣṇava saint of Assam used the terms 'nāṭa' and 'nritya' in the Rukmini-haran, 'nāṭaka' in the Keligopal and 'jāṭrā' in Kāliya-daman, many a time to mean commonly 'a book of drama'. The later biographers also used the terms like 'jāṭrā' or 'aṅka'. Kāli Rām Medhi says that the term 'nāṭa' is same as the Sanskrit term 'nāṭaka' and 'nāṭa' or 'nāṭaka' is equivalent to the English term 'drama'. In the opinion of

37. Dwijendra Nath Das: 'Samskritik Charcā āru Aitihya Rakṣār Eti Anusthan' in Ādir Assam, 19th June, 1988
38. Rāmacaran, V. 3418; Daityārī, p. 128, Ramananda, V. 1505
Tirthanath Sarma 'nāta' owes its origin from the Vedic word 'narte'. Dr. S.N. Sarma says that the term 'anīya-nāta' has been used to call those dramas written in the form of Śaṅkara-Mādhava to distinguish them from the dramas of later period. According to Dr. M. Neog 'anīya-nāta' "is of popular application, indicating Sanskrit variety of play." In brief, the play with music, dance and dialogue is known as anīya-nāta, the fullest development of which was experienced in and around Barpeta during the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement.

Even accepting the Cihna-vātra of Śaṅkaradeva to be the first and earliest effort in writing and staging with painted scenes representing the seven Vaikuntha (heaven) the fact remains that he composed and staged all of his other dramas in the Pāṭbāusī Satra as mentioned earlier. The dramas of Mādhava and Gopāl Ātā were also composed in the Barpeta group of satras. Almost all of their dramas were produced on the stages here and as a result, the entire 'Cultural Zone' was flooded with neo-Vaiṣṇavite cultural and spiritual traditions. As Dr. B.K. Barua says, "this Assamese bhāonā is a type

40. Tirthanath Sarma: Panca Puṣpa, p. 111
41. S.N. Sarma: Asamīyā Nātya Sāhitya, p. 9
42. M. Neog: Śaṅkaradeva and His Time, p. 266
43. GCK, p. 31
by itself, and entirely a popular representation that breaks all social barriers and provides enjoyment to the village community only with occasional recreation and diversion, but also acquaint them with episodes from the epics and the Purānas.

The typical nature of Aṅkiyā-nāta and its art and technique gave birth to some such striking features, as the coordination and harmony of which depend on its success, are songs, rhythmic representation by dance, melody etc. from proper instrument and dialogue. In order to perform these elements of bhāonā appropriately the saint trained some such persons who had been seemed to be skilful in the field of performing arts, such as ojā, sūtradhār, gāyan, bāyan, natuwā etc. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that traditionally the satras have been being the centres of drama composition and performance. In the performance of aṅkiyā-nāta the orchestral party of gāyana-bāyana is to mark the beginning with devotional music known as dhemāli. Thus the sūtradhār, the keyman of the bhāonā, introduces the drama and its characters to the audiances through the medium of recitation, music and dance all through the course of drama from the beginning to the end.

44. B.K. Barua: 'Introduction' to the Aṅkiyā-Nāt, p. XXX
It is to be admitted that according to custom the functions of sutradhār, ojā, gāyana-bāyana etc. are to be performed by the respective families with hereditary responsibilities even now. But as we have mentioned already, the performance of ankiyā-nāta and its practice are about to disappear from this region. As the old veteran nostalgically complains — "there is old traditions without relevant execution, there is rumination of old memory without dream of the future." ⁴⁶ In satras like Barpeta, however, dramas have been performed in Bihu festivals, Kīrtanatsavas of the saints, Deul or Doulotsava etc. but these are not ankiyā-bhāonā. ⁴⁷ Of course, individual efforts to preserve and propagate satriyā culture can not be denied as mentioned earlier.

(2) Khuliyā-bāonā : This type of bhāonā is an extension of the typical ankiyā-bhāonā, introduced, perhaps for the first time in the Barpeta Satra. The foundation of this typical bhāonā was laid by Lakshmi Kānta Rājmedhi alias Seho Rām Bāpu approximately in 1887 A.D. It is stated that khuliyā-bhāonā or 'bāyan-party' became a most entertaining institution prevalent

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⁴⁶. Remark made by few Budhā Satriyā and Budhā-bhakatas of Barpeta Satra.
⁴⁷. Girish Choudhury: 'Barpetār Yātrā Abhinaya' in Sāhitya, Samskriti āru Barpeta edited by R. Das, p. 100
in Kāmrūp and Mangaldoi region which resembles to dhuliyā-bhāonā. This cultural institution grew in co-ordination with the western style of drama performance and is called Khuliyā-bhāonā. The basic organs of this bhāonā are natuwa (chokrā) nritya, sūtradhāri nritya, actors of the play with accompaniment of khol, tāla, nritya or bhāonā. The bāyana, plays the key-role like the sūtradhār of ankiyā-nāta. The khol (cattle drum) and tāla (cymbal) of the bāyanas are the vital musical instruments of this bhāonā. Those who beat the khol are known as khuliya in popular language. Perhaps, this is the reason for which this drama performance is known as khuliyā bhāonā, and as the main roles have been played by the bāyanas (khol dancers) it is called the 'bāyan-dal' (party). It is noticed that Seho Rām Bāpu (Rājmedhi) trained a group of people up in the Bajāli area through the rehearsal of his drama Sāgar-manthan. It is also said that Seho Rām Bāpu and Senā Rām Tahsildār of Barpetā Satra went to Kamalabari Satra in 1891 A.D. in order to pertain instructions on 'khuliyā bhāonā'.

48. A.C. Hazarika: Mančalekhā, p. 259
49. Ibid, p. 259
Seho Rām Bāpu trained some devotees of that satra with the help of his drama Jayadrath-vadh and Tahsildār trained through the dramas namely Sītā-vanabās and Abhimānyu-vadh. The bhaonā known as dhura-bhāonā in the Kamalābāri Satra was originated in the Barpeta Satra. Dr. S.N. Sarma stated that the sutradhār starts the nāta and proceeds to the subject-matter with the help of typical music known as 'dhurā' and as this occupies a pivotal position in the bhāonā, so this bhāonā is called 'dhurā-bhāonā' or 'dhurā-nāt'. In connection with Khuliya-bhāonā Seho Rām Bāpu prepared nearly 25 dramas the mention of which has been made in preceding chapter. With the inclusion of sportive character and its witful speeches the bhāonā was able to gain popularity within a short time. But due to frequent changes of political and social conditions in the state and society, people were allured for quest of new ideas and interests. As a result, popularity of khuliya-bhāonā had to be decreased. Now, this sort of bhāonā has almost extinguished in the Barpeta region.

50. N.C. Goswami : Satra Samskritir Svarṇarekhā, p. 806
51. S.N. Sarma : Asamīyā Nātya Sāhitya, p. 84
(3) Dhuliya Bhāwariyā: A semi-dramatic folk performance.

There are grounds to believe that since the primitive times the bands of dhuliya (drummer) had been giving performance in important social and religious functions and during festivals. Their mummery and musk-dancing lead us to consider that it involved from the traditional folk-dance. We have come across in the GCK that before Śaṅkaradeva's arrival, there was prevalent of bardhulliyā and their mummery at Dhopguri, a village in between Kāljār and Bhāwanipur staras of Gopāl Ātā. According to K.R. Medhi the performance of dhuliya bhāwariyā may be divided into four parts, such as (a) music with drum, cymbal and flute, (b) acrobatic performance, (c) farcical devices with songs and dance, (d) bhāwariyā performances. He considers that "it was common among the people before the appearance of literary work and their songs and dances are extemporary, ludicrous and marked by coarse jokes and vulgar and contemptuous language." It appears that no common set formula has been applied in their dances. Man like Mohan Bhāwariyā of Kāmrūpī

52. GCK, p. 237
53. Kali Ram Medhi: Studies in the Vaiṣṇava literature and culture of Assam, p. 66
dhuliya could create sensation among the audience by wit and
presence of mind through his farcical devices of songs and
dances.

A.C. Hazarika remarks that Kāmrūpī dhuliya is a recrea-
tional and farcical institution as well as a sober cultural
institutions which heightens the pomp and solemnity of festival
and public gatherings through its jumping, skipping, rope-
dancing etc. like circus party. Now, this nature gifted
famous dhuliya institution has been losing its popularity day
by day, perhaps due to progress of education and science gifted
audio-visual devices. Besides it, there are folk performances
like Bihu songs and dance, mohoho music and dances that are
common throughout Assam without any speciality of this cultural
zone except the dialect of music employed.

(d) Transitional period of Drama-performance:

(1) Influence of Bengali drama performance: After the
annexation of Assam by the Britishers in 1826 A.D. as mentioned
already, the Assamese had to lose their mother tongue for
Bengali upto 1872 A.D. The Assamese are too sensitive by

54. A.C. Hazarika: Manēalekhā, p. 206
nature for which Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan prayed to God to give the Assamese people 'good disposition of conscience'.

Perhaps, Barpeta has been occupying the advanced position in many respects in comparison to other places of Assam. In the case of bringing Bengali yātra gān (drama) or chokrā-gānā (Beng. gānā means drama, Ass. gān) i.e., performance of drama associating 'boy-dancers' or 'dancing boys' - into the stages of Assam she had not been lagging behind. Tithi Rām Bāyan of Barpeta has been considered as the front ranker to import Bengali drama-performance to the broad floor of Assam. He organised a drama-party adopting Bengali drama at Barpeta in 1860-65 A.D. in collaboration of Kedār Nāth Dās and Gobindarām Dās Choudhury (both lawyers). Advocate G.D. Choudhury wrote two Bengali dramas namely Rāma-Vanavās and Mānabhanjan for the opera-party of Tithi Rām Bāyan to produce on the stage. Tithi Rām Bāyan's party staged the dramas in various places of Barpeta region and as the land was fertile the popularity of Bengali drama captured the area rapidly. Tithi Rām Bāyan and his party got encouragement at their

55. Ibid, p. 249
56. A.C. Hazarika: Mancālekhā, pp. 250-51
popularity and as a result, they chalked out plan and programme to move the entire Assam. In view of that they went to Sibsagar and staged their Bengali drama at different places of the district where they were received warmly from all corners.\(^{37}\)

Since then the wave of Bengali drama accompanied by a band of dancers (côkrā) under the costumes of girls knocked every nook and corner of Assam nearly for a considerable period of time. In 1905 'Kedâr Roychoudhury, Sarat Kumâr Lâhiri (both outsiders) and Manahari Dâs of Barpeta started 'Bândhav Nâtya Samity' in collaboration of few government officers and educated people of Barpeta. This Nâtya Samity staged few Bengali dramas namely Dasârathar Mrigayâ, Prahlâd Caritra, Bilvamangal etc. with success. In 1911 under the leadership of Hariprasâd Brahmachary they arranged a Bengali drama named Harirâj to produce on the stage in order to celebrate the coronation ceremony of Emperor Gorge V at Barpeta against the interest of people like Ambikâgiri Raychoudhury.\(^{58}\) Perhaps, that was the last Bengali drama staged at Barpeta.

\(^{57}\) Ibid, p. 250

\(^{58}\) Prasannalâl Choudhury : "Barpêtâ Raâgamança" in Sâhitya Samâroh Granth, Barpêtâ Adhivesan, 1969, pp.43-44
(b) Revival of Assamese drama: In the meantime Ambikāgiri Raychoudhury organised Dakṣin-hāṭi Yātrā Party towards the last part of 1911. He wrote the Jayadrath-vadhā, Kalyān-mayee and Shikhidhvajār Dān-parikśā during 1911-1915 A.D. with the determination to free the Assamese stage from the strangle-hold of Bengali drama. Accordingly he, with the help of Ambikācaran Pātowary and Harendra Nārāyan Pujārī, organised the "Party" providing alround directions. The Jayadrath-vadhā drama was staged at Barpetā Satra compound in the last part of 1911 with grand success and received enthusiastic acceptance. His other two dramas also received warm appreciation from the audiences of all works of life. His dramas were able to capture the fields of Barpetā region and to free from the strangle-hold of Bengali drama. His efforts were able to produce immediate result of driving away the performance of Bengali drama not only from the stage of Barpetā but also from the stages of the entire region.39 The Yātrā Party of Dakṣin-hāṭi exhibited Jayadrath-vadhā on the stage of Ujānbazar Guwāhāti and in the first Annual Session of Asam

59. Nanda Talukdar (ed.): Raychoudhurir Smriti-granth, p. 241
Sāhitya Sabhā held at Dhuburi. Then again, there grew the Democratic Club, Bāndhav Nā tya Sāmity, Milan Mandir at Barpetā one after another producing different dramas on the stage of Barpetā. At length Milan Mandir party did its best to build the permanent Milan Mandir Theatre Hall and the same was completed in 1934 under graceful initiative of advocate Dhani Rām Tālukdār, the then Chairman of Barpetā Local Board. Milan Mandir Theatre Party earned a good reputation throughout Assam through the performance of dramas - 'Beulā', 'Juieporā Son' and also were exhibited on different stages within and outside Assam.

In the post-Independent period another permanent theatre hall was built keeping its name Tarun Rām Phukan Hall for which government aid was accorded. Both Milan Mandir Raṅga-manča (theatre house) and Tarun Rām Phukan Hall have been meeting the cultural needs and demands of the people. The neighbouring areas of Barpetā, as it is considered, suffered much due to indifferent attitudes of the educated people to pay attention for the preservation and propagation of satrīyā or śaṅkari culture.

60. Prasannalal Choudhury: 'Barpetā Raṅga-manča' in Sāhitya Samārāhgranth, 1969, p. 44
Our discussion on dramatic performance as an art of culture in Barpeta group of satras will remain incomplete if we do not go through the role of Braja Sarma and Barpeta's original contribution in the introduction of co-acting in Assamese theatre. From the days of Šaṅkara and Mādhava till 1932 A.D. we have no information that the women were given opportunity to take part with men in bhāonā exhibition of Assam. Formerly female roles in drama were played by male actors wearing female costumes, hair, etc.

Brajanath Sarma, a native of village Silā near Barpeta, is the most reputed name in the dramatic field of Assam whose contribution to drama and theatre are much more than expected. He is considered the founder of the "roving Assamese theatre" and co-acting in drama performance creating new era of Assamese theatre. "The revolutionary minded Brajanath started his revolution in social, cultural and political field of Assam. He was an expert actor, organiser, dramatist and a skilful manager too." 61 Brajanath began his life as an actor and organiser in

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61. A.C. Hazarika: Mančalekhā, p. 273
his native village in 1921 A.D. starting the 'śīlā Kālikā Opera Party' in collaboration of his brothers Maheswar and Kāśinanath Sarma. Within a short time the 'party' carried a good name in the entire district of undivided Kamrup. But in November 1924 the 'Opera Party' was dissolved due to internal misunderstanding. But Brajanath Sarma did not waste away his time to accept the appointment as ostād (master) and manager offered by the Dakshin Ganakgāri Opera Party in 1924. Under his able guidance the Opera Party from 1924-29 A.D. could earn reputation in the Lower Assam through the dramas namely 'Dhātri Pānṇā', 'Bāsachpāti', 'Sānti', Rakhi-vandhan, Ranjit Singha and Kālā-pāhār. Then in 1930 he organised a professional theatre party under the banner of the 'Assam Kahinur Theatre Party' adopting the dramas like Veda-uddhār, Bhāskar Pandit, Kālā-pāhār, Hindu-vīr, Bijaya Basanta, Lalitāditya, Mānar Jiyāri, Pānipath, Sivāji62 etc. From that time the importance of Opera Party's Kholā-mança (open theatre) had been in operation of diminishing return. But he had been longing for introduction of co-acting in Scene-theatre and

62. Ibid, p. 275
accordingly, he employed six girls in his party in 1933 A.D.  
Dumduma of Upper Assam was his first theatre of producing drama performance on the stage with female actresses in 1934 A.D., and that was a bright sign for women's liberation. The 'roving Kahinur Theatre' party travelled the entire Assam staging dramas in different places through which he laid the foundation of co-acting and created another new era of mancābhīnaya. By this time on the urging request of the Megaphone Company of Calcutta he completed recording of his three dramas namely the Manomati, the Patitā and the Sītā during 1935-36 A.D. The green memory of Brajanath Sarma's activities in different fields, he acted, would remind the theatre artists of all ages to come and inspire them. He paved the way of mancābhīnaya producing artists like Phani Sarma of great repute, music master Haren Sarma and master actor Chandra Choudhury of the Natarāj Theatre, Pāthsālā. Brajanath Sarma's life itself is a drama full of romance with laughter and lamentation.

63. A.C. Hazarika: Mančalekhā, p. 275
64. A.C. Hazarika: op.cit.
2. **Visual Arts**:

Barpetā's place in the field of the visual arts of Assam has been well established since the days of Saṅkaradeva. Painting, sculpture and architecture of the *satriyā* style have been glorious days in this region of Assam.

(a) **Painting**: The famous scenes of *Vaikunṭha* for the *Cihna-yātra* are said to have been painted by Saṅkaradeva for which he has been described as a famous painter. Saṅkaradeva in collaboration with Mādhavadeva had also depicted the scenes of Lord Kṛṣṇa's life in *Vṛndāvana* with captions for each miniature woven into a huge cloth of 180' x 90' with the help of the weavers of Tātikuchi. The mural paintings and wood carving of some beauty and sometimes with folk-art elements in them are seen in almost all of the *satras* specially Barpetā, Sundarīdiyā, Ganak-kuchi, Pātbāusī, Bhawānipur etc. The artistic sensibility of local artisan's paintings is seen in the *satra kīrtanghar*, *manikūt* and in some village *nāṃghars*. In most of the *satra kīrtanghars*, there are painted walls where

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65. *GCK*, p. 31
66. *GCK*, pp. 174–75
the stories from epics are portrayed and painted with decoration and designs for easy illustration. The walls, posts and post-plates of the kirtanghar of Barpatā and Sundaridiyā satras have been bearing their evidences to the visitors. Even in those days when under Mādhavadeva's instruction and initiative the great kirtanghar of Barpatā was constructed the walls, posts, post-plates, panels of doors etc. were covered with rāngpātā (tin foil), bālicandā (mica), and kharimāti (chalk). The paintings were also provided on the wooden posts and post-plates.67 The art of book illustration by means of miniatures was largely cultivated in the 17th and 18th centuries of Christian era. All the illustrated manuscripts have not yet been published and, therefore, no serious attempt has been made to study the technique of Assamese religious painting of medieval period.68 Such manuscripts are available in satras and bāhās (abodes) even now. The present set up of the satras are made of brick, cement, iron rods, C.I. sheet etc. bears the traditional style and technique of painting. For instance, on the walls of the Barpatā group of satras in most cases the different

67. GCK, p. 288
68. S.N. Sarma : NVM&SIA, p. 176
incarnations of Viṣṇu are portrayed through painting in which attempts are made to tell the stories swiftly and vividly with the help of line and colour. The beautiful coloured creepers with floral designs painted on the doors, and the Guru-āsanas bear the skill and interest of the artisans. The painted statues of the Kāliya-damana episode of Kṛṣṇa, Garuḍa and Hanumān installed in the khaṭkhaṭīr-jān of Barpeta are signs of modernised excellent arts of painting. Dr. S.K. Chetterjee remarks, "one thing marks off these 18th century paintings of Assam - there are beautiful landscape, most green and undulating plains with flowers, trees, and hills and rivers. It is a wonder how the beauty of nature as spread out over the face of the earth could captivate these artists of Assam in a way it never did artists in other parts of India.\textsuperscript{69} The boats meant for races are so beautifully decorated through the medium of paintings. The technique and finishings are so realistic to create enthusiasm among oarers as if they fly riding on a peacock and the landscape arising out of boat-race allures the audience so gathered.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{69} S.K. Chetterjee: \textit{Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India}, p. 58
(b) **Architecture**: In the *Guru Carit Kathā* we find detailed descriptions of different types of houses and house-complex built by the common people from the remote past.\(^{70}\) We may take here the *raṅgiyāl ghar*\(^{71}\) (*Sans. raṅgaśālā* = performance houses) of Barpeta Satra as the model architecture of *satra-kīrtanghar* of the 16th century where modern materials were totally absent. The following description of the construction of the *kīrtanghar* of Barpeta Satra is of special significance which will shed light in respect of form and style of old Assamese wood and bamboo architecture\(^{72}\) except few application of modern colourful materials. According to Daityāri Thākur\(^{73}\) the *gosāighar* of Barpeta Satra built under the initiative of Mādhavadeva was the most beautiful and no such *kīrtanghar* parallel to that was in Kāmrūp in those days. A detailed

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70. *GCK*, pp. 209-213
71. *Raṅgiyāl ghar* erected under the initiative of Mādhava for the urging pressure of Thākur Ātā does not seem to be a *kīrtanghar* but a theatre house where bhāona and other satrīyā dance style with training were performed to give a better counter to the growing popularity of Dāmodara-deva. Besides, the name given to that house reminds to a house built for giving amusement.
72. *GCK*, pp. 287-91
73. Daityāri, p. 315
description regarding the construction of the kīrtanghar of Barpeta Satra available in the GCK will show the architectural picture of house complex as given below:

Being settled at Tātikuchi (Barpeta) Madhavadeva discussed with Mathurādās Budhā Ātā regarding the construction of Hari-mandir (temple) in order to remove the inadequacies faced in administering ordination to the people and in holding prayers and religious discussions. Accordingly, arrangements were made to build a Harimandir there in the plot of land donated by Rāmlādwar Budhā. Bamboo was not available at Tātikuchi due to low land area. So, he, with the help of few disciples, bamboos were brought from the Bajāli Parganā. The long and big matured bamboos were split into long rods (kāmi) and the thinner made into whole rods (ruwā) to be reaching from the eaves to the nave. They were then kept under water for few days in order to give them durability and then they were dried and dyed red. Timber was available in the selected cite of Rāmlādwarā's land. Madhava's disciples, namely Parvatiyā Kriṣṇāi Ātoī, his son Rām Kārikar and Bhiviṣāṇa worked as carpenters. They made ready

74. GCK, pp. 288-90
the required number of posts and beams and an āsana or pīrā (padestal). The locally available canes were split into small strings and made them smooth for ready to tie. Now, the posts were set upright the cross beams and horizontal poles along with whole length of the house were set. The dyed rodes were then spread over split rodes to form the roofs and tied them by strings of cane where necessary. Then the sketch roofs were covered with thatches all over and wicher work frames at the ridges and edges. Walls were set up with bamboo and wood, windows being left in proper places. The posts and walls were studded with bālicandā (mica) and rāngpātā (tinfoil). The gum used for sticking the glittering objects was produced and obtained from bilvas (wood apples). Kharimāti (chalk) was used for decorating the walls and posts. Bibhiṣaṇa and Krṣṇāi Ātoi, the two expert carpenters carved out creepers with floral designs (lata phular naksā) on the main gate-way (pāt-dvār) and on both sides of the pāt-dvār the wood carved representation of Jay and Vijaya75 were kept on standing pose who are considered as the gate-keepers of Vaikuntha.

75. GCK, p. 290
Decorated caption and floral design on panels of door and satra gate

Masks and effigies preserved in satra
The Barpeta group of satras has on its eastern most end a house constructed perpendicularly to the kīrtanqhar which is known by such descriptive name as bhāighar that is the house with drooping ends containing architectural form of its own. The math with its cōtāl (cour-yard) as mentioned in chapter IV is a distinguished architectural style of specimens of the Barpeta group of satras. In matters of architecture detailed informations are available in the article of R.F. Nath under the title, "Assamese Architecture" in Aspects of the Heritage of Assam, edited by K.N. Datta where his minute observations on 'Assamese Architectures' are well represented.

The tools necessary for architectural works are dāo (big knife), spade (cāch), karat (saw), hāturi (hammer), kuthār (axe), batāli (chisel), rāndā (adze) etc. and were made on local envil.

(c) Sculpture: To quote Dr. B.K. Barua, "the majority of sculptures that have hitherto been found in the province (Assam) are gods, goddesses and other semi-divine figures which served as an ornament of architecture." But it is said, "Assam

76. B.K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, pp. 191-92
has a very old tradition of wood carving, particularly associated with satras and nāmghars. Figures of door-keepers, the celestial bird Garuḍa, Hanumān, Votive pedestals (āsana), masks, book-rests (thāknā, thagi), decorative panels etc. carved out of wood and often painted in an indigenous traditional style, constitute important items of the Assamese Vaiṣṇava paraphernalia."  

No information is available regarding stone sculpture in satrīyā culture. The metal images available in some satras of this region are of local form but with imported technique. The GCK tells us about the 'lost-wax process' without evidential proof of such metal sculpture. Moreover, in satrīyā culture other gods and goddesses are not considered essential elements of sculpture except Lord Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu). Reference may be given to Ṣaṅkaradeva who had the wooden image of Viṣṇu carved by one Kārala Bādhōi. Such types of wood carving have been made occasionally for the demonstration in bhāonā performance. The sculptures that are products of neo-Vaiṣṇavism may be divided into three groups: (a) human forms, (b) birds and animal forms and (c) other various designs.

77. A Majid : Monographs on wood-carving in Assam, 1903, p.13  
78. GCK, pp. 395-96  
79. GCK, p. 287; Rāmacaran, p. 500; Daityari, p. 85
(a) **Hanuman forms**: So far Barpeta group of satras is concerned the walls, panel of doors, pāt-dvār etc. are generally decorated with those human forms that are depicted in connection with the various scenes of the epics. The images of Viṣṇu, Nārāyana, Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa and different ten incarnations are carved decently out of wood and some metal. The wood-figures of Jaya-Vijaya are carved out as the representatives of Vaikuntha who are considered the gate keepers (dvārapālas) of Viṣṇu. The two dvārapālas are common feature of almost all satras. Moreover, half-man figures of Hanumān and Garuḍa are common forms of sculpture in most of the satras.

(b) There are figures of elephants, lions, tigers, deer, fishes (magar), tortoises, crocodiles, peacock, pea-hens etc. are portrayed both from wood and cement clay. These are generally portrayed on the walls of the kīrtanghar, on the boundary wall of satra, on the decorated caption of the torans (satrapa-gates). On the two sides of the toran and its wall cement clay made figures of pea-cock are finely decorated items of sculpture. But the sculpture of the temples of Saivism and

80. Saivalinga figures made of cement clay with painting are seen under few bata-trāṣ. (ficus indica) generally on road side. These may be considered items of present day sculpture.
Saktism etc. are not considered here in our discussion.

(c) Other various designs of visual arts are traditionally carried on in the satras. Beautiful creepers with floral designs have been carved on the panels of doors and gates of kirtanghar which easily draw the attention of visitors. Of all floral designs, the lotus has been by far the greatest favourite and it is carved in various forms, in bud, in half hidden state and in full-bloom flowers. With the growth and development of satra institution the art of sculpture have been flourishing to cope with the various aspects of Vaishnava culture. The art of carving miniature images of deities, votive pedestals of wood and ivory beautifully decorated with various designs are still in existence in few satras of Barpeta region. The wood and copper Guru-āsana, āsana of deity 81 etc., specially the thrones consisting of seven tires supported by tortoises, elephants and lions decorated with various floral designs on the side plates adorn the kirtanghars and shrines of the satras. Another important thing of skilful art most

81. The metal made gosāi āsanas of Pātāushī Satra and singhāsana of Sundaridiya Satra are considered its metal to be brass.
commonly used in satras on all ceremonial occasions is 
asrāi
(mounted tray) of various types with designs. They are made of
copper and bell-metal locally.

The bhāonā performances gave birth to a class of arti-
sans who were specialised in making masks (mukhā) of various
kinds, and effigies (chō) of bears, birds, lion etc. The class
of people professionally devoted to such types of works are
known as khanikar or sūtār. Dr. Neog is of the opinion that
"in some satras were to be seen till the other day mural
paintings and wood carvings of some beauty and sometimes with
folk elements on them." It is to be marked that from the very
outlook of some sculptures the convention of angularity in
figures drawing and carving, fish-shaped eyes, arched eye-
brows, pointed nose and sloping foreheads are notable character-
istics which perhaps, indicate the influence of ancient tradi-
tion of Vaiṣṇava art and culture.

3. Crafts :

We have come across in the biographies of the saints the
references to weavers, spinners, goldsmiths, blacksmiths and
workers in ivory, wood, bamboo, canes, hide etc. some of which

82. M. Neog : The Contribution of Śaṅkaradeva to the
Literature and Civilisation of India, p. 29
received patronage of ruling kings from time to time, specially king Naranārāyana of Koch Kingdom who settled the brittiyāls (craftsmen) in his kingdom importing from different places.83

But in case of Barpeta Satra Complex it was Mathurādās Budhā Ātā who reorganised the Barpeta Satra into several hātis (suburbs) and delegated different persons for different assignments and responsibilities in connection with services of the satra to different hātis as mentioned earlier in chapter III. The craftsmen were required to render certain voluntary services in connection with satra festivals. In this context it is to be referred to that of the peculiar socio-cultural caste formation appeared depending on the development of different handicrafts. The craftsmen engaged in different crafts formed in course of time different classes. As a result, class and caste were blended together. These crafts constituting professional classes rather than castes became hereditary professions. There are kumārs, kamārs, khanikars, baniyās etc. belonging to different social castes like Kalita, Keot, Koch and so on.

83. Dwija Purpānand: Gopāl Devar Carit ed. by Mohan Ch. Mahanta, vv. 130-32
The crafts: Now, we shall pass on to different crafts which developed in Barpeta Satra Complex with their present conditions in the prevailing system of society.

(1) Weaving: The GCK, and other biographies give us sufficient proof of Tātikuchi's handloom industry where Śaṅkara-Mādhava woven famous Vrindāvani vastra with the help of the Tātis headed by Gopāl Tāti later known as Mathurādās Budhā Āṭā. The head of weavers is known as Maral. According Daityari Śaṅkaradeva was put officer-in-charge (gomasta) of the handloom factory of Kenduguri at Barpeta which would indicate about a rich legacy of handloom industry in this area. It is noticed that though weaving ceases now to be a profession of the mass people, yet women of this area have been preserving its old tradition and they have the skill in the art of weaving and spinning through which they knit dream in their dresses. Hundred per cent of the house-holders contain atleast one loom where they can knit famous 'Barpetyā' gāchā-basā (floral design) or pāti, as locally called, in

84. GCK, p. 174
85. GCK, p. 121
86. Daityari, pp. 84-85
Artisan engaged in making various ornaments of ivory, guru-āsana etc.

Barpeta-made earthen utensils and toys by Hira woman
their mekhelā and cādar. At present there are three weaving centres at Barpeta sponsored by the state government of Assam.

(2) Ivory work: Barpeta is the only place in Assam where ivory industry has been functioning since long past. Once Barpeta earned a good reputation for her ivory ornaments and sculpture like bracelet (kharu), chain (hār), ring (āngu-thi), combs of various sizes and types, small ornament boxes (sāphor), stick (lāthi), handle of knife (katārī nāl), small tray (thagi), toy (putala), image of Radhā-Kṛṣṇa etc. Originally there were three ivory enterprises at Barpeta where nearly 30 crafts men were employed. Now, there are two ivory enterprises namely 'Radhanāth Ivory Arts House' and 'Bhāgavati Ivory Works' House'. At present, both the enterprises have been facing acute financial crises as a result of which they are considering to stop functioning for want of government grant and raw materials. Jagannāth Dās of the Radhanāth Ivory Arts House was an expert sculptor of high esteem. The enterprises have been running this traditional craftsmanship somehow or other. They start making of wooden Guru-āsanas and carving floral designs on the penals of doors and wooden gates with significant ivory articles. Sailendranāth Dās of
Gold and Silver Ornaments Made by Native Bania of Barpeta


Mudhi (silver made wrist anklet)

Bharā - khāru (silver made anklet) a cele

Variegated Keseluvā hāyu (chain) reproduced from Prañitik, Feb., 1989.

Various gold and silver ornaments
Radhanath Ivory Arts House nostalgically complains that there are wanton negligences of the state government's authority concerned. The soaring prices of tusk also compel them to consider cease-functioning. These enterprises are now turning to one man's (business) crafts as there are no scope for apprenticeship. Moreover, no new hand is willing to learn this craftsmanship for deplorable source of income. Extremely high cost of production leads to discouraging demand for it.

(3) Gold and Silver Work: Another important ancient small industry of Barpeta is the manufacturing of jewellery. Goldsmith-cum-silversmith is locally known as Baniyā or Kārikar. The skill in the art of manufacturing variegated ornaments of gold and silver by Hādā Baniyā Atoi of Bāusi Parganā has been noticed in the GCK during the days of Śaṅkaradeva. 88

During the time of Mathurādās Buḍha Atā, the Baniyās were settled in Nahāti, Vrindāvanhāti and Ghorāmārā-hāti, so that they could meet the current demands of the people of their respective areas along with the demands of satra and

88. GCK, p. 170
people coming from outside the town. It is stated that only the native Assamese Baniyās of Barpeta have the unique art of making popular "Barpetyā sonā" and 'muthī' with proper designs which are the variegated ornaments of ears and wrists of woman. 89

The native jewellers have the skill of making various ornaments of great demands which are popularly known as keceluriyā hār (a kind of rope like chain), bharikhāru (silver made wrist bracelet), gām-khāru (silver made bracelet for man), gal-patā (a kind of necklace), prajapati-hār (gold made chain for groom), cele (silver made ring knitting anklet), phulkādī, thuriya sonā.

The remark of Heniker and the list of ornaments supplied by him is considered worthmentioning here. To quote him, "another place in Assam proper, but further down the valley, having a great local reputation for its gold and silver work is Barpeta in the district of Kāmrūp." 90 The list given by him is noted below:

89. Ganesh Das: "Asamīyā Mahilāā Ādarar 'Sonā' Āru Barpetār Sonā Gadhotār Daśā" in the Prāntik, February, 1989, p. 25


Besides these, the technique of making some other ornaments like Jon-biri, bharikharu etc. contain specific art of beauty. Now, there are seven native families only out of 230 goldsmith families who have been continuing the traditional crafts. Only three families out of them make gold ornaments while the rest confine themselves to making of silver and other chemical ornaments. At present the only skill man Deben Das, a native goldsmith of Barpeta town knows the art of making variegated 'sona'. Out of 21 resourceful jewelleries, there are twenty Bengali jewelleries in the municipality area. This currently available data shows the very deplorable condition of the Assamese goldsmiths of Barpeta.

91. Ganesh Das: 'Asamiya Mahilār Ādār 'Sonā' āru Barpetār Sonā gadhotār Daśā' in the Prāntik, February 1989, p. 25
The cause of such morbid conditions of the native Banijyas may be summed up as such—(1) They are financially handicapped, (2) Secondly insincerity to the crafts and (3) thirdly scarcity and soaring price of gold due to Gold Control Act of 1963, (4) Inability to compete with the new comers, (5) Sensibility due to modern education.

(4) Pottery: The potters are by far the largest craftsman community of Barpeta and its adjoining areas. They are classified into two sub-classes namely the Hira and the Kumār. "There are Kumārs belonging to different social castes like Kalitā, Koch, Keot etc. Their position in social hierarchy is not necessarily low."92 The Hiras and the Kumāras differ in the nature of their works. Even the clay used by them also differs. The soil used by the Hiras is popularly known as hiramāti. The mode of production of the Hiras is more primitive. They use their hands and a wooden rod to shape the utensils while the Kumāras use wheel in producing their articles of the crafts. The Hiras have been associated with toy making along

92. B. Datta: Folk Toys of Assam, p. 3
with making of family used utensils and other utility articles which are their principal production of the occupation. In the words of Dr. B. Datta, "in Barpeta, which is an important centre of Assam Vaisnavism, the treatment given to some human figures is rather peculiar; the head portion clearly resembles the forms of figures associated with the Vaisnava monasteries (satra) and prayer halls (namghar)." The Kumāras have little to do with toy making rather they are associated with making of certain particular utensils like caru (earthen cooking pot), ghat (earthen water-jar), cāki (earthen lamp) etc. and ring-wells (pātnād).

The survey report of Planning Forum of the M.C. College, Barpeta shows that the total number of potter families living in Barpeta town, Sundaridiyā, Bāmunā are 352 having a total population 2,226 out of which 250 families have stuck to their paternal occupation while others have left the crafts.

This wide spread and largest crafts of this area has also been facing some difficulties, such as (1) high price of

93. B. Datta : Ibid, p. 8
clay soil and fuel, (2) poverty of the craftsmen, (3) educated people prefer other job to their paternal one.

(5) Blacksmithy (crafts of Kamār): Among other small scale industries blacksmithy has also been playing an important role in this region which is intimately connected with peasant life. Naturally, it may be considered that its development depends on the growth and development of agriculture in rural area. The craftsmen employed in the iron work is popularly known as Kamār. Kamāras like Kumāras is not a social caste but a professional class. The Kamāras may belong to any other social castes and the craftsmanship does not lower down the so-called social status at all.

Once blacksmithy was a resourceful small scale industry of Barpeta centering round the satrīya town. The craftsmen of Barpeta supplied necessary equipments to the satra as well as to the agriculturists. The most notable product of the craftsmen of Barpeta is the gāchā (support for earthen lamps) which is not found made elsewhere in Assam. The other products are dāo, katāri (knife), kāchi (sickle), kuthār (axe), kabjā (hinge), gajāl (nails), khājābom (pipe-bomb), kādar tup (arrow-head) khāpar (hunting spare), kach (fishing nails) etc. The gāchā is most beautiful art crafts which has no match even other places
of India. The gachā and dāo of Parsu Kāmār (1841-1937 A.D.) are crafts of well repute. But with the gradual passing of time and with the development of iron and steel industry in a large scale, most of the craftsmen abandoned this traditional crafts.

According to the report of Planning Forum, M.C. College Barpeta, only 12 families out of 25 craftsman families have been continuing the trade. The educated members of kāmāra's family do not like this toilsome crafts any more. The serious complain against the craftsmen is that they find it very difficult to maintain their families with small income getting out of rigorous labour. Secondly, the old envil is not in order to compete with modern machinery. Moreover, the seasonal variation of numbers of order placed for leads them to incur heavy loss.

(6) Wood work: The artisans employed in wood work are known as bādhoi. Bādhoi is also a professional class. They are also known as sūtār in this region. We have already mentioned in this chapter that Krisnāi Āto and associates built the Raṅgiyālghar of Barpeta Satra where they carved creeper with

95. Survey Report of Planning Forum, p. 16
96. GCK, p. 287
floral designs and āsana out of wood. In the past water transport was the main route of communication. Moreover, Barpeta and its adjoining areas are bounded by rivers and tributories. So, boats were the sole means of water transport and hence, boat making was indispensible. For this purpose Kundās were imported from the neighbouring hill areas. The profession of wood work had been in vogue in this area prior to Saṅkara's arrival. For instance Chakiyā Mājī may be cited here in this connection. Mājī had a boat-lending business. It may be considered that since remote past the crafts of wood carving was a major profession of a class of people. The carving of Guru-āsana, various floral designs, images of the ten incarnation of Viṣṇu, Jaya and Vijaya, Hanumān and Garuḍa-Pakshi (bird), khel-nāo with carving and paintings, furniture of various designs are the most artistic crafts of the Barpeta group of satras. The images of Garuḍa keeping snake in its break, Hanumān on the pose of eating fruit were carved out of wood by a bādhoi Lakṣi Sarma by name at about 1901 A.D. have been preserved in the satra kīrtanghar

97. Kundā is big log of wood the interior of which is hollowed out.
98. GCK, p. 82
99. Benudhar Das : "Barpetar Keibidhmān Kāru-śilpa" in Sāhitya Samskriti āru Barpeta, 1985, p. 120
of Barpeta. Khel-nāo of Dharam Rām Sūtradhār (1872-1952) and his son Dinanāth Sūtradhār had good reputation and are kept preserved even now. The carving of crocodiles with fish in mouth, pea-cock, floral designs with paintings are excellent signs of artistic skill. At present there are 28 furniture firms and 9 motor bus body building enterprises at Barpeta town that have been maintaining her old traditional crafts with credit specially in respect of Barpetīyā Guru-āsana.

(7) Fire-work (Bākhar or ātacbāji) : The people engaged in fire works are known as Gandhiyā. Fire-works are professional crafts of Barpeta carried on specially by the people of pāthak-hāṭi and is informed as a baṅgasārā-profession. According to the above information Lakshi Rām Pāthak, the great great grandfather of Bhola Rām Pāthak is considered the first gandiyā of Pāthak-hāṭi who started the profession at Barpeta. He also claims that Barpeta has been the only centre to produce and supply fire works (Barpetīyā bākhar) throughout Assam. As there is no mention of fire works in the earlier biographies of the saints,

100. Jyotish Das : "Dharam Rām Sūtradhār" in Jivanī Mālā ed. by A.K. Misra, p. 57

101. Information collected from Bhola Rām Pātha, a veteran gandhiyā of Barpeta.
perhaps this crafts developed here in the later part of eighteenth century of Christian era but not earlier.

The materials necessary for the procurement of bākhars are saltpetre (jakhar), sulphur (gandhak), charcoal (ennaṛ), iron-dust (lohguri), aluminium, chlorate of potash, stanchion (lokhāṭi), lime (cūn), black-powder, bronze-powder, bamboo pipe (bāhar cuṅgā), cane, split bamboo (bāhar kāmi), jute, jute fibres and rope, packing paper, plastic-paper coloured-paper etc. The output of the crafts are popularly known as various types of mata, phuljari, play rockets (hāwe), uran cerki, pāte-bāji, tārā-bāji, āsman-golā, ākhar-gāch, nārikaliyā-bom, phānuc (flying lamp-baloon) etc. Each of the items of the crafts is produced by separate set formula.

The fire-work is a most profitable profession which is at the same time risky too. On the day of 'gandha' of daulotsava i.e., the first day of the daulotsav of the Barpeta group of satras specially, Barpeta and Sundarīdiyā Satras, celebrate this function and exhibit fire-works which is called bākhar-mārā. The display of various items of bākhar is really a splendid
show. Now-a-days, the display of fireworks is conducted on _dewāli_, marriage, birth day etc. as a mark of celebration. However, this crafts perhaps grew centering round the _deul_ of Barpetā Satra.

Although the glorious days of Barpetā's unique art and crafts are past, the region can even now boast of its own distinctiveness in several fields.

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102. _Dewāli_ is also called _dvipānvitā_ and is believed that the day is celebrated by lightening _cāki_ in every house-hold to commemorate the day of death of Narakāsura, the king of Prāggyotispur.