CHAPTER V

THE SATRA, AN INSTITUTION OF EDUCATION
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Sankardeva and his associates, the chief three Madhabdeva, Damodardeva and Harideva established Satras as the centres and seats of Vaisnavite learning. The purposes and principles of the satras of all of them were basically the same with a few modifications in their own lines. Satras that were established by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva were and are still known as the Mahapurusia Satras, those by Damodardeva as the Damodariya satras and the ones by Harideva as the Haridevi Satras. Biographers and thinkers of each of the three sects, however claim respectively differently in connection with the establishment of satra as the institution. The Mahapurusia group believes that it was Sankardeva who first established his satra at Bardowa with or without the Cont'd. 170/-
name Satra. It also believes that it was Madhabdeva who gave the real shape of Satra as an institution. The Damodariya group tries to show that Damodardeva was the pioneer in giving shape to his satra in the line of an educational institution in his own land purchased from Ram Rai against a tola of gold and with all necessities for a teaching learning situation. It is also said that Madhabdeva was advised by his dearest devotees to follow the model of satra construction system of Damodardeva. The Haridevi group wants to establish Hari­deva as the first Satradhikar in the Vaisnavite society of Assam. It holds the view that Bahari satra was the first satra established by Harideva at a time when Sankardeva was only four years old and Madhabdeva and Damodardeva were not born. It is to mention that the Haridevi biographers make Harideva senior to Sankardeva by twenty three years. But this controversy of the ages of the sages and the date of establishment of the first satra by any of them are not our methods of studying satras as the unique educational institutions for the common

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people of Assam during the Vaisnavite period. Our specific discussion on Satra institution is limited to its contribution to education within the area of religion.

Vaisnavite religion has many institutional aspects, and they exercise, even today, a tremendous influence on the cultural, social and the community life of the Assamese people. As the institutions of education the Satras and Namghars played the major role when there was not public or private schooling system at the time of Sankardeva. The Satras were like medieval monasteries or moths. The first satra it is said, was set up by Sankardeva near his ancestral village at Bardowa. The District Gazetters of Assam 1905 have recorded 280 Satras excluding many branches of them spreading over the entire Brahmaputra valley. ¹

¹ A list of the Satras with their branches of the four sects namely the Brahma Samhati, the Kala Samhati, the Parusa Samhati and the Nika Samhati has been given in the Appendix - II.

Dr. S.N. Sarma : The Neo Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam, 1965, pp.216
All of the Satras, however, are not uniform in size and influence but they are marked by the same fundamental characteristics. They also resemble, to a certain extent, the Vaisnavite methods of teaching.

Each Satra consists of three principal parties of categories of persons intimately connected with the welfare and management of it, and they are -

(i) the Satradhikar, the Head of the Institution,

(ii) the Bhakatas, the agents and qualified devotees,

(iii) and the sisyas or the disciples whom the institution is meant for.

The structure of each Satra is also more or less uniform, marked by the existence of a Namghar, a Manikut, a Karapat and two or four rows of hatis. These hatis are the residential quarters of the

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bhakats and an important branch of a Satra. Each Satra acted as the only centre of Vaisnavite edu­cation for all classes of people and the most notable social contributions of such an institu­tion was the upliftment of the backward classes. Hence the Satra institutions contributed consider­ably to a great extent to the spread of learning and education in medieval Assam. The daily servi­ces for all learners and educators were and still are divided into two, three, four, nine and fourteen units, each called a Prasanga.

The Satra style was evolved towards the end of the 15th century and in the early part of the 16th century when the Vaisnava saints and re­formers and artists and musicians composed their dance dramas and songs and had to educate people in their lines. The special kind of dance specially performed in the Satra has come to be known as Satriya Nritya which is on the march of gaining national honour and acceptance. On the other hand the neo-Vaisnavite movement had its full expression

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through the Satra. Any Vaisnavite preacher of the 16th century had revealed himself as the nation builder through the Satra institutions. The whole of Sankardeva and his associates has been discovered only through the Satra institutions, where their contribution is in no way less than any of the Vaisnava saints of the medieval India. But it is no good to mention that though they left a profound and undying impression on the cultural and social history of Assam, yet no adequate attention from the scholars of medieval Vaisnavism is found clearly.

Only Sankardeva appeared in a glance in one or two lines of Medieval Mysticism by Sri Kshiti Mohan Sen. 1 However attempts have been

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made by Assamese scholars like Dr. S.N. Sarma, Dr. M. Neog and Dr. B.K. Kakati through their works like "Satra Institution of Assam, 1966", "Sankardeva and His Times, 1965", "Sankardeva, the Vaisnavite saint of Assam" respectively. Of course, much of him is yet to be brought to light in a scientific way. His contribution to education has peeped through a few pages but in the first look. Much, though more still remains, have been discussed about the life and activities of this great saint, but the valuable contribution to education contributed by this great educator has been hidden indistinct under the cover of his contribution to literature and culture as the means to an end, the religion. The same is the case with his other contemporary associates also. The Satras were their schools and the Namghars the class rooms.

In Sanskrit, Satra has two independent meanings - an alm house and a sacrifice.  

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1 P.V. Kane : History of Dharmasastras Vol.II Part II, pp. 1239. (Undated)
But a Vaisnavite Satra was for a different and special purpose and it was the central or Head Office of the Vaisnavite movement. In its initial stage it was a religious setting or association and not a systematised and organised institution. But later on it became a systematised organised formal institution with regulation of rules and laws. Every Satra had to consist of a Namghar, large and open for holding prayer and religious meetings and discussions and often times a court of trial of disputes. Also it constituted a Manikut where the sacred scripture or the idol of the deity as the case may be was kept, being smaller than the Namghar and attached to it in the eastern end a Manikut, which literally means the house of jewels, was a store house of all valuables of the Satra. The third consistant of an organised Satra were the Hatis, the rows of residential huts for the qualified or bonafied devotees. At the entrance of every Satra campus a Bat-Chora was a must leading to its interior which served the purpose of the gate house for receiving guests at first.

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To mention a little about the functionaries of a Satra institution the mention of the Satradhikar designated as Mahanta or Gosain as the administrative head will come first. The next mentioning functionaries are the Bhagavatis who acted as the reciter and explainer of the Bhagavata Purana, the Pathakas who acted as the reader of the religious texts, Deuries who acted as the distributors of Prasada i.e. the sacred offerings at prayer time, the Bharalís who were the store keepers, the Sravanas to listen to the recitations of the religious texts daily, Athparias who were the vigilants over the Satra, the lightmen in the Namghar and the Hatimata to summon the devotees of the Hati to prayer. Besides there were appointed dancers and actors for dramatic performances, the gayans to sing and bayans to play the musical instruments in religious services and festivals and bhaonas.

Besides other religious activities, festivals concerning with Sri Krishna's life and work had to be performed as a part of compul-
sory programme. The festivals included Janmas-
tami, the birth (anniversary) of Lord Krishna,
Nandotsava, the next day of Krishna's birth,
Pacati, a festival of joy and amusement for the
women folk on the fifth day after Krishna's
birth, Phalgutsava on the full moon day of
Phalguna, Rash Yatra on the next full moon day
after the Lakshmi Puja and other festivals like
Rath Yatra, Snana Yatra etc. All the functions
were of certain educative values for realisation
from Lord Krishna's life.

Like uniformed dresses of modern edu-
cational institutions, the Satra disciples had
also to dress and live in a uniformed way. They
had to wear three pieces of white cloth - a dhoti,
a chaddar, a gamocha indispensably and invariably.
Coloured cloth or decorative dress was not allowed
to be used by the disciples. They had to keep
long hair, shave clean, without beard or moustache
and live in Co-operation and mutual understanding.
Rules were strict and any offence against a disciple was beyond pardon. Thus almost all the major aspects of modern educational institutions in this or that form were in vogue there in the ancient Satra institutions. Though religious teaching was the basic course of learning other important aspects of life and living as members of the community were also taken into account. The Guru had to live within the four walls of the Satra campus, the disciples had to work with their own hands including cooking and washing for themselves. Training of some sorts of handicrafts during the interval between the prayer services and also a little of agricultural work within the campus as programmes of manual learning and dignity of labour were a part of Satra life.

This did not conclude their course of training. Above all the disciples were taught from the very beginning, the art of manners and
dealings. There is a proverbial saying as the 'bhakatia behaviour' to mean the behaviour of the bhakats which had to be highly polite and polished. They never spoke in the first person but always indirectly and politely in the passive form. They could not even think that they had done anything themselves, but everything was done by the grace of God. It was never "I have done it" but was always "By your blessings (or by the grace of Krishna) it has been done." Rigid and effective discipline was followed at all time and no lie was ever heard of and any lier was strictly punished by the Guru. Once under such circumstances Sankardeva refused to see the face of one Udara Govinda for nine months for telling a lie and after nine months only when he sincerely repented for his misdeed he was pardoned with severe warning never to tell a lie in future again. The Satra institutions practised the system of punishment in an impartial manner and the great Guru Sankardeva was peculiarly strict in this respect.
His punishment system was long and pardon was rare. Once a devotee of his Vyasakalai Sarma had to worship the Goddess Kali (or Sitala according to some) for saving his son's life from smallpox. Immediately on receiving the information Vyasakalai was expelled for ever without any sign of pardon. Later on the offender sincerely repented for his wrong doing but Sankardeva did not receive him back to his fold. At last the offender died himself at Srikshetra without food and water for many days until death. Also magic charms, opium eating, smoking and drinking were never tolerated. Sankardeva once removed one Surya Saraswati from the office of Bhagavati for his addiction to opium. Even now any act of immorality and religious delinquency were not tolerated and devotees involved in offences required not only to pay monetary fine but they ran the risk of being expelled from the Satra compound.

In any case the old Satra Institutions were not lagging behind and not inferior to the
modern formal schools. Like educational institutions of this day Co-curricular course of study was a compulsory feature of teaching. Dancing and music both vocal and instrumental were cultivated within the Satra and also dramatic performances of devotional plays was frequently held on all important occasions. Boat race competition on certain festival occasions, the game of dhop specially during the Bihu days and another game of Cowrie on the Bahag Bihu were also some group games held by the inmates of the Satras. So the ancient Satras were not only the religious centres through which vaisnavism was propagated and Assamese life was reflected but also educational institutions through which moral, social, economical life of the Assamese people was controlled and guided. They also included art and literature in broader and deeper sense. These great institutions created a sense of friendship and brother-hood from East to West amongst the Vaisnavas with the same Namakirtana, same God, same name, same prayer and same ideals. Again like
the provisions of the Indian Constitution in respect of scheduled Tribes the then Satra made some special provisions for tribal people of ancient Assam for bringing them forward into the fold of Vaisnavism. National Integration was basically introduced in the Satras. Disciples of other languages who came under Satra fold of culture took Assamese as the language of their religious life. Sometimes they also changed their names to sound like those of Satra people. The great Sankardeva himself had accepted Gabinda Garo, Jayahari Miri, Chandchah Muslim as his dearest disciples and thereby device to make a whole India with all the Indians. In this sense a Satra institution was a centre of education for National integration and intercaste Co-operation. These age old Satras are still inspiring scholars to extend their research work by supplying enough materials of the past. These were the great libraries, central Universities and also research centers in comparision to present day education.

In ancient Satras importance was given on reading and listening. Writing was treated as a
professional job for those who had time, patience, practice and good hand-writing. Madhabdeva taught his satra disciples to write letters on the wooden slates as a part of education. He made his disciples capable of reading the holy scriptures at least. Most of his disciples were illiterate at first but had to start reading after initiation as a programme of his education. Even he punished his nephew Ramcharan very severely for not reading in the evening. Harideva was also with the same view. He did not like to spend much time in writing and translating books, rather he used his time by going from house to house to explain the concepts of Bhagawata and other holy sastras. Damodardeva did not write anything at all in the Satra. He only taught others what to write and how to start. He selected the best scholars as writers and dictated them the area and contents of writing. Thus the nameless author was the key composer of all he wanted from his disciples.

In the Satra Madhabdeva introduced the idea of spiritual democracy and social service of
the highest form like taking care of devotees in illness. He taught people to give priority in the service of man (bhakata seva), to the Service of God (Hariseva). Thus the sense of humanity was at all time taught and sometimes tested in the satra University. Once a test for evaluation of self consciousness was administered by Sankardeva in his own Satra. On that occasion he asked Madhabdeva to bring to him an idiot human beast next day. Accordingly Madhabdeva in the next morning came himself to the Guru and said with folded hands that he had searched for the human beast and immediately found it in himself and so came to submit him to Sankardeva. Sankardeva was pleased and declared him promoted to the next higher level of life which is the zero pride stage - the nira-hankara Stara. Sometimes it also happened that some great teachers of the satra allowed themselves to be tested. Once twelve Brahmins came to Harideva with a tola $^1$ of poison to offer him for eating so as to test his perfect spirituality. Harideva unhasitat-

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1 \textbf{Tola} : Measurement of weight which is $\frac{1}{80}$ th of a seer.
ingly accepted the test, ate the poison remembering the name of Hari with the Ganges water (Ganga-jal), feet washing water of Brahmins (Brahmana Padodaka) and that of a Salagrama bath (Visnu Padodaka). It could not kill the spiritual Guru.

Study of religion, the religion of Vaisnavism and the training of devotion framed the curriculum of satra education. Besides these curricular areas there was provision for extra curricular and co-curricular activities like songs and music, dance and dramatisation, games and sports and art and culture. Almost all the satras were the residential type of schools with provisions for whole time instruction both liberal and vocational. As parts of vocational programmes disciples had to work for their livelihood and for the welfare of the satra in different ways. Idle disciples were treated as useless mortals as their worthless knowledge (Karmahina jnana) was not utilised. Under Satra administration they had to cultivate land for agriculture, plant flowers for beautification, prepare herbal medicine for sale and use and free
distribution, copy religious books to sell to needy scholars, receive visitors with amiable behaviour and teach people the ways of devotion as adult educators. They prayed while they worked and worked while they prayed with the 'pray and work' (Karmadharma) theory of religion. A satra was the ideal centre of communism and socialism, where none was allowed to store for self. They ate what they got with the 'no store no want' belief.

There was also a kind of excursion in the Satras for the senior disciples who had to travel by boat or to walk to certain places for imparting the ideals of Vaisnavism at times through their initial knowledge of art and culture, initiation and devotion, songs and music and dance and dramatization. Games and sports of limited events were also a part of the satra dominated education. Above all these satras were the pioneering institutions for scientific system of education. For the planned and moti-
vating modes and methods of teaching such satras could produce the leading scholars like Ram Saraswati, Ananta Kandali, Bamsigopal and Daityari Thakur who added a lot to the contributions of Sankardeva and his contemporary associates on education, language and literature of Assam. These Satras were the safest forts for the devotee soldiers (the maharathis as Madhabdeva claimed himself to be) to fight against the earthly sufferings. Here in the laboratory of devotion within the satra walls they invented and discovered techniques of safe and peaceful life under the wantless shadow of divine feet of the supre Father.

However, the satra institution owed a great deal for its development to the organising ability of Madhabdeva. Although Sankardeva was the founder of Mahapurusia satra it did not develop during his life time. It was Madhabdeva who completed satra in its structural and institutional aspects. He made Barpeta a model Satra at a centre surrounded by satras of all Vaisnavite sects, the Mahapurusia, the Damodaria and the Haridevi at the
neighbouring villages like Chunpora, Patbaushi, Ganak Kuchi, Baradi, Maneri, Bahari and Sundaridia. Barpeta is a complete satra with the prayer hall (Namghar), the gate (Karapat), residential hut (baha) and the hatis (rows of residences) separately for married (Samsari) and celibate (Keulia) devotees, separate bathing ghats at the Barpeta lake for householders and celibates and the Narayana Vigraha called the Kalia Thakur in the Manikuta. The democratic system of selection in electing the Head of the satra (Buhra Satriya) and the Deputy Head (Deka Satriya) is being followed irrespective of caste, status and inheritance. The co-operative banking system is in vogue through which money is being lent to needy people in nominal interest by the Satra management. The supreme power of legislation and execution is vested in the hands of the 'Samuh' which is the general meeting of all the members including the primary ones of Barpeta locality. For these and many other reasons, amongst the three beds of Vaisnavism Bardowa, Barpeta and Behar, Barpeta is called the centre of
With the word Satra the picture of a Namghar automatically comes into. A Namghar is a part and parcel of any Satra. If Satra is a school, Namghar is the class room in it and if satra is a system, namghar is the technique for its application. Often times when a Satra is mentioned people have a tendency to misunderstand it for the namghar. Even without a satra, every village has a namghar of its own. It is a miniature replica of the satra. It is the nurve centre of the village. It has its manifold functions of co-ordination in all aspects of village life and serves as a prayer hall, a court, a stage for dramatic and cultural displays and a school for religious lessons and cultural pursuits. A namghar is

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1. a) Bardowa in Ujani or Ahom Kingdom
   b) Barpeta in Namani or Kosh Kingdom
   c) Behar in Cooch Behar or Kosh Kingdom.
also the centre of social evaluation of a satra, the society and the village. With the word 'village' the dictionary claims a church and a school in it. Hence a village without a school which is a satra and a church which is the namghar had no recognition even in any society of the past. A namghar is both the Upper House for the high officials like the satradhikar, the head guru, Atoi, the village head and the priests to decide matters and the Lower House for all common people for discussion and legislation. It is the open public court which can only give justice based on truth and virtue. It is an all permissible common place for public gathering for local festivals and religious celebrations. At a time this many folded namghar served the society as its school, panchayat, library, assembly, office and even as the post office and the information bureau for new comers. It is a simplified, extended

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and reformed system of king centric costly construction and rigid administration. Here in the cool and pacified shade under the roofs of the namghar the pleasant moments are commonly enjoyed, the sorrows and sufferings are devotionally minimised and the difficult problems are unanimously solved. Today's namghars are tin-roofed open pandals held by round wooden posts of two kinds, the chief posts (lai Khuta) symbolizing respect and highness and the general posts (pali-khuta) symbolizing commoners. There in many cases is no system of keeping any idol for worship except that in some places the Bhagavata purana is kept on a padastal like the Granthasahib of the Sikhs. The Damodaria and Haridevi groups however turned to idols and still a Visnu Vighraha is kept for daily and compulsory worship. In some Mahapurusia Satras like those of Barpeta and Madhubpur provision for keeping a Visnu Vighraha for daily worship by Brahmin priests is in Vogue. Occasional singing of devotional songs known as namas accompanied by local musical instruments

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like Tal, Khol and clappings of the devotees with Nagara sometimes is a common feature of a namghar of any Vaisnavite sect.