CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

1. Map of Study area (South Kamrup):

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Map of Kamrup

Map of Assam
2. South Kamrup:

Kāmarūpa was the ancient name of Assam. Earlier it was known as Prāgjyotisā. From the time of Varman Dynasty, Kāmarūpa had flourished as a powerful kingdom. In the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of the time of Gupta emperor Samudragupta of the 4th century A.D. we find for the first time the mention of Kāmarūpa as one of the frontier states in the North-East of India.¹ Earlier the expansion of Kāmarūpa was very wide. Present Kamrup district of today's Assam is a small part of ancient Kāmarūpa. The present Kamrup district has been carrying the heritage and glory of ancient Kāmarūpa. The mighty river Brahmaputra flows through the middle of this present Kamrup district of Assam. The area located in the southern bank of the river Brahmaputra of Kamrup district is called South Kamrup. In the various stages of history, South Kamrup played an important role. In the past, South Kamrup was known as Dakhin kūl or Daksin kūl (Dakhin = South, kūl = bank). Mentioning of the term Dakhin kūl or South Kamrup is found in various times and places of history. For the first time the mentioning of Dakhin kūl is found in the Arthasastra of Kauṭilya. It is in the Arthasastra that the kings of North India built up the commercial relations

with *Dakhiṅ kūl* of *Lohit Sāgar* (River Brahmaputra) through the Kirātas. The Copper Plate Inscription of Balavarma Deva of 9th century A.D., the *Carit Puthis* of Neo-Vaiṣṇavite literature, Pargana Settlements of the Mughals, English writers A. J. M. Mills and E. A. Gait had also used the term *Dakhiṅ kūl* or South Kamrup. According to the aforesaid sources the boundary of South Kamrup is very wide. But under present circumstances the boundary of South Kamrup is much narrow. According to the intelectual group even the greater Guwahati, the present capital city of Assam, is not within the perview of this articulated area.

In the present record the area is covered by the southern part of the Brahmaputra of Kamrup district covering the area from Dharapur in the East, Šākhāti-Nagarbera in the West, Palāśbāri in the North and Cāṇḍubi Bil in the South. The whole area is generally identified as South Kamrup.

There are 5 (five) circles in South Kamrup - (i) Boko circle, (ii) Nagarbera circle, (iii) Chamarīyā circle, (iv) Chhaygāon circle, (v) Palāśbāri circle. In Boko circle there are 3 (three)-Mouzās, viz. Boko, Luki and Bekeli. In Nagarbera circle there is only one

4 *ibid*, p.23
Mouza, i.e. Nagarbera. In Chamarlya circle there are 2 (two) Mouzas, they are Chamariya and Sontoli. In Chhaygaon circle there are 4 (four) Mouzas, namely Bangaon, Pāntān, Pūb-Chamarīyā and Gāraimārī. In Palāśbārī circle there are 7 (seven) Mouzas; they are Barduār, Bholāgaon, Chayāni, Saru-Baśar, Dakṣiṇ Rāṇī, Rāmpur and Rāmsanānī. The 37 No. National Highway divides this whole area which runs from Guwahati to Goalpara. In this articulated area there are 216 revenue villages. According to the census of 2001 the total population of South Kamrup is 7,38,034. Out of these population 7,18,731 numbers of people lived in villages. Of these 19,303 lived in town and under municipality.

3. Satra: its origin and organisations in general:

In Indian religious history the application of the term ‘Satra’ seems to be new in regards to understand the Vaiṣṇavite institution. The scholars opine that the term ‘Satra’ is used in the Vedas. According to the Rgveda, Yajur Veda, Chāndogya Upaniṣad etc. the term ‘Satra’ means a sacrificial session for 13 to 100 days. To some Rock Inscriptions and Copper Plate Inscriptions the word ‘Satra’ means residing monastery of the

devotees and worshippers and performing of Vedic rites. The term ‘Brahma-Satra’ have mentioned in the Bhagavata Purāṇa. To mean Yajña (sacrifice) Śaṅkaradeva also applied the term Satra i.e. Sarpa-Satra. At the early stage of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement the meaning of the term Satra had used in the sense of religious discussion or Bhagavata-cakra, not to well-systemized institution. At the time of translation of Śrīmadbhāgavata, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva also used the word ‘Satra’ as Yajña according to the original script like—

āthāiśa sahasra ṛṣi vedata pradhān /
viṣṇura naimiśa ṣetra mahā puṇyasthān //
mānya kari sutaka pātīla satra tathā /
śounaka pramukhye sune bhāgavata kathā //

When saint Śuka had been performing Satrāṇuṣṭhāṇa (sacrificial session) in front of the king Parīkṣita honourable sage Sūta had discussed the Bhāgavata at the leisure time with Śounaka and more than twenty eight hundred saints. Scholars opines that in this signifying mode of performing religious rites the term ‘Satra’ have applied in Assam. In course of time the word Yajña had

7. Satra Pradīp, Souvenir, 44th Biennial Session, Asom Satra Mahāsabha, p. 35.
10. Śrīmadbhāgavata, Pratham Skandha, Verse- 5, p.1
disappeared from the devotees and the word ‘Satra’ has taken its place.

Again Śaṅkaradeva applied the term *Satra-Gṛha* in the sense of the term *Deva-Gṛha*. According to Bhuṣaṇa Dvija after returning from first pilgrimage Śaṅkaradeva started preaching *Bhāgavata-Dharma* by building the *Satra-Gṛha*, viz., -

śaṅkara bolanta bhāi śuniyoka rāmarāī
deva-grha sājīyo jatane /

hena kathā śunilanta satra-grha sajāilanta

rāmarāi mahāraNga mane /11

In this regard it seems to be used the term *Satra-Gṛha* as the synonymous word of *Deva-Gṛha*, for which the reason of the term *Deva-Gṛha* has used in place of *Satra-Gṛha* in the next verses. The term ‘Satra’ means religion also.12

Poet Ananta Kandali, the contemporary of Śaṅkaradeva, in his *Madhya-Daśama* had defined ‘Satra’ as Śunā Sabhāsada.13 The word Śunā indicates the meaning of hearing the *Bhāgavata* by reading. “It was gradually understood and convinced that ‘Satra’ was the place of reading and reciting the *Bhāgavata* where

13. Śrimadbhāgavata, Māj Chowā (Middle portion of Daśam Skandha) Verse-54, p. 194.
religious discourses occured among the audience and the masses.”

Kabiratna Baikunthanāth Bhāgavata Bhattacharya in his book Śaraṇa-Mālikā has given an aphorism of Satra in Sanskrit. This aphorism has translated by Dr. S.N. Sarma in English as: “That supreme place adored by gods and Vaiṣṇavas where ardent devotees perform duties pleasing to God and where ninefold Bhakti daily prevails, is called Satra: Vaiṣṇavas residing there are naturally prone to Harināma.”

The Sanskrit dictionary also describes the ‘Satra’ as — ‘śataḥ sādhun trāyate iti traiḥ kah,’—that which protects the righteous is called Satra”.

The Hem-kosa Abhidhana also defines the word ‘Satra’ as — a religious institution of Assam, a monastery.” In short Satra is a Vaiṣṇavite monastery in Assam. It can be compared with ‘Sanghas’ of Buddhist monastery. The term ‘Satra’ or ‘Sattr’ is derived from Sanskrit. The word ‘Satra’ completed by the assimilation of Trai with the term Sat (i.e. Sat + Trai = Satra, सा‌ + त्र = सत्र). The word

14. Quoted from - Satra Pradip, Souvenir, 44th Biennial Session, Asom Satra Mahāsabha, p. 35.
15. Sarma, Dr. S.N. : The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam, p. 104
**Sat** means virtuous or religious person and the word **Trai** means salvation. That means the place where by the recitation of the glory of the God gets accomplishment for welfare of the people and get salvation, is called Satra.\(^8\) Though the term ‘Satra’ is widely used in Assamese language but its folk-term ‘**Sastar**’ is also used in some areas of Assam like - Darrang, Hajo, Ramdia, Barpeta, South Kamrup etc.

From the aforesaid discussion we may ascertain that the **Gṛha** built by Śaṅkaradeva for the first time for **Nām-Prasāṅga**, reading of **Bhāgavata** and the discussion of devotional matters is mentioned as **Satra-Gṛha** by some *Caritakāras* (biographers) like Dvija Bhuṣaṇa, Rāmcarana etc. It is found in the *Guru Carit Kāthā* edited by Dr. M. Neog that Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva staying at Ālipukhuri at the age of 54 years began to discourse of **Hari kathā** (discussion about God) or **Kṛṣṇa-kathā** (discussion about Lord Kṛṣṇa) holding **Nām-prasaṅga**. But having disturbed in that place, Śaṅkaradeva built **Hari-Gṛha**\(^9\) by founding four **Hāṭis**\(^20\) far from the village at the mustered field of Kusumbara.

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\(^9\) **Hari-Gṛha** is a house where people gather for discussion about God, **Nām-Prasāṅga** and religious matters.

\(^20\) **Hāṭi** is a row of residential houses attached to a religious institution for devotees and disciples.
Bhuyan, his father. According to Dr. M. Neog the religious institution which was made by Śaṅkaradeva holding Hari-Grha, Kirtanghar or Nāmghar as a centre, surrounded by the residential devotees, was the first shape of the Satra institution. Hereafter the two Gurus (Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva) in which places they steped down or lived, Satras grew up there in the same model afterwards. It is seen that though Śaṅkaradeva established the base of Satra tradition through Satra-Grha yet during his time except Hari-Grha, Kirtanghar and four Hāṭis no other systems of Satra were found. The Guru-Grha, Maṇikūṭ or Bhājghar, Bāhā or residence of celebacy devotees, Bhāndār or store, Atithi-śālā or guest house, other related houses and establishments were flourished by the endeavour of Mādhavadeva and Dāmodardeva, the disciples of Śaṅkaradeva. Again the various portfolios, the methodical divisions of Nām-Prasaṅga along with fourteen prasaṅgas, introduction of Gurukar, along with customs and usages, the full-fledged Satra institution florished during the days of his (Śaṅkaradeva) disciples and followers. But after them also the Satras have been blooming with new organs and techniques from time to time.

The term ‘Satra’ formed its own shape at the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite age itself in Assam. Generally a Satra is surrounded by a

quadrangles palisades or wall which is locally called *Garh*. A full blown Satra is a consistence of some units of agreeing uniform or characteristics viz., -(1) *Mūl Toraṇ* or *Simhadvār*, (2) *Bāṭca’rā*, (3) *Māṇikuṭ* or *Bhājghar*, (4) *Kirtanghar* and (5) *Hāti* or *Bahā*.\(^{22}\)

The Satra is also known as *Dhām* or *Thān* viz., - Madhupur Dhām, Barpetā Thān, Chamarīyā Thān etc. These are religious residential places of Vaiṣṇavite cult. There are three classes of Satras in Assam - (1) *Mūl* Satra (original Satra), (2) *Ājūṇāpar* Satra (Subordinate Satra) and (3) *Pākhi* Satra (Satras established by bringing earthen lamp from original or subordinate Satra). Out of these *Ājūṇāpar* and *Pākhi* Satras are large in number.

Again, these Satras are also divided into 3 (three) categories, they are - (1) Celibacy Satra, (2) Half-celebacy Satra and (3) House-hold Satra. In the celebacy Satra the *Satrādhiṅkāra* with his clerical devotees lead their life of a celebate or they remain unmarried. In the Half-celebacy Satra the *Satrādhiṅkāra* and the *Deka Adhiṅkāra* are married but their devotees consist of both celebates and non-celebates. The celibates generally reside within the campus of the Satra. On the other hand, in some Satras the *Satrādhiṅkāra* and *Deka Adhiṅkāra* remain unmarried but their

devotees are married. In the House-hold Satras the Satrādhikāra, Dekā Adhikāra and their devotees as well, lead householder's life with wife and children.

The Ahom and Koch kings had granted Dharmottar lands for the development to the Satras of Assam. To look after these arrangements the kings had also appointed officials called Satriyā Baruā. In this regard the Ahom king Lakshmi Singha, Koch king Naranārāyaṇa etc. are noteworthy.

The activities and formalities of the Satras have been increasing gradually. The Satra is not only the centre of religion but it has also been used as the research laboratory, library, platform of drama, court of Pañcāyatirāj, centre of art and architecture, centre for practising literature, dances and songs and centre of money savings like bank. The Satras creat the brotherhood, mankind and unity among the commoners. It had also laid down the principles of Ayurvedic, Sanskrit and moral teachings by introducing village level health treatment.²³

4. Mahāpuruşiyā :

The real name of the Neo-Vaiśṇavite cult propagated by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva is Ekśaraṇa Dharma or Ekaśaraṇa Bhāgavati Dharma. The renowned name of this Ekśaraṇa Dharma

²³. ibid.
is Mahāpuruṣīyā Dharma. The term Mahāpuruṣīyā is descended from the term Mahāpuruṣa. Among all the founders of religious sects in India, even among his contemporaries, Śaṅkaradeva had enjoyed the unique honorific title - Mahāpuruṣa. Mahāpuruṣa means the supreme human being or wise, pious and virtuous person. As Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva originated and propagated this religion in Assam, so it is called Mahāpuruṣīyā Dharma.

According to another explanation, the Eksarana NeoVaiṣṇavite cult in Assam was founded by Śaṅkaradeva and it was spread widely by his chief disciple Mādhavadeva. Both Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva are designated as Mahāpuruṣa. So the religion preached by both the Mahāpuruṣa is called Mahāpuruṣīyā Dharma. Therefore the Satras that have been establishing or maintaining by the doctrine or idealism of both the Mahāpuruṣa are called Mahāpuruṣīyā Satra.

There is an another opinion about the Mahāpuruṣīyā Dharma. According to this opinion God Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa is regarded as Mahāpuruṣa. Since only Nārāyaṇa is worshipped in the Vaiṣṇava

26. ibid, p. 749.
religion of Assam so perhaps the name of this religion is *Mahāpurusīyā Dharma*.\(^{27}\)

Whatever the originality of application of the name *Mahāpurusīyā Dharma*, the popular belief is that as this doctrine was propagated by Mahāpuṣuṣa Śaṅkaradeva it is named as *Mahāpurusīyā Dharma*. The chief helmsman of this *Mahāpurusīyā Dharma* was Mahāpuṣuṣa Mādhavadeva.

The other two disciples of Śaṅkaradeva were Dāmodaradeva and Harideva. The followers of Dāmodaradeva and Harideva identified themselves as - Dāmodarīyā and Haridevī instead of *Mahāpurusīyā*. So at present whenever we call *Mahāpurusīyā* it identifies the followers of the three sects of Assam Vaiṣṇavism viz., *Nikā, Kāla and Puruṣa Samhati*.\(^{28}\) The followers who have been following the main path showed by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva are called *Mahāpurusīyā*.

5. Importance and Objectives of the study:

The Satras with its compact organisation were functioning as the focal point of religion and culture for the rural residents of South Kamrup. Its impact on religion, culture, literature, arts...

\(^{27}\) Sarma, Dr. S.N., *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, Introduction, p. xii.

\(^{28}\) *ibid.* p. xii.
and social life in South Kamrup are indeed great and abiding. Specially the Chamarīyā Satra is most important in the historical point of view as well as culturally and literary. We find that, no one has done any research work on this topic so far. Only some popular articles, writings and a few books are published on the Satras of South Kamrup in general. It is an interesting subject and necessary to do some works on this important topic. It is very interesting to find out the fact, how the centuries old religious institutions maintain its original character even though certain changes have taken place in the society. Another important aspect of the study to show how importance of the Satra culture gains its popularity in the social and cultural life of the Hindu people of South Kamrup till today.

The object of this study is to explore the historical background, origin and geographical distributions of Mahāpuruṣīyā Satras in South Kamrup. It also emphasises the study of the organisational aspects, establishments, departments, structures, designs and so on. Other main objectives are to find out the names and numbers of the Satras, educational contributions, problems and solutions and the ways to preserve the Satra culture in South Kamrup.
6. Scope and problems of the study:

The scope of the study has been limited within the above-mentioned boundaries of South Kamrup. Within this study, taking Chamarīyā Satra as a special reference, the Mahāpuruṣīyā Satras of South Kamrup have been discussed. Along with this, its influence on social, religious and cultural life have also been discussed. This study has to be limited within the circle of Mahāpuruṣīyā Satras, because, if we go to study about the Satras of other sects viz., Dāmodarīyā, Haridevī, Kṛṣṇapurī etc. situated in this area, it is our assumption that it will be the another research work. If we cover this extensive study we will have to face a lot of problems. So, only the Mahāpuruṣīyā Satras have been covered in this study.

Some problems have to be faced in working out this study. Generally, the articles preserved in the Satras, are considered very sacred as devotional things. Therefore, those articles are not allowed to touch. Again it is not allowed to enter in some places also. Hence, to discuss about those sacred articles, I have to depend upon the observation from a distance and the descriptions given by the Satra authority. On the other hand, some Satras do not let to know about the list of wealth and some special documents of the Satra. The reason behind this is that,
they think if they let it to know about these it will be harmful for them. Again most of the Satras have no any methodical authentic historical source about the establishment or history of the Satra. So, the history of the establishment of most of the Satras have to explain depending upon only the stories described in the *Carit Puthis* and the sayings going on traditionally.

7. Methods and sources of the study:

Historical and analytical methods have been taken for the study. In this regard field work has been much emphasised. Datas are taken from original and secondary sources, Copper Plates, Rock Inscription, records, and the manuscripts etc. Historical evidences are also kept for the study. For this study materials are collected from Satras existed in the different places of South Kamrup. Datas have also been taken from literatures, articles, journals, souvenirs etc. In addition to using the libraries like K.K. Handique Library, G.U., Indian Council of Historical Research Library, G.U., Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, Library of Kāmarūpa Anusandhāna Samity, Guwahati etc., some College libraries viz., D.K. Girls’ College Library, Chhaygaon College Library and J.N. College Library, Boko are also used for this study.