CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Every community or institution has, in the anthropological sense, a culture. Culture principally is about ideas, values or attitudes as well as the normative or expectant rules of behavior. Culture is intricately connected to a society. The concept of culture as an institutional sphere producing meanings is based on a postulation that the social structures in a society are composed of a cluster of institutions devoted to specialized activities. These clusters most conventionally cater to the sphere of culture. The study of culture engages with the activities that takes place within these institutionally distinct spheres and relates to the meanings produced in them. “Culture is an independent variable that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces and this emphasis on the relative autonomy of culture entails a bracketing-out of wider, non-symbolic, social relations” (Alexander 2003, 12-14). The concept of culture does not merely stand as a way of doing things and understanding as a patterned set of belief and practices, it also includes habits which are persistent through time. As such we may define culture as an institution conforming to the forms of thought, belief and actions to a pattern of familiarized repetition. In our present context of study, we define culture as an instituted force. The various cultural forms within its paradigm have a historical mode of existence and these are embedded in the social and economic apparatuses belonging to a group of people adhering to identical values, beliefs and practices, giving them a specific shape and relationality.

The realm of culture can never be separated from social or economic relations which finally make up the infrastructure of the institutions we are
referring to in this study. Culture hence, is given a particular shape by grounding its value in formal or informal institutions on one hand, while on the other it is conveyed as 'material' in the sense that it cannot be thought as disembodied set of ideas. In relation to this, Ann Swidler (2001, 82) puts forward the argument as, culture not being a process or results of symbolic behavior, but a set of rules which gets embedded in the regular practices. These rules are reproduced not as a result of people's direct knowledge on the set of rules. As a whole culture causes action and the cultural practices are the organized actions. This demonstrates the fact that "culture has to do with the schemata employed in practice at least as much as it has to do with 'representations of or for practice' " (Biernacki 1999, 75). This idea levels culture to be regularly in use rather than a being a repertoire of stored materials. The study will try to map the changing boundaries within which the discourses of culture have taken place, particularly paying attention to the significant mutation of culture in practice and representation taking distinctive form of cultural analysis.

A society is characterized by its own system of opinions, beliefs, attitudes, values, customs, institutions, material as well as other practitional ways that it adopts. These systems are handed down from one generation to another and constitute a kind of accumulated experience which provides guidelines for the community and a base for its behaviour. And these systems are usually characterized as part of the tradition which a community follows. When the community develops, the culture too reaches a newer height. The character of the community and the role of the individuals involved with it depend on the social configurations, strength of their members as well as economic pursuits at large. And sometimes such,

A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized. The making of a community is always an exploration, for consciousness cannot precede creation, and there is no formula for unknown experience. A good community, a living culture, will, because of this, not only make room for but
actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need. We need to consider every attachment, every value, with our whole attention; for we do not know the future, we can never be certain of what may enrich it; we can only, now, listen to and consider whatever may be offered and take up what we can (Williams 1966, Reprint, 320-21).

The present study seeks attention to the traditional flagship institution of Assam known as the Sattra, which has developed over the years giving a new shape to the cultural horizons and institutional features that the Sattra reflects. It not only fulfills the cultural aspirations of the community but has also been catering to the socio-economic and religious lives of the individuals in the Vaisnava community of Assam at large.

Institutions develop in a society to cater to the needs of the people in a collective way as well as that of the individuals. The intellectual growth of an individual depends on how one connects himself to the community and imbibes the values through such institutions. And these individuals with similar thoughts, values and ideas form a community. The community in the words of Ogburn and Nimkoff (1979, 247), is the total organised social life of a locality. Communities imply settlement in a single locale sharing a continuously evolving social norms, history and heritage. “Communities are imagined through a complex of institutions that guide and shape thought and behaviour” (Mgijima and Buthelezi 2006, 796). Even though the term community invokes a sense of homogeneity and continuity, we find individuals not considering themselves to be always homogenous. As such the institutions and their internal and external relationships keep changing constantly. The present study is informed by involving one such institution which is homogenous in nature but has constantly been in change since

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1 The Sattras defined as institutions embodying a self-contained identity with symbolic norms and conditions of life have been elaborately discussed in Chapter 3 based on the premise of its genesis and development.
its inception. Durability or enduring relevance of an institution depends on a number of factors such as,

a) Involvement of the community and public participation in the affairs of the institution is essential for its growth and development and in taking shape into an organized initiative. All the relations which develop within the structured paraphernalia of the institution rest on the basis of participation which is expected from the community in general. Direct or indirect involvement of the community is anticipated while seeking postulations from its socio-cultural reserves,

b) Institutions determine economic performance. They provide incentives to expropriate the resources which already exist without leading them to stagnation and decline. The individuals connected with the institutions are the key actors whose performances determine the institutional changes. The management of the economy thus, lie at the base of such institutions. Here we understand the concept of institutions as a constructed means to analyse human behavior at the cost of transaction which takes place between the material objects of economic stature and the level of individual attributes. When combined, both transactions and human endeavors can affect the institutional growth. And this helps in determining the role played by both of them in the functioning of societies.

c) The notion of power and knowledge is important in institutional growth and development. The power we discuss here is not the one we generally understand but is generated as a way of gathering knowledge through various performances, be it societal, political, cultural or economic. Knowledge in this context must relate to the power of performance. The relations of power in such institutions should be such that they cater to the
power of knowledge rather than the power of inheritance, space and identity,

d) Another factor which helps in the longer durability of an institution is the religio-cultural edifice on which it develops. The Sattras represent religious philosophies of the saints who preached Vaisnavism in Assam, as well as pursuing various art forms. As such, a relation has developed between the various practices of art and religion in the Sattras. The pursuit of art integrated with the pursuit of religion is integral for the development of such institutions. The religious sentiments of the people are delivered through such forms of art like dance, music, drama etc. This connects the individuals and a constant interaction at different levels takes place through it. Religious rituals and customs therefore, convey a meaning and such meanings get reflected through the performances. The cultivation of varied forms of art as part of all cultural elements of the Sattras integrated with religious proceedings further helps in their sustenance.

The Sattras, as referred in our study are also leveled as religio-cultural institutions catering to diverse fields drawing an attachment with the people through various religious acts. Apart from being a socio-cultural institution, the Sattras also adhere to the religious sentiments, beliefs and values of the community. They cater to a religious system and religious attitudes shape the lives of the people involved with it. As such, these institutions also conform to certain rituals, rites and ceremonies attached with religious feelings, which are of a permanent nature. There grows a relationship between the individual thoughts and action and the institution. This relationship on the contrary helps in the growth and sustenance of such institutions. A connection is developed between the performer who enacts such performances and the performed acts. This involvement is not only physical but also spiritually connective one. Even if it is
understood that nothing attains permanence, it is deliberately through such religio-ritual relationship that the Sattras have been trying to interpret so far. Such a relationship helps to give these institutions a permanent stature to a considerable extent.

Moreover the religio-ritual continuum is important in the sense that these institutions are set by some rules and principles. The individuals are habituated by way of adherence to such rules which have a psychological effect on them and thereby acquire a temperament to engage in certain previously adopted forms of behavior. This particularly corresponds to the concept of habit, which is a key element in the understanding of rules which are embedded in the social life of an individual belonging to the Sattras as well as for the long term sustenance of such institutions. Walter Hamilton's definition of an institution as “a way of thought or action of some prevalence or permanence, which is embedded in the habits of a group or the customs of a people” (1932, 84) is preferable as long as habits and customs are interpreted as an outlook to understand things as they are rather more than mere behaviors. From a religious point of view habit can thus be termed as a repeated set of actions performed by an actor (individual) in any religious setting, be it a ritual act or a performance of any art forms held inside a Sattra. The habits nurture not only the growth of the self but also the nature of the institution. And as such institutions function by means of an interaction with the individuals who act as agents, their habits and beliefs which indirectly help in their spiritual and intellectual growth.

The present study will try to seek answers to the question of knowledge and power relations, the way of representation of the self, permanence and transience, identities and differences in relation to the institution of Sattra. And for that matter, the Sattra considered to be a vivid representation of the history and culture of the Assamese community, requires a comprehensive analysis.
With the same considerations, we introduce Sattra or Sattras (as they exist in multiple numbers) as an important component of culture in the present context of study. The whole way of the Assamese society is incredibly linked with the Vaisnavite monasteries in Assam known as the Sattras. The Sattras are public institutions drawing a whole of social, economic, religious, political and cultural influences in the life of an Assamese Vaisnava in particular, and the larger society in general. The Sattras have been instrumental in preservation and sustenance of multiple traditions of art and literature of the state along with their social-cultural and religious contributions towards the growth of the society since the days of their inception. These are the living repositories of Vaisnava heritage and culture. The cultural history of Assam is unique in the sense that they add pristine features with these institutions. The cultural traditions of the Vaisnava movement initiated by the great saint Śaṅkaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva during 15th-16th centuries have been preserved by the Sattras in most parts of the state. But with the changing time many of the Sattras, which played a very influential role earlier, have come under the bleak of dilapidation and many have even vanished from the scene. For centuries the cultural history of the state got enriched in respect of various expressive forms like dance, drama, plays, music, literature, crafts, sculpture and social education which got institutionalized through these Sattras. This apparently brought about a socio-religious and cultural awakening in the state since the days of their establishment in various corners of the state. It also did not confine its manifestations to these boundaries alone. In course of time it went beyond to reach the laity in far and distant places and attracted crowds from far and wide. It reached out to people irrespective of caste, creed or religion shuffling all barriers. Born out of a completely different ideology of believing in the concept of one God and discouraging sacerdotal practices prevalent at a time, Vaisnava philosophy still has its roots survived through the institutional order of a Sattra. It is the Sattras which have been able to unite the Vaisnavas as well as
those outside the fold of Vaisnavism in Assam with its multilinear cultural practices.

Since their origin, these institutions have however undergone many changes. The changes are seen in the way of their operation, the involvement from the community as well as their sustenance. This invariably raises questions in the mind whether in a fast changing world these institutions will be able to maintain their traditional values and bind the community. The present study will explore ways to understand the perplexities that the Sattras and the Vaisnava community are confronting and analyze the present state of participation and involvement of the community through which their own history was represented. The Vaisnava community is comparatively larger in Nagaon, a district in Assam, with a large number of Sattras situated here. The involvement of the community in the affairs and activities of the Sattras which strengthened the institutional set up will also be a determining factor of the functioning of the Sattra as a vibrant socio-cultural institution in future.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The Sattras, as mentioned earlier, have been very influential in the cultural and social life of the entire Assamese community. Even now, their importance has not diminished. Though in the changed context of time and space, certain problems have crippled many of these flourishing institutions. Earlier trends in the study of Sattras by different scholars focused mainly on a general notion of the great Vaisnava saint, Śaṅkaradeva and his contributions towards the growth of the Vaisnava religion and culture. The Sattras have not been discussed in detail in terms of changing circumstances and challenges they are facing in the changed environment especially the ones included in the present course of study. There is very little information about the Sattras of Nagaon and no detailed study has been conducted so far. Hence, a systematic study of the Sattras of this district with an
analysis of its different variants merits a challenging subject of study informed by the notions of cultural history as understood today. The primary objective of the study is to make an attempt to get insights into the developmental characteristics of such institutions, the loopholes where attention is sought and formalization of the socio-economic and cultural impact on the society at present. In addition, the study also focuses on how these institutions will sustain in the long run amidst diversities in thought and action.

The study makes an attempt to answer questions as to how rituals performed within these institutions act as a means of communication binding the community, why there is a need to preserve and protect the cultural practices and artefacts regarded as quintessential for the growth of these institutions, how religion, culture and performances are interconnected with the economy of a community and under what circumstances the Sattras locate themselves on the edifice of these three important aspects interweaving them in their regular pursuits.

The Sattras are born of a religious and socio-cultural resurgence in medieval Assam. Since these are institutions primarily viewed as contributing to the growth of Assamese culture in general and the Vaisnava community in particular, hence a study on its multifarious functions needs an understanding of the concept of cultural history. Moreover, a distinction can be clearly perceived in respect of the process of enacting rituals, the economic prospects and status and heritage aspects of these institutions relating to their location and participation. This distinction which is especially drawn between the ones situated in the villages and the other in the towns needs a closer examination. Needless to say, the Sattras lying in the rural is dissimilar to the ones in the urban in terms of their institutional features. In addition the study also focuses on their representational characteristics keeping in view the religious sentiments of the individuals since these institutions foster a faith in the community.
1.1.1. The Satras as Institutions

Institutions shape human interaction. They form incentives to human exchange of thought and behavior through social, political and economic rules. The change that takes place in the institutions conform to the ways in which societies evolve through time. The institutions help in the understanding of historical changes and are reflections of the past, present and future since the continuity of the society’s norms and conditions are attached to it. However organizations like institutions also shape human interactions. They refer to a group of individuals bound by some common purpose to achieve certain objectives. To draw a distinction between the terms institution and organization, we understand them by these simple definitions: Institutions are systems of established and embedded social rules that structure social interactions. "Organizations are special institutions that involve a) criteria to establish their boundaries and to distinguish their members from nonmembers, b) principles of sovereignty concerning who is in charge, and c) chains of command delineating responsibilities within the organization" (Hodgson 2006, 18).

Following this definition, institutions construct social interactions by forming form and consistency in individuals. The individuals' thought and action are ruled by the institution. They put constraints on human behavior by enforcing rules and also enable the behavior by soliciting a matter of choice. By way of structuring, enabling and constraining the behavioral aspects of the individuals, institutions can mould the society and also the individuals in a collective manner. Also institutions provide an agency and structure within which individuals act and their actions are determined. Moreover the individuals assigned to institutional roles possess varying degrees of discretionary power in relation to their actions. These powers are utilized by the individuals at different levels. The structure of the institution is "both constituted by human agency and is the medium in which
human action take place. This seems to mean that structure is nothing other than the repetition over time of the related actions of many institutional actors” (Giddens 1976, 121).

The study refers to Sattras as social institutions rather than organizations. These institutions act at the disposition of individuals on the basis of the interactions with a shared pattern of thought. Institutions can be understood as “the outcomes of human interactions and aspirations without being consciously designed in every detail by any individual or group, while historically given institutions precede any one individual” (Hodgson 2006, 8). It provides a platform to place an individual’s thought and ideas, to interact and follow certain dictums which are deemed essential for the institutional growth. Within a given institutional framework, the skills and knowledge of the individuals are cultivated and utilized. As such institutions acts as a kind of catalyst in human interactions through some shared set of values and ideas. The Sattras are the finest examples of such institutions. The shared values of the institution constitute a culture of its own and such culturally acquired values relate to the kind of communication that takes place within or outside the institution. As a technical term in social science, “an institution is a regular and continuously repeated social practice” (Edgar and Sedgwick 1999, 129). The Sattras are defined as institutions since they adapt to human behavior and thought. They have a long history of mobilizing individuals and the community on behalf of its social and moral cause. They also act as ‘mediating structures’ in the Vaisnava community of Assam. These institutions have given a dent to the religious identity of the Vaisnavas and thus, have continued the culturally normative religious traditions. They assemble individuals from different sections of the society and structure interactions amongst them. Certain rules and norms are followed within these institutions conditioning the lives of the individuals attached to it. The norms involve mutual beliefs among the members of the groups which are the followers of the same faith. Since institutions monitor the individual habits of thought and action, the Sattras as
institutions too, have the power to mould the capacities of individuals and bring about transformations. If at all, these institutions cater to regularities of human behavior, concordant habits are passed down from generation to generation corresponding to belief and faith, then the institutional structure is assumed to have sustained. This view is also adaptable to the institutional structure of the Sattras with self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing characteristics. The Sattras stand on the edifice of individual involvement be it social, economic or cultural; they cannot refrain individuals from participation and interference often involving material artefacts. They depend on the individuals or groups for their existence, their interactions and shared pattern of thoughts. Thus, concisely we may relate Sattras as institutions rather than phrasing them as organizations, adopting Douglass North’s views. North (1990) defines,

Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. In consequence they structure incentives in human exchange, whether political, social or economic. Institutional change shapes the way societies evolve through time and hence is the key to understanding historical change (3).

Institutions are rules of human behaviour that provide incentives under which rationale people act. They are “accepted modes of behaviour protected by culture” (Powelson, 2000). These institutions are interchangeably used as meaning organizations though both organizations and institutions are not the same. The institutions may include certain social rules and conduct, laws and procedures, set of a popular belief system and traditions, and other similar rules of human behaviour. They provide a platform directing all human activities which include both social and economic. And the organizations operate only within a set of institution. Thus, Turner (1997, 6) provides a whole definition on institutions as “a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organising relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in
reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment."

1.2. Objective of the Study

A study on the cultural history related with an institution like the Sattras, enables us to understand particularly the ideological differences and the concept of power amongst their partakers or beneficiaries, the role it plays in the society today, its economic development, norms and conditions which it sets for the individuals and their consequences, preserving the traditional values as a heritage asset in the continually changing context of modern thoughts and ideas.

The broad objectives of the study can be identified as under:

a) To understand the cultural and historical significance of an institution like the Sattra in contemporary times,

b) To analyze the present status of the Sattras in terms of its three basic components; the ritualistic approach, economy and heritage management,

c) To relate the concepts of power and representation in describing the role of these institutions and their influences in the society today,

d) To examine changes that have been reflected in the practices as well as management related to these institutions.

e) To describe the Sattras as an institution catering not only to the socio-cultural aspects but also for the intellectual development of an individual.
1.3. Review of Literature

With reference to cultural history which forms the major focus in the present work, several scholars have put forward arguments and analyses related to it. The trend of a new cultural history has evolved as an important area of study in recent years and has attracted the attention of many cultural historians and allied disciplinarians. The present thesis is informed by such views and approaches and has adopted a few theorists' interpretations on cultural history. Literatures on the subject have been surveyed and the theoretical concepts taken into consideration in conceptualizing the framework of the present study.

Raymond Williams in his book, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1966, Reprint) traces the idea of culture as it has developed in the West especially Great Britain from 18th-20th centuries. Considered as one of the seminal works in contemporary times, Williams has made a social and historical approach to culture with new social nuances. The author explores the notion of culture as it developed responding to the Industrial Revolution and the social and political changes that came in its wake.

Anna Green in her book *Cultural History: Theory and History* (2008) provides a coherent introduction to the major theories of the study of cultural history. The volume explores the conceptual and imaginative world of human consciousness as reflected among the elite intellectuals and aesthetic works as well as everyday social beliefs and practices.

In Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), Geertz presents his vision based on extensive empirical studies, of what culture is, what role it plays in social life and how it ought to be studied. This collection of essays addresses interpretive theory of culture (thick description), the growth of culture and the evolution of human societies and consciousness per se. It also analyses religion and ideology as cultural systems, rituals and social
change and the politics of meaning. The author presents a valuable resource for understanding how individual and social values, their formation, definition and maintenance are culturally determined.

Peter Burke's *What is Cultural History?* (2008) gives a brief description about the rise of cultural history in recent times, placing it in its own cultural context. The author also discusses the 'classic' phase of cultural history associating the likes of Jacob Burckhardt and Johan Huizinga to Marxist interpretations of Frederick Antal and Edward Thompson. The book provides a critique to the diverse fields of cultural history with major theoretical strands.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Émile Durkheim goes on to discover the enduring source of human social identity. To understand the religious nature of man as an essential and permanent nature of humanity, he studied the religion of the Aborigines of Australia. Durkheim explored the idea that individual's thought and actions are socially related to each other and that religion embodies the belief which shapes the moral discourse of humanity. The volume also deliberates on the intriguing origin and nature of both religion and its impact on society.

Eric W. Rothenbuhler in his book *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony* (1998) provides a theoretical explanation to the meaning of rituals, rites and ceremonies as symbolic social actions in everyday life of an individual accentuating a powerful and special form of communication. The author examines the uses of the term ritual in various aspects, from mediated form of ritual to political, rhetoric and civic rituals and cites some problems in the study of ritual.

*Heritage Studies: Methods and Approaches* (2009) edited by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and John Carman describes the concomitant relationship between heritage and culture. Heritage as a symbolic representation has been useful in
describing culture. The book also mentions about the techniques, methods and approaches for preservation of both the tangible and intangible aspects of culture.

David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985) is a classic study of the highly varied and politicized construction of the meaning of heritage. He explores historically how the past creates patterns of meaning in the present. Drawing examples from arts, humanities, social sciences and popular culture, the author argues that the past (including tangible and intangible remnants) is manipulated to meet specific social, cultural and political requirements and relate them to historic and contemporary societies.

Apart from the thematic approach of cultural history included in the present study, the researcher has added some views of scholars working on the Sattras citing them as institutions of culture and enhancing the overall development of an individual and the society at large. The Sattras regarded as institutions of Vaisnava learning in Assam have been very influential since the time of their inception. Bearing this in mind, many scholars of literature and culture have published numerous books on Vaisnava philosophy and the development of Sattras in the state.

The most important among these are the books entitled, *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (1996, Reprint) by S.N. Sarma and M. Neog's, *Sankardeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam* (1998, Reprint) which give comprehensive accounts of the Vaisnavite movement initiated by Śankaradeva with its many fold contributions towards the Assamese society giving it a whole new genre of polity, economy and culture. These books mention the growth of Sattras in the shape of a monastery giving it an institutional character in the later part of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sarma compiles a detailed account of the genesis and development of the Sattras mentioning its contribution to the Assamese society after attaining a formal shape while Neog has detailed out the historical
antecedents that gave rise to the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiating a spiritual bent of mind amongst its followers. Both the authors throw light on the socio-cultural renaissance brought in by the Vaisnava movement thereby developing various forms of art, literature, language and religion.

Pradip Jyoti Mahanta in his book, *The Sankaradeva Movement: Its Cultural Horizons* (2007) discusses the philosophical background in which the institution found its growth and sustenance, the administrative set-up it had built and the wide contours of the institution at social, religious and other cultural levels which came to be associated with its existence in succeeding centuries.

Dambarudhar Nath, in his book entitled *Satra Society and Culture: Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garamur Satra* (2012) makes an approach to one of the most influential Sattras of Assam, Garamur in Majuli, making perceptive comments on its economy and administration. Written from the perspective of a modern analytical historiography, this book provides an insight into the Sattriya way of life and its contributions towards the society and culture of Assam.

In the book entitled *Abibhakta Nagaon Zilar Sattra Darpan: A Mirror of the Sattras of Undivided Nagaon District* (2005) by Tilak Mazumder, the author provides a gist of all the Sattras available in the two important districts of Assam, Marigaon and Nagaon. The author also mentions about their contributions towards the society and lays emphasis on the need for preservation of these institutions from further decay.

1.4. Methods and Methodology

A structured methodology is an important component of a good and valid research. The paradigms covering the interdisciplinary subjects of both cultural
studies and cultural history are taken as an approach to the present study. And since the work relates to studying the institution of Sattra from different directions - religious, artistic, heritage and economic - it has been approached from diverse theoretical premises for which formulations from respective domains have been drawn. Concepts of cultural heritage, methods of representation through the notions of power relations and practices, are the premises corresponding to the present study. With regard to this methodology on which the study is based, various methods, both primary and secondary have been employed to get authentic data and information from the source.

The primary source of information that have been collected for the study, are various Sattras located in several areas of the district of Nagaon; the target groups being the individuals directly involved with the Sattriya tradition and culture and the ones indirectly involved with it. During the course of the survey, a field visit to Majuli, acclaimed as the heart of Sattriya form of art and culture, situated in upper Assam, has been carried out by the researcher for the purpose of making a comparison between the Sattras of both these places. However main emphasis is on the Sattras of Nagaon district.

Techniques like interviews and observations have been adopted to make the work more purposive. Since the study is based on surveys, unstructured interviews were conducted with various representatives from the Sattras as well as the ones not directly involved with these institutions at various points of time during field visits. The concentrated areas of the district are Bardowa, Kampur, Raha, Dhing and Koliabor. From the variety of research methods available for collecting data, the researcher has applied both participant and non-participant observation methods and the induced natural context method for gathering required information. These techniques were mainly applied to analyze and interpret the multifarious functions and roles played by these institutions at present times. Application of field data collected from similar study areas are also
taken into consideration as models for our present study to make it more convincing and providing a wider canvas to the study.

Since the present study makes an attempt to analyze the Sattra institutions combining the ritual forms, heritage and economy and interpret them from various perspectives, multiple theoretical postulations in relation to the disciplines of cultural history and cultural studies have been referred and cited to understand the realities of the Sattra institutions and analyse them from different standpoints.

Secondary sources have been adopted for collecting information from different reference materials like books, e-journals, articles, newspaper, magazines and related websites. Following the phase of collecting information, several libraries and various academic and other institutions were visited to be informed of the available works related to the present study.

1.5. Chaperization

The present work is divided into seven chapters, including the conclusion, keeping in view the major objectives of the study. Following is a brief account of all the chapters.

The first chapter introduces the present work with a brief on the statement of the problem, methods applied and the methodological aspect of the study, aims and objectives and a review of the literature surveyed and a gist of the chapters integrated in the thesis.

The second chapter deals with the theoretical perspectives on cultural history with its present day reference to change and development. The theoretical understanding and criticism of some eminent scholars on the developmental aspects of cultural history have been borrowed and analyzed.
The third chapter gives a general notion of what Sattras are and how these have been playing an important role in endurance of the tradition and cultural life of Assam. The genesis and developmental aspect of these institutions have been discussed in detail along with the drawing of a general perception on the Sattras concentrated in the present district of Nagaon. It includes a general comment on the Sattras of Nagaon laying special emphasis on its type and nature based on field investigations.

The following three main chapters of the thesis are based on the primary source of datas collected from institutions and individuals at various points of time. It has been tried to sequentially put in all the necessary informations gathered from these sources during the course of the survey.

The fourth chapter entitled "Rituals: Forms and Practices in the Sattras" discusses rituals in its variant forms and act of performances to be an important component of cultural history. It analyses rituals from two distinct features, one as a communicator and the other as action-oriented performance. The Sattras administer innumerable rituals related to special occasions and festivals accompanied by traditional values and practices. It also emphasizes on the different types of rituals involving the community at large, especially the ones being performed in the institutions as observed in the district. The chapter is also an attempt to understand the meaning of rituals with growing popularity and how these are connected with the lives of an individual member from the Vaisnava community. To make the study of rituals more expressive, a comparative note on a festival accompanied by rituals in two most revered places of historical and cultural importance for the Vaisnavas of Assam, notably Bardowa and Barpeta is made.

The fifth chapter under the title "Economy and the Sattra Institutions" details out the various facets of economic influences of religion as well its institutional character on the community in general and the individuals in
particular. This draws a link between the schemas of religion, economy and culture. Moreover the chapter discusses the crisis presently experienced by the community under social and demographic changes. It has not only shattered the base on which the economy ascended at the time of their inception but has also disintegrated the self identity of the individuals due to many unscrupulous agencies posing a serious threat to these institutions.

The sixth chapter entitled “Heritage Dimension of the Sattriya Culture in Recent Times” observes the need felt by the society at large for protection and preservation of both tangible and intangible resources of the Sattras. The cultural heritage of the Sattras has been discussed as an important element that demands association of individuals, so that the cultural edifices could be preserved and passed on for the future generations. At the end of this chapter the researcher tries to situate the Sattras of Nagaon in particular in the process of preservation and also throws some light on the problems underlying during the course of its preservation action.

Before proceeding to the concluding chapter, a case study on Bardowa as the nerve center of socio-cultural and religious activities, has been made to make the study on Sattras more comprehensive. It analyses the discourse between tradition and development in this old institution.

Lastly the seventh chapter being the “Conclusion” provides a summary of the whole work and specifies the findings that evolved from the previous chapters.

1.6. Limitation of the Study

In the present work, being a PhD dissertation the researcher has delimited its study due to various constraints. One major reason is the stipulated time frame within which the work had to be completed and the other being the vast field of
survey involving certain restrictions. The Sattras are often referred to as major religio-cultural institutions in Assam, commendable right from cherishing religious values to fulfilling various societal requirements. These are scattered in different parts of the state of Assam. So for an easy understanding of the role it plays in the present day Assamese society, we have included only those Sattras lying in the district of Nagaon with a detailed analysis of their influences in the lives of the individuals as a whole. Considering the immense contributions of a Sattra to the Assamese society in terms of religion, literature and various art forms like dance, music and drama, the researcher has also restricted the study by including only the forms and phases of the various rituals undertaken, their economic contributions towards their growth and development and the diverse means and conditions of preserving it as a heritage property, covering almost all the Sattras of the district. As such aesthetic appraisal of diverse art forms, their performance analysis and aspects of their continuity and change, form an integral part of the Sattra way of life, which have not been taken up for consideration in the present study.

It is hoped that this research work will prove useful and serve as a source for further study and research in this field.

1.7. Conclusion

This chapter in brief has stated about the research problem, the aims and objectives of choosing the present work, the various methods and methodologies adopted, review of the literature surveyed and organization of the chapters. The researcher has also set the limits of the study. The following chapter will give a theoretical perspective to the study of cultural history with reference to the present study area.
REFERENCES


