CHAPTER 3

THE SATTRA INSTITUTION

The cultural history of Assam itself is unique and variegated with multiplicity of communities. Within this large canvas over the last five hundred years it is to a large extent intertwined with the Sattra institutions spread over the entire range of the Brahmaputra valley in the region. The unprecedented current in the religio-cultural history of the era started from the Neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568). The movement brought about a cultural resurgence with all forms of arts- literature, music, dance, drama, painting, sculpture coming under a spell of revival along with religion.

In less than two hundred years of its inception the movement could sow the seeds of the Vaisnava faith in the entire valley relocating the people of the land who were under the impact of the Sakta or Tantric beliefs acting as a dominant cult till the advent of Neo-Vaisnavism. According to the District Gazetteers of Assam (1905), eighty percent of the total Hindu population of Assam constituted the Vaisnавites, scattered mainly over the districts of Kamrup, Goalpara, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. The implication of the Bhakti movement in other parts of India during that era was so affluent that it inspired Śaṅkaradeva to recognize and reorganize his own turbulent society at the grass root level using the Vaisnava faith as an effective tool. The awakening is manifest in different cultural and religious practices as well as artistic forms which together are an integral part of the popular and the eclectic in Assam. The spiritual obligations gave the people a balanced and conscious view on life and made them elevated with a new and comprehensive outlook on life. There were many bitter moments in the history of Assam where interferences in religious ways by
adopting unholy practices prevailed. But it came to be subdued in course of time with the invoking of Vaisnava faith with its ramifications.

The movement celebrating the ideals of unity and love (in an age of internecine wars) harmonious coexistence and equality among people irrespective of caste and creed and thereby granted a sense of identity to all including the socially depressed in pursuing the religion of devotion (Mahanta 2007, 7).

The native population of Assam comprises mainly the Vaisnadvite Hindus. The rise of the Neo-Vaisnava movement in the wake of the sixteenth century has added more richness to its socio-cultural, religious history and brought about a renaissance in the entire land. The Sattras or the Vaisnava monasteries as the content of this present study is concentrated on are an outcome of this movement, which in later years reached the pinnacle of glory with its multi-faceted characteristics. This chapter is an attempt to discuss in detail the genesis and development, structural features, organizational set up and the socio-religious and philosophical role of the Sattras and to give a comprehensive overview of the Sattras in general. The establishment of these institutions exercised and continues to do so even today, a great influence on the cultural and social moorings and community life of the Assamese Vaisnavas in particular and the community in general.

3.1. The Sattra Institution of Assam

The new movement in Assam bears similarities being a part of the pan-Indian resurgence of Bhakti with other parallel Vaisnava movements in other parts of India. It became popular as the Mahapurusiya Dharma regarding Śaṅkaradeva as Mahapuruṣa or the fountainhead of the faith. At his initiative it began to be propagated as the Ek saran nām dharma meaning complete surrender to one God. This movement in the initial phase ushered a new era of socio-
cultural awakening in Assam, which can be stamped as completely devotional as well as humanist in form and popular in content.

The Sattra institution envisaged by Sankaradeva and his apostles, is the high watermark and consummation of the Bhakti movement in Assam. Designed on democratic norms and solidarity of the preceptor and the laity, the Sattra was conceived as a source of life, verve and vigour for sustenance of the tradition of religious learning, the pursuit of art and the new social order born out of their resurgent milieu (Mahanta 2007, 3).

And over the centuries the Sattras took a definite shape and started growing under the tutelages of a few disciples of the reformer. The chief among them was Mādhavadeva (1489-1596), under whose initiative the Sattras became heartland of the Assamese Vaisnava tradition. The era of Neo-Vaisnavism is reflected in this distinctively unique institution which is to a large extent connected to the social, religious and cultural life of the people of Assam. The importance of a Sattra cannot be thus overemphasized. It has enabled the continuity of Vaisnavism in the cultural-historical context by performing multifarious functions and institutionalizing the Vaisnava philosophy in the heart and minds of the Assamese people so that it could go beyond time and space.

The Sattras in Assam are of both monastic and semi-monastic orders. The monastic Sattras are strict in their rules of conduct and follow a monastic order and are a prototype of the Buddhist monasteries or gompas. The bhakats or the devotees remain celibates throughout their lives and lead an extremely devotional and dedicated life within the campus of a Sattra. They are known as kevaliyās, meaning lone or unattached. The semi-monastic Sattras have devotees who can lead a normal house-holder’s life and perform all ecclesiastical roles under the Sattra. In recent times however the number of celibates in the monastic Sattras has diminished though initially they out-numbered the non-monastic Sattras in the
region. It is very interesting to note that the types vary with a reference to the order or sect they are affiliated to.

3.1.1. Sattra: Meaning and Significance

The term Sattra is originally a Sanskrit word having two broad usages, firstly it meant a charitable institution lending alms and secondly meaning a sacrificial session lasting for several days. The word Sattra was earlier used in the Satapatha Brahmana in the sense of a sacrificial session. The Bhāgavata-Purāṇa explicitly denotes the word Sattra for the sacrificial sessions in the form of a recitation and congregational reading of holy text, performed by the sages in the forest of Naimisa for a long period of thousand years, where Suta- Ugrasravā recites and explains the Bhāgavata to the sages. This act of listening and reciting greatly influenced the great Vaisnava saint to have perpetuated the new faith. The part played by Šaṅkaradeva probably reminded the listeners of the same role played by Ugrasravā in the assembly of holy sages (Sarma 1996, 143). This concept is also to mean the session of the discussion of the Brahman (brahma sattra), being the Divinity, as also the performing of a sacrifice (karma sattra). The Bhakti movement in Assam drew its inspiration from the Bhāgavata and likewise the term Sattra came to be more acceptable as people began to understand it as a way of expounding the holy text and acted as a pious association propitiating the movement initiated by Šaṅkaradeva and other apostles in later eras. Instead of the sacrificial part as the word Sattra actually denoted, the Bhāgavata began to be sung, recited and discussed in many forms and ritual contexts in almost all of the Sattras thereafter to understand the concept of Bhakti as being influenced by the saint himself. The etymological meaning of the term Sattra as a sitting or session or an instrument meant for liberating the good added a reasonable meaning to the term and in later phases different biographies of the saint gave different meanings to the Sattra. The Sattra may thus be defined as the
abbot of the monks of different orders following a disciplinary order and residing with solace. Vaikuṇṭhanātha Bhaṭṭadeva in his Saran Malika defines Sattra as an institution where devotees pursue nine forms of devotion (nava-vidyā Bhakti).

O Vaiṣṇavas! that place is a sattra, adorable of gods, where the sole devotees of the Lord perform pure religious rites, where ninefold devotion to the Lord always prevails. All Vaiṣṇavas who live there are ever engaged in the chanting of the names of Hari (trans. Mahanta 2007, 99).

3.1.2. Genesis and Development

Since the time of their inception the Sattras have come across different stages of development. The genesis of a Sattra can be ascribed to the days of Śaṅkaradeva whose philosophy of Ek saran nām dharma set ideals to the Sattra institution. The Sattras grew as centres of developing culture through various art forms, language, literature and traditions of maintaining the religious order in the society. The first phase of which began with Śaṅkaradeva even though it could not take a permanent seat during his times. The Sattras as an organized institution with its paraphernalia took a concrete shape only with the help of two very important disciples of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva (1486-1596) and Dāmodaradeva (1488-1598), one of which was a celibate and the other a widower. “There are definite references in medieval biographies of saints to the part played by Mādhavadeva and Dāmodaradeva in giving a definite shape to the structural as well as organizational side of the satra institution” (Sarma 1996, 146).

The Sattras took a monastic form at the initiative of Vamśi Gopāldev, another scholarly mind behind the establishment of many important Sattras in the state. He introduced many changes to the structure and content of the Sattras towards the third decade of the seventeenth century. In the later phase of the
growth of the Sattra institution, some of the Sattras received patronages from the Ahom kings as a result of which it provided the basis for a sound economy to several among them. Initially the Sattras were designated as only religious centers with a regular congregation reciting verses from the Bhāgavata and other texts written and set to music by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. But with time the Sattras took a definite shape, enriching the Assamese life socially and educationally and also contributing to the development of various forms of art and literature from within the literary and musical corpus that the two saints left behind.

3.1.3. Socio-Cultural and Religious Contributions

Besides serving as the seat of religion in propagating the philosophy of Bhakti to its adherents, the Sattras have contributed a lot to the growth and development of the whole of the Assamese identity, through its cultural and literary engagements. The last few centuries of its establishment in different regions in the state saw the unprecedented rise in the social as well as cultural aspects. Hence the importance of these institutions does not only lie in its religiosity, it contributed much to the cultural development of the Assamese community. It is notable that the cultural manifestations grew up in the midst of its religious consciousness.

The Sattras are probably the best examples of providing distinctiveness to the Assamese community in general and the Vaisnavas in particular. Their contribution in every sphere of life is remarkable. One of their most notable contributions to the social life of the Assamese community is the inclusion of people from the sub-stratum of the society such as the underprivileged and backward classes. This has been continuing till date in most of the Sattras. Moreover the people from the tribal belt of Assam, who were for centuries outside
the portals of Hinduism, were also brought into the fold, which reduced the rigours of caste system to a considerable extent. Individuals irrespective of their caste, language, sect or creed were incorporated into the Vaisnava faith through the institution like Sattra.

The literary and educational contribution of the Sattras is commendable. They are the living centers of tradition and heritage. It has been serving as an important educational centre imparting not only the knowledge of the scriptures and holy texts but also involving the community in all literary forms like composing dramas, prose, religious texts (kāvyas) and devotional lyrics. Some of the prominent Sattras voluntarily took up the responsibility of establishing a primary school known as 'tols in the precincts of a Sattra for imparting education for the benefit of the community. These schools imparted formal education to the young and the old. The Sattras also served the purpose of a library where rare indigenous manuscripts of epics, dramas, hymns, theological treatises written by apostles of the movement and biographies of the saints (carit-puthis) and satra chronicles (satra-vamsavali) are preserved.

Sattras have marked a distinction in the cultural sphere too. The various art-forms such as music, dance and drama gained a tremendous surge in these institutions which includes bhāonās, bargits, sattriya nāc, ankiya nāt. Apart from it, other forms of art like crafts, sculpture and mask making came for popular practice. Mask-making or mukha-śilpa as commonly understood, is an exclusive art form practiced in a few Sattras of the district. It has served as a medium to integrate the commoners. Even to this day, the masks used in bhāonās are prepared with utmost care by the Sattra and village artisans. Since bhāonās form an important component of the cultural manifestations pursued in the Sattra circles, the art of mask-making has been further utilized as a useful economic resource. On many occasions only grotesque masks for sub-human figures and other mythical characters used in the bhāonās are prepared to serve the purpose.
However, nowadays the artisans have started making masks with other decorative motifs on commercial basis. Some people adjacent to the Sattras, especially, the young generation are involved in this art-form, thereby getting engaged in a commendable manner. This is growing as an avenue of self-employment to a considerable extent. An example in this regard can be cited from the Samaguri Sattra in Koliabor sub-division of the district where bhūona has been accepted as a major theatrical form and reciprocally the art of mask-making and the use of masks have attained much attention and appreciation from the theatre loving public. This can be accepted as a two way process; where on one hand it demands a participation or engagement from the community while on the other it creates a space for the development of economy. From the informed sources it has also been found that some of these masks are even sent outside the state for display and sometimes for use in other Sattras of the district and the state as well. This has contributed considerably to the growing popularity of the art and also to the socio-economic sphere.

3.1.4. Division of Sects in the Sattra

The post Śāṅkaradeva era witnessed schism within the Vaisnava order. As such, the Mahapurusiya Dharma got divided into four main branches or sects. These were popularly known as samhati or samprada meaning integration. This division took place only after the demise of Śāṅkaradeva and his immediate successor, Mādhavadeva. Since Mādhavadeva did not find any appropriate successors to succeed him, there continued a rift amongst the other contemporaries of their times. These differences in connection with the veil of leadership led them to segregate from the main sect. And hence the division took the form of new episodes in the history of Vaisnavism in the successive years. Though not any such major difference is seen in the fundamental practices and doctrines, yet a degree of difference is observed in respect to the four elements or
cāri-bastu viz, guru, nāma, deva, and bhakat or bhakta. One notable aspect of Assam Vaisnavism is the inclusion of individuals from both Brahmins (priestly) and non-Brahmins (non-priestly) into the faith. Śankaradeva being a non-Brahmin, engaged Dāmodaradeva and Harideva to propagate his faith amongst the Brahmins. As he chose Mādhavadeva as his successor to lead the Vaisnava order, Dāmodaradeva and Harideva broke away and founded the brahma samhāti and introduced some Brahanical ritualisms into the otherwise simplistic religious order. Each of them including Mādhavadeva anointed twelve dharmāchāryas or preachers to carry on with the task of expanding the faith to every nook and corner of the state. Two other disciples of Mādhavadeva founded separate sects within the order and assumed responsibility to carry forward the gospel. All these resulted in the formation of four distinct sects, namely purusa, brahma, kala and nika respectively.

While all these apostles founded institutions called Sattra in different areas, they too anointed their disciples to go on expanding their institutional network which led to the growth of a large number of Sattras spread over the valley. These sects and their features may be characterized as follows:

_Purusa_, derived its name from the elder grandson of Śaṅkaradeva, Purusottama Thakur. “The followers of Śaṅkaradeva who accept the guru and deva or the worshipped God as the same, have given the epithet Mahapurusā to Śaṅkaradeva and since Śaṅkaradeva is regarded as the ‘Adi Purus’ or the father of the sect, they also claim, the name had its origin from that” (Rajkhowa 2012, 88). Hence of the cāri-bastu, namely guru, nāma, deva and bhakat, the guru is given the priority. Apart from the regular nām-prasangas, certain Brahanical rites appropriating idol worshipping are done by the Sattras belonging to this sect.

_Brahma_ sect came into vogue at the initiative of Dāmodaradeva and Harideva, who were appointed by the saint himself to propagate the faith among the Brahmans in Kamrupa. The main preachers of this sect were Brahmins and of
the four elements, the followers stresses emphasis on *deva*. Hence they worship the image of *Visnu* or *Narayana*.

*Kala* sect has Sattras established by the offshoots of one of the twelve preachers appointed by Mādhavadeva was Gopāla Āta. He had very cordial relations with Mādhavadeva and so initially it was felt that he would succeed the later. Emphasis was laid on the position of the *guru* who the followers considered as the representative of God. Gopāla Āta too annointed twelve disciples, six of whom were brahmins and the rest non-brahmins for further spread of the faith. They moved to different directions and established Sattras of this sect for religious propagation.

Susceptible to a rigorous code of conduct and unattached devotion, the *Nika samhati* Sattras were established by three important disciples among the twelve, Padma Āta, Mathurādas Burha Āta and Keśava Āta. The followers of this sect completely adhered to the *Ek saran nam dharma*. They lay importance on the worship of sacred scriptures rather than the practice of image worship.

The Sattras created by the heads of these principal sects spread to almost whole of the Brahmaputra valley influencing a majority of the population to shift to Vaisnavism. Throughout the history of Vaisnavism in Assam, however there have been a co-existence among all the four major sects without jealousy or enmity among them and they continue to flourish side by side.

3.1.5. Functionaries in a Sattrra

The functionaries in a Sattrra consist of three principal categories of persons who are intimately connected to the management and functioning of each Sattrra. The chief or head of a Sattrra is known as the *Sattradhikāra*, who resides in the precincts of a Sattrra. He acts as the spiritual guide and religious head of the Sattras. He supervises the initiation process of a novice and conducts all the
rituals. “His position is similar to that of the mohunt of medieval mathas or the abbot of the Christian monastic system” (Sarmah 1996, 141-42). However, the Sattradhikāra’s performatory role in administration and other related duties in a house-holder Sattra are quite different from the monastic Sattra. In the absence of the Sattradhikāra or at his demise, the immediate successor selected either hereditarily or democratically elected known as deka-adhikāra takes over the duties of the head.

The bhakats or the bhaktas mean the devotees who hold priestly positions in the Sattra or the one who spends the life of a celibate throughout. As mentioned earlier these bhakats have a stricter life in the monastic Sattras than the non-monastic ones. They are recruited to the Sattras at a very early age and under training under the vigilance of all elderly bhakats. They are initiated to the faith when they attain a matured age and acquainted with the religious teachings and practices. The devotees of the non-monastic Sattras could marry and have a family life rather. They play concurrent roles at a time. Even the head of such Sattras could have a family and simultaneously perform the liturgies in his Sattra.

The lay disciples from the laity are known as the sisya who make the majority of the functionaries of a Sattra. It is also important to note that every house-holder in Assam till the recent past was associated with one or the other Sattras in the state. And according to customs, each house-holder belonging to the Vaisnava faith has to undergo the initiation process in the Sattra he/she is affiliated to, before the start of his conjugal life. Earlier this was considered as mandatory for all disciples but now flexibility is noticed in many of the Vaisnava families. These sisyas play a major role in disseminating the ideals of the Vaisnava faith to a new horizon. It is generally the sisyas who take active part in the regular congregations accentuating the ethos attached to it.

Apart from these three important functionaries, there are other individuals who take care of the Sattras holding different positions within a Sattra. They are
known by different titles complementing the posts they are assigned. Each one has specified functions, be it administrative, financial or ecclesiastical. Examples are medhi, bharali, āldhora, pujari, muktiār, deurī and many others. They take care of the management of the Sattras along with the nāmgars. There are even instances when these office-bearers continue to serve the Sattras at the behest of the Sattradhikāra. Though their posts are temporal yet they are keen on performing the same in the name of God.

3.1.6. Structural Features of a Sattra

The aesthetic nature of these Sattras can very well be understood from the pattern of structure of the religious place as well as the place of stay of the monks. There were no permanent structures in the Vaisnava Sattras in Assam earlier than the eighteenth century. The Sattra became the nerve centers for learning and sustaining the traditions of religion and the social life of the people at large.

The Sattras have unique architectural patterns built with the available indigenous goods in the state, such as bamboos, timber, thatch grass etc. but with times the use of these products have been stopped. Concretized structures have replaced the chief architectural model of the Sattras, and most often the nāmgars have undergone such changes. Though this has been the case in most of the prominent Sattras yet the relics have not been removed from the original sites. The non-availability of indigenous products, natural hazards, lack of proper preservation etc. are other reasons which has brought changes to the architectural structures of a Sattra. An elaborative account on the structural elements of a Sattra has been made which are cited as under:

(a) Nāmghar:

The institution of nāmgars or prayer hall located in a village or in an urban setting is the central structure of a Sattra. Most of the nāmgars
are situated either within the boundary of a Sattra complex or at a very close proximity to the Sattra. It is the place where regular hymns kirtana brought the faith of Bhakti to the doors of the remotest villages and people thronged into accepting the comprehensive preaching of the saint. These are also known as kirtan-ghar in many places. The gathering in these institutions were kept open to all sections of people irrespective of caste, creed and class which in later period greatly ushered in a social upheaval which left its imprint credibly on the Vaisnavite society in Assam as a whole. The central periphery of the Sattra is built on the main prayer hall which is important to every Sattra. It is a wide rectangular hall meant for holding regular prayers (nām-prasangas). It also serve the purpose of undertaking all religious discussions as also act as the ground for staging dramatic plays on occasions. Even in some village it acts as the central ground for holding the village panchayats (local self-government at the village or small town level in India) at short intervals. The nāmghar of modern times are mostly built of concrete to protect it from the natural calamities and other shortcomings. It is a common feature in every Assamese village to have a nāmghar close to a Sattra or to have one or two at a distance. However the size of a nāmghar depends on the resources available and the number of disciples of a Sattra. All people from the village laity are generally welcomed to the nāmghar, not being specific on a particular day or an occasion. In recent times, however the nāmghars in an urban setting have also showcased what an ideal prayer hall in a village delivers. As observed by B. Kakati, “the nāmghars as central religious institution in the village combined the functions of a village parliament, a village court, a village church and a village school. He also added that these institutions served as
sheet-anchors of Assamese society in the midst of continually shifting political circumstances” (Chaliha 1998, 31).

(b) Manikūta:

The second most important feature of a Sattra is the manikūta which houses the valuable properties of a Sattra. It is referred to as the sanctum sanctorum where mainly the idol of the deity, particularly in Sattras where idol is worshipped. Apart from these all other valuable manuscripts and scriptures used by the early saints are also preserved. This structure is built perpendicularly to the main prayer hall. “In many of the Sattras in the Barpeta district of Assam it is named as the bhajghar because of the bent or arched roofs with drooping ends or the bharal ghar (store-house)” (Mahanta 2007, 101). Literary known to be the house of jewels, the manikūta is not open to all except for the clerics inside the Sattras concerned.

(c) Relic- shrine or the pada-śila:

The pada-śilas are important components of a Sattra which preserves the foot impressions on slabs or foot wears of the saints or religious heads. There is however only a few notable Sattras in Assam like the ones in Barpeta, Bardowa, Sundaridiya, Patbausi in Assam and Madhupur Sattra in Kooch Behar which preserve these relics. Though they are not direct modes of worship even then they are kept as objects of veneration in the Sattras. Apart from these foot imprints of the saints, the pada-śilas also contain the articles of their daily use. On rare occasions these are taken out for the public and devotees throng in large numbers to have a glimpse of these relics as part of their regular obeisance to the great reformers.
(d) **Hati:**

The cloisters of huts known as *hatis* are normally built adjuncts to the main prayer hall for sheltering the monks or clerics of a particular Sattra. Depending on the number of monks and also their status and needs the residential huts are built in four rows and sometimes in two to accommodate the same. These hatis are however meant only for the celibate monks who generally stay in the precincts of a Sattra. Separate huts are also made available for the married and the general devotees outside the Sattra premise known as the *bahir-hati* or *asramii hati*. The hut normally consists of one or more rooms depending on the consistent number of monks.

(e) **Bātcarā:**

The main gateway to a Sattra is termed as the *bātcarā* which is very relevant to almost all of the Sattras of Assam. It is like a miniature replica of the *torana-grha* of a Hindu temple. The entrance is marked by a small opening in the type of a roofed house. It is also known as the *karāpāṭ*. The chief dignitaries are first being received at the *karāpāṭ* and then escorted to the interior of the Sattra on many important occasions. The *bātcarā* often confirm the presence of a Sattra in a village or town. It acts as a gateway or corridor to the interior of any Sattra. It is invariably a two roofed structure without any walls on the side.

(f) **Thān:**

Another remarkable feature of a Sattra is the *Thān*. It is more than a place of worship for a Vaisnava devotee in Assam. It is generally the place where either the place where the chief apostles have worked and died or their relics have been preserved. As for example, Bardowa in Nagaon preserves the relics of the saint, Śāṅkaradeva in the form of his
foot-print and hence the name Bardowa Thān. The ones which have been preserving the relics of the early saints of the faith are also remarkably known as Thāns.

3.2. The Sattras in the District of Nagaon: A General Perception

Unlike all other prominent Sattras of the state, Nagaon is also the home to many Sattras of repute. Although there are no such elaborative accounts on the Sattras established in the district yet inferences have been drawn from all available sources as important content for the present study. These include the available source texts, historical accounts, and the narratives. The present study is an effort to draw insights into the multifarious functions of the Sattras lying in this district.

According to the primary sources available for the research there is an estimate of around 159 Sattras in the entire district combining all the four major sects or samhati. However the present study holds the fact that out of these nearly half of them are in a very dilapidated condition and the rest have come under the cover of extinction. The reasons are many. These aspects are elaborately discussed under different heads in the chapters of my research work.

Nagaon, as according to the historic evidences and available sources is the birth place of the fountain-head of Vaisnava faith in Assam, Śankaradeva. As such the Sattras established in this part of the region are unique and have played an indomitable role in spreading the message of Vaisnava philosophy since long. It also has a record of accommodating Satras of all the samhatis together, thereby binding people from all sections in the society. They are mostly scattered in the three important sub-divisions of the district, viz, Dhing, Koliabor and Raha, apart from the main town, Nagaon. The survey has also added to the fact that most of them are located on the banks of the river Kolong and Kapili which is another
reason for growth and development of any institution. The history behind establishing these Sattras is unique. At various phases the chief apostles of the faith who had been appointed for further propagation and proliferation of the Sattras arrived and settled down in different parts of the district and established Sattras. The first of its kind is said to have been set up at Bardowa, after Śaṅkaradeva started propagating his new set of ideologies here. The apostles, at the initiation of whom the Sattras were established in Nagaon contributing to the socio-cultural and religious dimensions are mentioned in the chart below (fig. 3). They began to propagate in the whole of the state and once for a while made one of their bases in Nagaon. Being centrally located the district provided good grounds for establishing Sattras on the basis of the sect they adhere to. The number of disciples from the purusa samhati is however more compared to other sects. A serious note of concern is that amongst these, many Sattras have lost their integrity in the process of time and few have completely become extinct. The multi-sided reasons behind this non-operational status of the Sattras are discussed in detail in the following chapters emphasizing on the social-cultural, ecclesiastical and economic relations.

3.2.1. The Type of Sattras in Nagaon

The Sattras lying in the district are all of the non-monastic order, where the head of the Sattra is married and runs a family. Simultaneously he plays the role of a Sattradhikāra where he hereditarily acquires the title and sometimes he is chosen on being the senior in the family when no immediate successor inherits. Most of the Sattras even have heads who is a celibate but the devotees are householders. There is no such prominent Sattra in the district now following a pure monastic order, but the ones belonging to nika samhati brought under the survey is under the threat of extinction, once having an influential role. A majority of the
Sattras are either offshoots or branches of the main Satras established by the apostles in Majuli or the ones by the successors of the saint himself.

3.2.2. Sattras of Nagaon under Various Sects

Another important content of the study is the division of sect in the Mahapurusiya order, which is popularly named as the samhati, a Sanskrit word and a synonym to sangha meaning cohesion or an association. By the end of the middle of the 17th century, after the demise of the two main apostles of the Neo-Vaisnava faith, Šankaradeva and Mādhavadeva ideological differences simmered out amongst the various apostles of the Vaisnava movement. It resulted in the creation of various sects or divisions amongst them. The Sattras ordained by the chiefs of the sects seemed to have settled mostly in the western part of Assam at the time of their inception. But at later stages they shifted their bases to many a place in central and eastern Assam. There is, in fact, no fundamental difference among the sects in matters of religious philosophy and theology (Dutta 1990, 50). Classified under four main heads, the samhatis have their own unique features and a history related to its origination. Furthermore, the sects became like an umbrella under which various clusters of Sattras got instituted with an apostle as its head, most of whom were relatives or in some way or the other associated with the two main Gurus, Šankaradeva and Mādhavadeva. Corresponding to the divisions and strength in the number of disciples, Nagaon has Sattras of the purusa samhati more in number than the rest. The number of Sattras affiliated to this particular sect was higher, when they originally shifted their base from the initial stage itself. Regardless of the divisions, the Sattras however have contributed a lot in terms of cultural, religious and socio-political considerations. Each Sattra in the district is affiliated to one samhati and accordingly they have been carrying the works of ordination as well as other associated activities of religio-cultural nature.
All the major Sattras of Nagaon are directly or indirectly linked up with one sect or the other. The following diagram is an extended division of the Sattras on the basis of the four major sects which got further expanded with many large or small Satras led by the grandsons and great grandsons of the saint, disciples of the main apostles and other members of the Ajnapar Sattras. All these Sattras gave a new direction and a constructive reorganization to the movement started by the saints.

An elaborative description on the sahhati division with reference to the ones scattered in the district will provide a lucid understanding of the Sattras affiliated to the sects or sub-sects.

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2 Sattra founded under the orders of the preceptor. Also known as the 'branch' Sattras.
**Purusa Sanhati**

Accommodating the largest number of Sattras in the entire district till date, *purusa samhati* is the most prominent amongst the four. It occupies a unique position amongst the Vaisnava of Assam. Originated under the leadership of Purusottama Thakur, a direct descendant of Śaṅkaradeva and whom Mādhavadeva acclaimed as the real successor. It was under the tutelage of Mādhavadeva that Purusottama attained his education. As chief protagonist of the sect, he appointed a set of twelve disciples as apostles to initiate adherents into the faith. In the subsequent years they set up many Sattras disseminating the teachings of the sub-sect, mostly in the eastern and central parts of Assam. Centrally located, Nagaon houses the maximum number of *purusa samhati* Sattras. It acquired its name ‘*purusa*’ from the term *Mahapurusa*, the honorific title given to Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva too. The principal Sattras of this sect can be categorized as *bar-bārajanyā* that is established by the twelve disciples of Purusottama Thakur; *saru-bārajanyā*, established by the twenty-four disciples each of Caturbhuja Thakur, younger brother of Purusottama and his wife Kanakalatā Āi; and *Nāti Sattras* established by the grandsons of the saint.

After Purusottama’s death, his legacy was further carried down by his younger brother, Caturbhuja Thakur and later on by his wife Kanakalatā Āi. Having a strong religious and organization acumen, Kanakalatā with another set of twelve apostles and her nephew, Dāmodara Āta rediscovered and reclaimed the main seat of the Guru, Bardowa. After a gap of almost 140 years Bardowa revived its lost glory with her untiring efforts. The descendants of this sect established two main Sattras of the sect- Narowa and Salaguri, which branched out into many new Sattras in the district at different phases. In the later years the Sattras got disseminated under the able leadership of many apostles, many of which had their branches in Nagaon like in other parts of the state and popularly known as the *Ajnapar Sattra*. Amongst them the Sattras of Karcung, Nācanipār, and Kobāıkota...
(see Appendix I) are the most important ones in the region. Moreover it has been observed that a few Sattras which have an anonymous origin also claim to have affiliated under the *purusa saṅhati*.

Emphasizing more on the concept of *nāma*\(^3\) the disciples of this sect are more inclined to singing and reciting congregational prayers in praise of the Lord. That is why the Sattras under this sect in Nagaon are into the practice of conducting rituals accompanied by *nām-prasangas*. But in some Sattras Brahmanical rites are also followed in addition to adhering only to the chanting of prayers. In one or two prominent Sattras located in the region, the images of Viṣṇu are also kept as a seat of veneration. One distinctive feature of the Sattras affiliated to it is that the head belongs to both Brahmin and non-Brahmin community. As such there are some Sattras in Nagaon as mentioned in the Appendix-I where the initiation is given to the Brahmins by the non-Brahmins as also rituals are two-fold. On one hand the Sattras distinctively perform *nām-prasangas* as acts of special value, while on the other they perpetuated the Brahmanical rites within the fold. Most of them, according to the recent survey, have been able to retain the originality of Śaṅkaradeva's faith and pass it on to the younger generations. A special mention may be made of the initiation process of the women. In many of the Sattras it is equalized with men as a majority of the Sattras was established by the descendants of the saint from the female line. The *Mahantas* (heads) were mostly selected hereditarily but they were not necessarily Brahmins.

**Brahma Saṅhati**

Based on the number of disciples affiliated to the sect and its popularity, it is the second important one in Nagaon housing approximately thirty-three Sattras. Originated from Brahma, the creator as the name suggests the Sattras under this

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\(^3\) According to Vaisnavism in Assam as propounded by Śaṅkaradeva, one of the fundamental rudiments in devotional practices is *nāma* meaning chanting and recitation of verses in different ways and procedures. The other three are *deva*, *guru* and *bhakta*. 
sect are strictly headed by Brahmanas, who basically pursue the cult of Bhakti and practice the Brahmanical codes. This sect evolved under the tutelage of Dāmodaradeva, an apostle of Śaṅkaradeva and the founder of the Dāmodariya Panthā and Harideva, another close associate and one of the four apostles appointed by the saint. Of the four major elements of Vaisnavism, this sect lays emphasis on *deva* i.e. God. To keep the images of Viśnu-Narayana in the form of sālagrama-sīla in all the Sattras and also in every household is an important feature of this sect. Dāmodaradeva (1488-1598), born in a village near Bardowa was an egalitarian in spirit and in all admiration for Śaṅkaradeva. Śaṅkaradeva too elevated him to the apostolate order to initiate the Brahmans in particular. Moved by the reverence of the saint he inducted many Brahmans into the Vaisnava faith. He is said to have introduced worship of the image of Lord Viśnu with Brahmanical ritualism and observances of other Vedic and Brahmanical rites. Even though the *Mahapurusiya* order does not encourage idol worship, yet there are no differences between the two sects at the basic philosophical level, the *Mahapurusiya* and the *Dāmodariya*. Observing a ritual in a Sattra of this sect in Nagaon, it was experienced that there is a huge assemblage of people for regular congregations, be it in the Sattra or even in the village nāmghar belonging to the laity. Many of them also got special land grants from the Ahom kings during the Ahom regime in medieval Assam. The four affluent Sattras of eastern Assam popularly known as cāri-satras, namely Āuniāti, Dakhināpāt, Garamūr and Kuruwābāhi have their branches in Nagaon. The Sattras established by Vairasīgopāladeva and Yadumānideva, the two important visionaries intensified the number of disciples of the sect by proselytizing in almost in all parts of the district. In the later stage these Sattras gained momentum under the tutelages of their descendants. The Kuruwābāhi Sattra and Māhorā Sattra having their lineage to the aforesaid apostles of the sect respectively (see Appendix I) are affluent ones amongst all. Moreover there are many branched-out Sattras affiliated to this sect by the same apostle in the district at various locations. It was observed that a few
of them have been influential since the time of their inception and is continuing since then. The rituals of śarana and bhajana form an important feature of the Sattra institution in entirety administered by the Sattra chiefs of these Sattras also. Generally the members of families of laity affiliated to a particular Sattra including that of the brahma samhati are ordained śarana by the Sattradhikāra. However, now a days individuals from other sects are also seen to receive initiation from Sattras to which they do not belong. And the practice is regularly going on in the Sattras of Nagaon affiliated to the aforesaid sect. A notable feature observed in the Sattras of brahma samhati is that the rituals observed by these Sattras are very much similar with those of the purusa samhati and thus, there is a mix of them, between both the sects. There is a propensity of initiating disciples from all the tribal belts surrounding the district and as such they constitute into a large unit adhering into this sect. In most cases, apart from following the daily devotional practices and rites, the Sattras perform rituals related to the Brahmanical fold.

**Kala Samhati**

Considered to be the most liberal and heterodox in religious practices, the followers of this sect owe their origin to Gopāla Āta, one of the chief apostles appointed by Mādhavadeva who acclaimed him as the supreme religious head and successor of the order. The name of the sect is connected to the original abode of the preceptor, Kālijār. After his demise, his twelve apostles ordained by him, started propagation by building Sattras at different places of the state. He appointed six Brahmins and six non-Brahmins as disciples who took to the position of an Adhikara or Mahanta (heads of a Sattra). Among these twelve apostles mention may be made of Bar- Yadumaṇi, Saru- Yadumaṇi, Śrīram Āta, Nārāyana, Rāmāchandra descendants of whom, at later stages proliferated into many Sattras. The notable ones which have their off-shoots in Nagaon are the Dihing, Māyāmarā, Gajalā and Āhātaguri Sattras. Each of the above had at least
one prominent Satras in the entire district under different sub-divisions. (*see Appendix I*). But there are no Satras in Nagaon established by Gopāla Āta himself. The ones brought under survey are established either by a few amongst the twelve apostles or his sons and grandsons. The Dihing and Āhātaguri Sattras have the largest number of followers in Nagaon. The collateral branch of the Dihing Sattra in the district owes its origin to the days of the illustrious saint-poet, Bar- Yadumāni and later on it was made popular by one of his sons, Sanātana. This Sattra received grants from the kings and hence flourished under the royal patronage. In course of time it became one of the richest Sattras in Nagaon.

Among the four fundamental elements the guru plays an important role in this sect and it lays no emphasis on the Brahmanical order. They consider Śāṅkaradeva to be their only revered leader and assumed him to be the human representative of God. This sect has a history of initiating individuals belonging to different tribes and other socially backward classes into this fold. These features are also available in the Sattras affiliated to this sect in Nagaon. The major Sattras of *Kala samhati* in Nagaon have not only been instrumental in converting the Assamese caste-Hindu population such as the Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalitas into their fold on diverse occasions, but they have also included the tribal population, the Tiwas, Kacharis, Kaivartas*¹⁴* inhabiting the rural belt of the district.

**Nika Samhati**

The Sattras under this sect originated after the formation of the other three sects of Mahapurusiya Sattras. The founders of the sect led by Mathurādas Burha Āta, Padma Āta, and others following the footsteps of Mādhavadeva took a path of ritual rigour and cleansing the faith from all other interpolations that appeared to creep into it. Hence a set of rules was set to purify a Vaisnav’s mind and body. The followers of this sect strictly adhere to *Ek saran nām dharma* (devotion to

*¹⁴ As mentioned in the list of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) population inhabiting in the state of Assam. Source: Census of Assam, 2001.
only one God) with a rigorous code of conduct with complete devotion. The three main apostles, namely Padma Āta, Mathurā Āta and Keśava Āta who were the close associates of Mādhavadeva evolved certain rules which were considered to be favorable for the followers then. The word nika meaning pure and clean is an important feature of this sect. The worship of scriptures is an important characteristic, while image worship is totally negligible.

Barpeta, Kamalabari and Madhupur are the prominent Sattras of this sect. There is a close association of these Sattras with the ones in Nagaon. The rituals and festivals connected to this sect are performed accordingly. The affairs of these Sattras are taken care of by the authorized officials at regular intervals. There are around six Sattras affiliated to nika samhati in Nagaon. The one which has been surveyed is the Barjaha Sattra founded by Keśava Āta, Upar-Doomdoomiya and Nām Doomdoomiya. The other Sattras which had once been established by the off-shoots of the above three apostles at different phases are Lāiāti- Barfāl, Sarufāl and Majufāl, Doomdoomiya. But now the administration of these Sattras is in a negligible state. The prospect is quite different in Nagaon from the rest of the Sattras affiliated to this sect. Out of the six Sattras which were established in Nagaon at various times, one or two now wears a desolate look in its regular devotional practices. The Doomdoomiya Sattra owes its origin to the days of Mathurādas Burha Āta, a chief apostle of this sect and it is only after his demise that the nika samhati Sattras became known. The lands which were bestowed upon by the kings in the name of religion are now encroached by the illegal immigrants, which is a major state of concern for many of the Sattras in Nagaon alone.

The various Sattras strewn within the hub of the Nagaon district, belonging to different sects and sub-sects of the Vaisnava culture in Assam have been playing an important role in integrating the whole Assamese society. Housing nearly 159 (approximate estimate) Sattras in the district of all sects, they
have been successful at appropriating the socio-cultural and religious uniqueness in the individuals. But the recent study of the Satras has undergone certain anomalies which has greatly affected the consistency of these institutions of learning and culture. The causes and reasons for the irregularity in their functioning would be discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters. However, the *samhāṭi* division in the Satras is so far not been the lone cause of their decline. The existing Satras with their collateral branches in and around the district have made successful attempts to retrieve the lost cultural heritage of the Satras and the Vaisnava community in general but the schemas of religious proceedings have fluctuated over time, irrespective of the sects and selection of the heads of the concerned Satras. Since the time of their inception these Satras have more or less assimilated the larger Assamese population through conscious religious preaching constituting the Vaisnava fraternity in Assam. But now this prospect is slightly diminished to a considerable extent.
REFERENCES


Figure: 4 – The main entrance (bāicarā) to Rupnārāyaṇ Porābheti Sattrā premise.

Figure: 5 – The main prayer-hall of Narowa Bālisatra, Dhing.
Figure: 6 - Important functionaries (*bhakats*) in their traditional attire.

Figure: 7 – A village *nāmghar*. 
Figure: 8 (a) – Relic-shrine inside a Sattra.

Figure: 8 (b) – Srimanta Śaṅkardeva’s foot-wear made of eight metals.
Figure: 9 – A prayer hall with some important artefacts.

Figure: 10 - The entrance to the *Paduka thān* of Samaguri Sattra.
Figure: 11 – Sri Sri Brahmachārī Sattra.

Figure: 12 – The premise of the nāmghar of Karatipār Bogajon Sattra.