CHAPTER 4

RITUAL: FORMS AND PRACTICES IN THE SATTRAS

Throughout human history, rituals have always been playing a significant role in spite of the fact that they vary in its content, form and context. While normally rituals are performed on specific dates and occasions, there are some which are practiced at random intervals in compliance with laid down canons. A ritual refers to “a predictable and regular observance of some act or procedure, which has a symbolic element resulting in the inculcation or reinforcement of shared values and beliefs” (Coyne and Mathers 2011, 74). Individuals in the society are often bound with certain elements and values necessary in day to day lives. And for the well being of the society, it is important to understand how rituals connect our ways of life. A ritual is not something one is audience to but something one is participant in. Likewise it is not something that can happen to someone but something one chooses to be a part of (Rothenbuhler 1998, 125). While discussing rituals in the context of socio-religious institutions, it becomes vital to understand why rituals are important in the socio-cultural life of an institution and how it contributes to the overall health of a particular community based on its ritualistic performances. “Ritual is often explained by anthropologists and sociologists as a means by which communities define, cement, and justify social relations” (Gazin-Schwartz 2001, 273).

4.1. Rituals in the Context of Sattras in Assam

To interpret rituals in the context of Assam Vaisnavism as observed in the Sattra institutions, an understanding of the varying contexts of such observances is necessary. Rituals are an important component of religion and this perspective is quite popular. Cultural precepts and practices take tangible forms of expression through various ritual actions. It is always possible to consider a ritual in terms of
‘latent’ social goals or the explicit religious meaning of ritual symbolism, bearing in mind that ritual acts do endow culturally important cosmological conceptions (Green 1997, 735). To have a first hand information or understanding of the above several field surveys were undertaken, as often anthropologists and historians of religion do, for interactions with the laity of various Sattras, scrutinizing the actions adopted during such rituals and observing them as distinct cultural texts practiced through ages. For the purpose of this study, the researcher presents a survey of the rituals concerning the essential features or identifying marks of the rituals in the Sattras of Nagaon in particular. In general the Vaisnava followers in Assam engage in a wide variety of collective and individual ceremonies, practices denoting the term ritual. As suggested by Michel Mohr, (in Heine and Wright 2008, 205), “the rituals serves as a prism to view various images provided by Zen institutions in the past and the present, to connect different periods of history and to bridge concepts and practices.” We can look at the day to day rituals or the same observed on account of the festivals within the Vaisnava community specially the ones practiced in the Sattra institutions and the nāmghars of the district today. The rituals which are continuing for several centuries apart from impacting the religious mind of the people, are working as a means of communication and dialogue among various layers of people and thus contributed to the understanding and harmony of the society for ages which is why the Sattras in the district continue to be vibrant institutions or centers of social communication. And the institutions as well as their rituals help us to ‘connect different periods of history’. Moreover my interest in understanding the rituals in the Sattras is to examine the lived dynamics of how the rituals been undertaken and how people create, communicate and change themselves through the ritualized behavior. “The historical approach is mainly centered on the role that ritual plays in the process of transmitting the cultural and religious knowledge and symbols and in the formation of the identity and invention of the past of the society, community, or group” (Green 1997, 736).
Governing the religious belief and worship, the rituals are at the nucleus of a Sattra and in most cases they are the repositories attaining a canonical status. Prompted by such an intent, the study sets to examine the ritual observances of the numerically small but culturally rich Vaisnava community, seeking to explore its distinguishing features and epistemological foundations on which these rituals are based. One of the most notable features in the performance act is that the Sattradhukāra or the chief of a Sattra is amongst the few chosen ones responsible in handling all ritualized behaviors in his own Sattra and sometimes outside it. From the perspective of a cultural transmission taking place in a Sattra, the privilege of the chief heading the Sattra is nonetheless of great social importance. Therefore practice of certain rituals by more participants assembling in the institution is a rule for the community. It is interesting to draw a formal link between the institutions and the ritual process. With respect to ritual, the potential for institutional advantage is obvious. And it happens so periodically that the institutional actors or the mediators get a notion to invent a particularly practical ritual and attach themselves for a practical purpose giving meaning to an already established and authentic ritual.

The rituals such as the initiation rites in the Sattras create a special bonding between the individual and the one who initiates him into the faith and also draws the communion between him and the spiritual world. These rites can be described as the traditional patterns of religious activity embedded in the cultural consciousness of the individuals which in most cases are founded on religion and religious precepts. Many of such rituals in the Sattras, as discussed below, emerging even from mundane or natural reality seek to relate it with the divine or trans-natural and thereby in a state of sacred-secular continuum.

The Sattras operating as platforms all ritual actions are more often through an endeavour to conduct the rituals in a specially designated location like the nāmghar using specific materials and involving regulated motions to perform the act drawing similarities from Turner (1967) in demonstrating the case of the
Ndembu rituals. He further adds in his analysis of rites of passage that a ritual often constructs and reaffirms social relationships in part by inverting the everyday relationships among people, and between people and objects. This creates a relationship between the designated actors who perform the rituals and the people who are participants in the ritual process. Moreover as stated by Renfrew (1994, 49), rituals as social and communal activity, involving specific actions are carried out in special ways at special places, on special days and at special times. This view can be adopted in the case of the Sattras where we consider the roles played by various ritual acts in establishing and maintaining social relations amongst the members of the community and they allow us to examine the ways different ritual sites and items express different social relations. For example the Samaguri Sattra in Koliabor houses the guru-paduka, a symbolic or relic representation of the saint’s feet. A new initiate at the end of a formal ceremony is led to it for another simple ritual of paying obeisance to the relic. Also, once in a year especially during Bihu this item is exhibited for public display as mark of veneration as also as part of the ritual. This draws a link between the individuals and the members of the Sattra in establishing social relations by way of participation. It also ‘incorporates the individuals into a larger social entity’ (Islam and Zyphur 2009, 114). And this is an essential feature of rituals.

4.1.1. Ritual as Forms of Communication

Rituals are an important means of communication and communion amongst all concerned individuals in these institutions. Hence, by nature all forms of rituals are communicative. As mentioned by Rothenbuhler (1998, 4-5), “rituals are types of symbolic behavior in social situations.” It often accompanies a voluntary performance by the individual in a perpetuated form. Emile Durkheim’s notion of rituals as communal means by way of which the beliefs and ideals of a culture are communicated to the individual members of a particular
society is taken into account while discussing the Sattras from the lens of building a communicative process. From this premise rituals of all forms in the Sattra institutions in Nagaon or elsewhere can be viewed as a part of a communication involving both the members of the laity, the practitioners as well as the performers. The rituals thus connect the Vaisnava ideals to the practitioners and vice-versa. The interactions that hold place within the rituals acts as a way of communicating with each other. It may be appropriate "to adopt the term 'ideologies of communication' with reference to culture as a whole set of ideas about how information flows between people and the natural and super-natural worlds" (Robbins 2001, 599). Through prayers one finds the sacred communion with the Almighty and in most cases we find the Sattradhikāra acting as mediators between God and men. He acts like a mediator. Sometimes it so happens that the rites performed by others are not compatible for many, as marked very often in the case of urban dwellers than the rural folks. In their act of participation the individuals fail to communicate with the ritual procedures since by virtue they keep distance from these. They are mostly occasional visitors to the Sattras. No doubt, the best way to come to understand "the point or power of a ritual is to engage in it oneself, even if only empathically" (Wright 2008, 10).

4.1.2. Ritual as Action-Oriented Performance

All rituals commence with a performance. The aesthetic component of the performatory nature of a ritual determines two important characteristics. One, a ritual is an action with a pre-conceived notion. This notion is shared by the members of the group as always being a part of the performance. Secondly, a ritual is always a performance for someone. "Ritual is performed, performance being an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience" (Bauman 1989, 262). An essential form of a ritual is the bodily movements of the one who is involved in
the process. This makes the ritual more accommodating in their deliverance. The rituals in the Sattras certainly accompany actions which are regulated and confirmed by the performer. The individuals' lives are structured by way of communication through these performances.

Ritual as a category of action is characterized by predictable structure over time, a structuring that is commonly labeled repetitive. A ritual may be defined as a combination of the actions called rites (socioreligious ceremonies following specific traditional patterns), which in their turn, may be divided into smaller ritual units in the structure of a ritual (Green 1997, 734).

It becomes the duty of every individual within the community to collectively attend to a ritual performance. Most of the ritual ceremonies as discussed in this chapter involve the entire community. The collective well being of the community (Rappaport 1968, in Schechner 1976, 211) is fairly dependent upon a common body of performance related to ritual activities. With this Turner (1982, 31) attested that the “whole community goes through the entire ritual round.” In the ritual phase of aboriginal society of Australia, Durkheim (1912, 217) wrote, ‘the population comes together concentrating itself at specific places....’ The concentration takes place when a clan or a portion of the tribe is summoned to come together” (Alexander 2004, 535). In a Sattra in the present context, participation in any ritual act is contingent on both the participant and the observer. Participation in such acts are determined by the individuals concerned or the entire community. It is considered to be a natural and necessary dimension of the ongoing ritual process upheld in a particular Sattra.

Ritual performance not only symbolizes a social relationship or change; it also actualizes it. There is a direct effect, without mediation (Alexander 2004, 537). The ‘actors’ ordained in our discussion are the chief heading a particular Sattra or the members indirectly involved with the Sattra participating in any of the ritual act within the demarcated areas can be cited as the institutionalized
masters of a ritual performance. The Sattradhikāra perform the rituals in a particular place and assures the transmission of meaning of their performances to the observing audience which is the relevant community at large. The success of any ritual act upheld by them depends largely on their skills and these skills by and large are intertwined with other characteristic dimension that allow the entire process of performing the particular act to be fused in simple social organizations. Both the participants and the observers of the rituals lay claim that they have an outstanding force to act and enact in the performance. As protagonist of the whole process of rituals pertaining to these institutions, the performers have to transform their interest to a level which could propel a persuasive symbolic form. Therefore, “the challenge confronting individual and collective symbolic action in complex contemporary societies, whether on stage or in society at large, is to infuse the meaning by re-fusing performance” (Alexander 2004, 548).

4.2. The Historical Record of Rituals in the Sattras: A General Overview

The general consensus among the Vaisnava followers in Assam is that the rituals practiced according to the conventional Vaisnava ideology and propagated by the two propounders, Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva had been enacted with a combination of practical necessity and compassion for the common people. With the proliferation of Sattras in the later half of the 17th century, the rituals found their way in Vaisnavism spreading to the lay population. A set of ritual activities were disseminated among the masses through these socio-religious institutions and most importantly concentrated in the nāmghars regardless of the ritual space. The manikūta serves as the sanctum-sanctorum representing a sanctified ritual space with placement of the sacred text, the Bhāgavata. Moreover it infuses religious significance and the prayer hall serves as the powerful venue for the ritual performances, in addition to the regular ordinations and the spread of principles of the faith. As formal modes of conduct, the Sattras lying in different
locations of the state has been going through different acts of rituals, ceremonies and festivals at different points of time. And it holds good in respect of the Sattras in Nagaon, the area of the present study. For an easy understanding of the daily as well as occasional conduct of ritual performances in the Sattras, a description of various kinds of rituals, accompanied by religious ceremonies and festivals which are exclusively observed by a Vaisnava individual are narrated in brief below. Apart from the regular ritual practices there are certain festivals accompanying the rituals which imply their performative nature.

The Sattras are invariable unique models to establish various rituals as a pre-contained set of acts constituting an essence of culture. The Sattras of Nagaon mostly cater to the calendrical rites and the rites of passage. Calendrical rites are periodic, recurring, and form a clearly distinguishable group of their own (Green 1997, 735). These rites occur regularly in the lives of the community. The rites of passage includes the initiation process, the death and birth anniversaries of the saints. These rites highlight the social position of an individual in the community. In the Sattras too, these rites are held only once in the life of the individual.

The important components of any socio-cultural institution are the performances related with a ritual process. And so thus we see a constant mode of interaction through the ritual performances in the Sattra. So before going into the foray of ritualistic aspects of these socio-religious institutions, it is important to take a note of the various rituals and occasional practices held from time to time. Among the rituals regularly performed in the Sattras there are two distinct varieties: those practiced on a daily basis (nitya) and other periodic rites (naimitikka) which are performed at a particular frequency and in some ways more meaningful. Associated with it are the annual rituals which include the beginning of the Assamese New Year (fig.13), remembrances of the saints’ birth and death and commemorating the founder(s) of a particular sect of the Vaisnava order, rituals of initiation and prayers in the form of nām-prasangas. Most of the
rituals thus observed are calendrical and are repetitive in nature. Every year certain rituals accompanied by ceremonial observances and festivals are held in these institutions. They form an array of actions along with religious performances. The major forms of rituals conducted in the Sattras are cited as under:

a. **Initiation and allied ceremonies**: This is an important ritual in a Sattra. Once an individual takes up this faith s/he has to undergo a process most commonly known as *śaraṇa* and *bhajana* to confirm their entrants into the faith. The head of a Sattra often performs this rite, while in his absence it is done by somebody entrusted with the responsibility. In many a case it is found that this ceremony is held in a communal form, wherein an individual belonging to a family with which the Sattra is traditionally connected or is initiated into the faith through certain strictures, deemed necessary for anyone ordained into it for the first time. The initiation ceremony along with the rituals of a new disciple or devotee being accepted into the faith is also accompanied by the rites of installing a new *Sattradhikāra*. As in the Buddhist monastic order and Christian Benedictine order, a novice has to undergo a probationary period of at least a year or two, so also in Assamese Vaisnava order a newly initiated member in the Sattras of celibate order has to spend a few months in probation and training before formally being taken up into the community. But this is not so rigorous in the case of the member of a house-holder Sattra. Once the newly anointed head or sometimes his immediate successor and other intermediaries go through a period of basic training in each ritual practice, they begin to specialize in the act. The formalization of the initiation rites of the role of the head takes the form of a ceremonial performance that takes place either in the Sattra or the village *nāṅghars*. The formal staging of this spectacular event highlights the hierarchical stratification embedded in appointing the head or abbot of a Sattra.
b. **Daily prayer services:** A performance based ritual is held regularly in the premises of a namghar or in a Sattra continuing from morning to noon. On several occasions they continue till late at night. There are basically three distinct divisions of regular prayer-service, at morning, forenoon and evening services respectively, but now we find only two services and sometimes four commonly known as dū-prasanga and cāri-prasanga. In the village namghars also normally two services are held, one in the forenoon and the other in the evening. Nāṁ-prasanga, a common coinage for this contains a set of prayers in the form of recitals from the sacred texts, the Kirtana, the Nāmghosa, the Bhāgavata and the Gita. The chanting of prayers is accompanied by the beating of drums, cymbals and clapping of hands. Everyday at least one fascicle from the Bhāgavata text is read by each bhakat. Normally there are fourteen such services to be performed from morning till evening in the three Mahapurusiya orders of the Sattras while twelve are followed in the sects of Dāmodaradeva and Harideva. On the contrary, in several Sattras where there is a lack of devotional pursuits due to lesser number of devotees participating in the act, the number of prayer sessions is also less. Rituals cannot be performed without bodily participation (Rothenbuhler 1998, 62). Likewise this ritual of offering prayers also demands a bodily participation from the congregation. The performative aspect of the bodily participation is an index of the position of the performers as well as the meaning and form of the practice. More frequent during the month of bhādra (July-August) are the prayer services in the Sattras particularly belonging to the Mahapurusūya order because of the anniversaries of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva’s death. And it carries great significance to women as a set of such rituals in the form of prayer services is solely performed by them. Since the Sattras of Nagaon do not, at all, restrict women from entering
the premises, the evening services of prayers are generally conducted with the laity in attendance. This is one of the key events in the Vaisnavite calendrical rituals that bring together the entire community.

Moreover on several occasional ceremonies in the Sattras, special rituals are inducted to the daily routine of prayer services. These special rituals accompanied by performances are notably the ojā-pāli, natuwa-nāc and uthā-nām. These are frequent in most of the Sattras, each depicting the different forms of prayers along with some performing acts. Performance here is marked as ‘an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience’. Borrowing this idea from Bauman (1989) such rituals in the Sattras are seen as performances attracting an audience and having an aesthetic component. The prasangas, as observed in many of the nāmghars in both rural and urban setting, is practiced at least twice each day, mostly the morning and evening service, always at the same time and at a prescribed manner. In addition to this there are other rituals like chanting of verses from the sacred texts or scriptures, singing of bhatimās, gunamāla, nāmghosa etc. that follows the same frequency. The fourteen agendas of prayer-services known as chaidhya prasanga were common in the Sattras belonging to the nika, purusa and kala samhati but now due to constraints of time and space, this has eroded to a great extent. However, on special occasions, Bardowa still performs this congregation of prayer-services from morning till night. On many instances, ojā-pāli and natuwa-nāc are performed through singing and dancing along with the clapping of hands and cymbals.

c. Conferment of rosary: This is another important ceremony held high in many Sattras of Assam. A devotee confirmed into the faith is ritually bestowed with a string of beads carved out of basil plant or sandal wood. The process of confirming a rosary to the devotee undergoes the same
ritual procedures as in initiation. Only a devotee passing through the complete process of initiation and ordination, ie. śarana-bhajana may be invested with a rosary. The act of conferring a rosary is more prevalent in the Sattras of both purusa and brahma samhati. The act involves a strict procedure for each member from the community reflecting their status and rank accordingly. In certain Sattras of Nagaon like Narowa, Salaguri, Letugram, Karcung, Nikāmul (Uriāgaon), Puranighar, Māhorā (Dimow), the ceremonies of initiation and conferment of rosary are normally performed at the nāmghar and sometimes outside the campus of the Sattra according to convenience of time and place.

d. Rituals related to worship: The relationship between worship and ritual is important in a Sattra. It involves both prayer and bodily movements and these are reflected in the iconography or images of the deity being worshipped. Though image worship is not very popular in the Sattras yet the worship of the image of Lord Viśnu is common to the Sattras of brahma samhati. It forms the most important item of daily services. Apart from this, several Sattras also have the salagrāma as an item of daily worship. Relic worship is an important phenomenon associated with the ritual practices in a Sattra. The foot impressions and footwears of the Gurus and different apostles of the faith, known as padaśila and paduka respectively, kept in many of the Sattras as replicas to be worshipped. The places sanctified by these relics are known as thāns. In addition to the conventional ritual ceremony, are also included the readings from the sacred texts, chanting of hymns in the form of mantras and invocations to the established deity or images.

e. Daily rituals by the devotees: There is not much difference in the daily rituals to be performed either by a house-holder devotee or the celibate
monk. Each has a similar set of rules of conduct. The individual, as soon as he is ordained to the faith has to observe certain rites and practices, which are essential for maintaining the status quo social order. Repetition of prayers in the form of chanting is another phenomenon in all the Sattras. They join together for the congregations. "In all activities, whether religious or secular, sacred names of the deity should be uttered or remembered" (Sarma 1996, 181). This daily congregation symbolizes the unity amongst the members of the community and also the resident monks.

4.3. Interpreting Rituals of the Sattras of Nagaon

The Sattras in the district have always featured rituals in a more sophisticated and elaborate way. In the major branches of the Sattras under the three prominent sects, with the efforts of a few activists maintaining the traditions the rituals are made more relevant in a rapidly modernizing society. Though not much in a collaborative way, they have been popularizing the faith and transferring ideas through its variant forms of rituals. The regularity is observed more in the celebration of important festivals integrating more people into the faith and also contributing largely to the socio-cultural and religious life of the Assamese community. The performance of the rites varies among different sects and order of Sattras scattered in the region and has provided instances of change in the ritual forms. These rites and rituals have identified the ways of life of each individual in the community. In most cases the rituals have become the tool of worship for them. There is no such irregularity in the performances and pursuit of the rituals. And if any, those are at an individual level. Collectively rituals have followed a social order. These are more of a collective action and a communicative process in these Sattras.
A survey of almost a dozen of these institutions reveals that many of the Vaisnavite ritualists have taken the form of initiation and ordination (śaraṇa-bhajana) and the regular conduct of prayers (nām-prasanga) as a model for ritual practice and sought to encourage all the members of the community to carry on these acts further. By this act of getting involved in a particular ritual with a long tradition, the individual feels connected and the process necessitates a sense of belongingness.

4.3.1. Episodic Festivals Conducted in the Sattras

Rituals and rites differ not only in terms of its occasion but also in terms of its subject. The community life is often seen to be punctuated by a series of events and celebrations. The Sattras are in no way an exception to it. Ritual acts as an element to all of these. Warner (1959) illustrates the sacred reunion and symbolic form of the celebrations. Unlike all other Sattras in the state, the ones in and around the district observes certain festivals and ceremonies corresponding to the faith. Often we see festivals have particular ceremonies related with them. For some activities such as the initiation process as discussed above, the day specified for the particular occasion is only hypothetical. Even special devotional functions such as pāṭl nām, Bhāgavata-pāṭh are supposedly held in one part of the year and sometimes not even performed in many of these institutions. Other similar activities such as reading verses from the sacred texts or scriptures occur daily and are not included in the monthly services. More often some other activities occur as indispensable ones like the tithis and they do not usually occur as monthly or regular as dates reasonably vary. One fine example is cited from the daily conduct of prayer services in the Sattras and most often in the nāmghars, being the focus of the events of a Sattra. There are significant variations in the manner of nām-prasangas between the four major sects or saṅhati, Sattras or even accompanying different periods of celebration round the year. But not any
particular variation undercuts the fact that the regular prayer services especially held in the month of bhādra as the most frequently associated rituals of a Sattra is still at the centre of the contemporary Sattra rituals as has been continuing for many years. As understood from the previous discussion, each village in the district is affiliated to a sectarian order of the Sattra or samhati as most popularly defined. The rituals vary at different times irrespective of the sects. As mentioned already, Nagaon houses a majority of purusa samhati Sattras (see Appendix I). Speculations are that only if these festivals and ceremonies accompanied with all socio-religious practices and cultural forms are preserved and practiced, the Sattras can excel in all spheres. In general most of the festivals celebrated in the Sattras of Assam have a Pan-Indian taste and that is why the researcher has restricted only a few observances which are exclusively and more significantly related to Assam Vaisnavism.
Figure: 13- Month-wise observances in a year according to Assamese calendar.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Observances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Srāvana (July-August) / Bhādra (August-September)</td>
<td>1. Janmāśtami</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Phālguna (February-March)</td>
<td>2. Phālgutsava/Doul utsava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Vaiśakha (April-May)</td>
<td>5. Bohāg Bihu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table clearly indicates that these are the most widespread and common festivals and ceremonials held with a set of ritual practices in the Sattras spread out in the whole of the district. This has been detailed out to identify the ones performed on a regular basis at all the major nāmghars or in the boundaries of a Sattra and those which directly involves the laity in the process.

1. Janmāśtami: Commemorating the birth of the Lord, bhāonās are held at several places which continue for several days. People from the village laity as also from the neighboring villages throng in large numbers to observe the festival in the Sattras. The nāmghars of the concerned Sattra are illuminated with recitals and prayers accompanied by a musical

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5In Assam the New Year is calculated on the basis of the solar month. According to the lunar calculation of the year a particular occasion may change the actual day or date based on the person's birth or death. Since the Vaisnavas in Assam stick to the month/date of the particular anniversary, it does not move from the actual month.
orchestra. It is this time of the year that the Satras receive funds generated from the village laity. As Lord *Krisna* is the sole deity worshipped in Assam Vaisnav philosophy, this festival gets an elevated decree amongst the Assamese Vaisnavites. Nagaon is no exception to this. Till present date, many Satras celebrate it with great pomp and show reflecting their culture as well as the religious fervor. In most Sattras of the district, *jannâstami* is celebrated by performing *puja* (idol-worshipping) and also by way of congregational prayer. The way of celebration however varies from Sattra to Sattra. Congregational prayer services are held on the night of the Lord’s birth. Parts of the *Bhãgavata* are read out describing the events leading to the birth of *Krisna*. At several *nâmghars* and Satras special prayer services are held by women known as *pâcati* to mark this occasion. Children from the villages also participate in ‘*din-bhâonâ*’ (a kind of *bhâonâ* performed during the day). While many Satras in Nagaon celebrate it with a two-day long programme, there are many who perform it for a day.

2. *Phãlgutsava/ Fakuwa/ Doul-utsava*: Known by different names in various parts of Assam, this is an important festival celebrated in spring. It is also called *phakawa* because *phaku*, a coloured powder specially made from grinding petals of flowers are sprinkled and rubbed on faces of people. It is a very lavish and big festival celebrated in most of the Sattras in Nagaon. It is however a gala affair in the Bardowa Thân which has gained popularity over the years. It lasts for three days with various rituals. Celebrations, though vary *samhati* or sect-wise but it has portrayed the sanctity and richness of the festival. It has much similarity with the Pan-Indian celebration of *Holi* (the festival of colours) especially in the northern part of India. It was Śaṅkaradeva who had initiated to

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6 Examples are Dahgharîyā Jajorî, Narowa Bâlisatra, Kobôikota, Karcung and Kuruwâbâhi. In these Sattras the rituals accompanying the festival commences both ways.
include phālgutsava or doul-utsava in his new-found creed. Since his religion genuinely focused on devotion to God through nāma-dharma i.e. through reciting verses from the sacred texts, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Gita, all the days of this festival are enjoined with khol-tāl recitals, nagara-nām, āiati-nām etc. People sprinkle colours on each other and take out the idol of Lord Krisna from the doul mandir (jig 40) in procession singing holi-geets accompanied by cymbals, drums and other traditional items. These geets or songs are meant only for this occasion. Moreover Śaṅkaradeva’s chief disciple, Mādhavadeva composed a few bargits specially meant for this festival. Bhāgavata-bhraman is another distinguishing feature during this festival in which the holy text is carried out in procession to mark the significance of the festival.

3. Bihu: One of the major festivals of the Assamese, Bihu is also celebrated in the Sattras with grandeur. The three Bihus celebrated at different periods of the year, namely Kāti, Māgh and Bohāg have gone beyond the extent of celebration in the Sattras along with the community. With a holistic approach, the Sattras arrange for ritual prayers which are held in the nāmghars. Devotees throng in to offer their homage and take part in the rituals. In the villages special fairs are held, devotional programmes are conducted where everyone from the laity participates be it young or old. It is especially during the time of the New Year in the month of April when the items used for covering the guru-āsana or simhasana are changed and decorate them anew. In recent times, there are new éléments in the celebration of all the three Bihus both at the urban and rural areas of the district.

4. Rāsa-yātrā: Another very distinct and unique festival celebrated with ritual ceremonies in the Sattras of Nagaon and even in the remotest parts
of the district is the Rāsa, popular in its content and form. It takes place in the month of October-November on a full-moon day according to the Assamese lunar calendar. This festival is normally celebrated for three days but sometimes it stretches for four to five days. “It signifies the Lord’s amorous alliances with the milk-maids in the autumnal season” (Sarma 1996, 185). The festival has undergone many changes in recent times. It is not alone confined within the Sattra premises. The type and venues of celebration has undergone changes in due course of time. Various stalls are set up displaying various items made of clay depicting incidents from the life events of Lord Krisna. To keep pace with the modern day trends special stalls displaying varied items are set up to attract crowds. Moreover specialists in idol-making and decorators are hired from different parts of the state as well as the country to make the festival more colorful and lively. Stage-performances and also conducting it in an open ground with all modern amenities have started gaining more popularity, irrespective of all barriers. Young children are trained in dance-forms for enacting in various roles during the festival. Many big nāmghars or as known ‘bar-nāmghars located in the rural and urban areas have started staging bhāonas to popularize the content of this colorful festival. It is rather getting more popularized than confining it only to the village nāmghars and the rural folks. The whole Rāsa-leela is normally performed by the males and there are even instances of males taking up female roles in many of the Sattras. But as observed in the Sattras of Nagaon, the custom is quite different from the others. There is a separate entity for girls to perform along with the boys. The young girls take part in the festival and act as gopis (milk-maids) accompanying Lord Krisna as mentioned in the Bhāgavata. Rāsa-bhāonas, mostly performed by young boys are still held every year in some of the important Sattras
of Nagaon. Except for the laity conducting the festival in a community-based form especially in the namghars of a particular village, there is no such celebration in the main Sattras as it used to be previously. However, Rāsa is still continued to be one of the most celebrated and important festival of the Vaisnavas. The rāsa-geets or the songs sung on this occasion attained much popularity in Nagaon than any other parts of the state and till this day it is held in high esteem. The whole festival is elaborative and colorful and also attracts a huge crowd whenever it takes place. Thousands of devotees irrespective of caste, creed or religion take part in the festival held during the autumn season. Due to its out-growing number of devotees and visitors, this festival has gained popularity in recent years like celebrated in other parts of the state and has metamorphosed into a more cultural rather than a religious festival in Nagaon.

5. Pāl Nām: One most popular and eccentric ritual celebrated with full devotion and dedication in the Sattras of Assam is the pāl nām. It usually takes place in the month of November-December. The history of the origin of pāl nām is recorded in the biographical texts of the Vaisnava saints known as carit puthi. The word pāl signifies turn while nām is congregational prayer. Hence pāl nām means continuous chanting of prayers, held by a group of devotees in turn. It happens by a way of rotation of reading the sacred scripture. This normally takes place in the premise of either a nāmghar or the Sattra. The authenticity of the ritual lies in the fact that it accumulates the laity with varied customs. It is conducted in a holistic way in most of the Sattras in Nagaon. Often it is held in the big prayer-halls adjacent to the respective Sattras or in the

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7 One such example is the Dāhghariya Jajor Sattra, as stated by the present Sattradhikāra, Kesavananda Deva Goswami in an interview held on 03.09.2012.
premises of a Sattra and accompanied by the beating of a percussion instrument like dobā and sankha at short intervals. It is a community ritual which continues for a period of two to three days and sometimes it extends for a week. Sometimes it lasts for week. The main performers are the bhakats belonging to a Sattra of the locality who keeps on reciting day and night. One bhakat normally chants the verses from the Bhāgavata for a few hours and then it passes on to another and this way it continues. Pāl nām is a symbolic ritual for the Assamese Vaisnavas who perform it every year and this is more concentrated in the nāmghars in every nook and corner of the district. There is no month attached for the conduct of this ritual. Normally it takes place in the month of Bhādra, as is considered to be an auspicious month for the Vaisnava followers. In most cases it is also held in Vaiśakha (April-May) marking the beginning of the Assamese New Year. Even the urban population in Nagaon has largely concentrated in the conduct of this yearly ritual in their own localities to infuse in the young minds the spirit of oneness and community brotherhood. People from all communities, irrespective of caste and creed gather to offer prayers. The devotees offer śaraī with offerings before the altar of the Almighty and in the midst of these performances or at the end, the devotees are served with the māh-prasada as part of the rituals.

6. Investiture ceremony and tithis: These are two most essential and often celebrated rituals in a Sattra. The investiture ceremony means the appointment of a new head to a Sattra either on a hereditary basis or selected democratically. The junior ādhikāra is raised to the headship of the concerned Sattra, either on the retirement of the head from his responsibilities or his death. This ceremony is popularly known as the nirmāli-lowā prathā.
The *tithis* are the formal occasions to celebrate the death and birth anniversaries of the chief apostles of the faith, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva in all the prominent Satras. Added to it, there are also similar celebrations marking the death (*tirobhabha*) and birth anniversaries (*janma-mohatsav*) of all the founders of various sects (*samhati*) in the Vaisnava order. *Nāma-prasanga, bhāonas* are the major attractions during these ceremonial occasions. The *nāmghars* are illuminated and people throng in large numbers from every nook and corner to pay obeisance in the form of offerings known as *naivedya*. In almost all the Satras of the district, the *tithis* of the respective saint is considered to be sacred and hence celebrated with veneration. On this particular occasion people contribute to a great extent, both in cash and kind for the welfare of the Satras to level of one’s will and capacity. Still it is considered to be auspicious and sacred amongst many Vaisnavas.

A chart is prepared by comparing three important Satras of the district affiliated to three distinct sects (*samhati*; *purusa, brahma* and *kala*), based on the calendrical rituals and the number of participants from the community. The sampling has been done keeping in view similarities and variations of the ritual observances in these categories of Satras. This is to support the fact that similar Satras of respective sects (*samhati*) celebrate the festivals in a large way whereas others do not. Public participation in all the occasions accordingly varies in these Satras.
Figure: 14 - Comparison between rituals and public participation in three Important Sattras of Nagaon.

0-0.5 scale in the graph indicates a total of 500 (approximate) numbers of participants.

For some activities such as conduct of pāl nāṃ, initiation and ordination ceremony of new entrants (śaraṇa and bhajana), the visit of the Sattradhikāra to a respective Sattra, the occasions are held on a day of convenience rather than the one prescribed. While other regular activities like reading verses from the sacred scriptures, lighting lamps in the morning and evening occur daily. In addition, certain activities like the birth and death anniversaries of the apostles, special sessions of prayer services accompanied by special offerings do not appear as a regular feature in either the nāṃghars or the Sattra. Having outlined the ritual practices in the Sattras and also nāṃghars engaged in by the parishioners of the
faith as well as the laity, constituting both rural and urban mass of population, it is hereby noted that there is little in all of these rituals to distinguish from the other similar range of Sattras in the district. They differ more or less in terms of the sect division and these variations are minor ones. The basic ritual of chanting the verses from the sacred texts in almost all the occasions in any Sattra may also vary at times in relation to other Sattras of similar sect. One reason might be the wide spread influence of modernity in the conventional Vaisnava ideology that most of the parishioners are exposed to. This variation is largely a transition from traditional to new.

4.4. A Comparative Appraisal of the Doul Utsava / Yatra Celebrated in Bardowa and Barpeta

The month of Phālguna (February-March) is considered as auspicious by the Vaisnavas of Assam. Since the days of the two great saints, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva Doul Utsava or Phālgutsava has been celebrated with verb and vigor. The festival of colour related with the Krisna cult is celebrated on the day of the full moon in the month of Phāgun or Phālguna. It is said that on this day Lord Krisna played coloured powder (faku) with the Gopis, his female devotees. As the season was spring, the festival is also known as Basantotsav or spring festival. In Assam this is popularly known as Doul Utsava as the deity of this festival Lord Krisna alias Govinda resides in a Doul.

Doul Utsava is celebrated with pompous and joy particularly by all the Sattras in Assam. Thousands of people gather to enjoy the festivities. Except a few local variations, the festival is celebrated almost alike in all the Sattras and nāmghars scattered in the state. Taking the example of two major Sattras of the state, Batadrava or Bardowa where Śaṅkaradeva lived his early life and Barpeta Sattra where he lived for many years till he went to Cooch Behar at the invitation
of the Cooch King Naranarayan, a comparison is made on the celebration of the *Doul Utsava*. Traditionally it is celebrated at Bardowa with a five-day programme and at Barpeta with a three-day programme. It can be mentioned that the observance of this festival has been able to retain the traditionality since the days of the saints. Through ages, the celebration of this festival accompanied by all related rituals in both Bardowa *thān* and Barpeta Sattra is unique and has many things in common. And this has been in vogue till date.

According to *Bardowa Guru Carit* (Neog, 1977), Bardowa is the first place to have introduced the celebration of the *Doul* festival for the first time after Śaṅkaradeva’s return from pilgrimage inorder to spread the cult of Bhakti. Every day different programmes are organized by the *Batadrava Thān Parichalana Samiti* (management committee) so that devotees coming from far and wide could enjoy the festival to the brim. Congregation of devotees, chanting of devotional as well as *holi-geets*, songs particularly sung for this occasion, the fourteen times prayer services (*chaidhya prasanga*) are all together performed. Cultural shows are organized by the local youths every night, which includes theatrical performances called *bhāonās* besides other cultural items. Apart from the locals, people from other towns and districts too participate in these performances. Mention can be made of one such *bhāonā* known as *Gada Parba* staged by artists from Maibong of the neighbouring district of Dima Hasao. The performers belonged to the Maibong *nāmgār* and Maibong *Sakha Sāhitya Sabha*. The whole drama was in Dima Hasao language. The full moon day known as the main day of *Phakuwa* is christened as *Gossain Phuruā Din*, a day when the deity is taken out of the sanctum sanctorum. The deity of Lord Krisna, who resides in the *doul mandir* all days of the year is brought out from the sanctum-sanctorum and encircle the place seven times. It is also taken to the Sorufāl and Barfāl (the two parts of the Batadrava village having two prominent household Sattras- Salaguri and Narowa on the north and south direction of the *thān*) and nearby Barbheti village, Nagaon. Accompanied by devotional songs, *holi-geets* sung by both male
and female devotees to the tune of the musical instruments like *khol*, *tāl* and *sankha*, in this sojourn of the deity, every household shows their respect to the deity at their house-gates. The deity does not enter any house hold except the *Sattradhikāras'* residences of both Salaguri and Narowa Sattras. He shows special respect and devotion to the deity as per tradition. Thereafter the deity is brought to the main prayer hall (*kirtan-ghar*) of the than and thence to the *doul mandir* after completing the *duar dhara* (gate blocking) ceremony. According to tradition, Lakshmi Devi, the Lord's wife did not approve him playing *holi* with his female devotees (*gopis*) so she asks her servants to debar Him from entering the house. The present *duar dhara* alludes to this incident of the year when the Lord enters his abode to remain undisturbed till next *holi* after an amicable settlement. Every year on this day the Sattra authorities organizes theatrical performances in the evening attracting a huge gathering. Commonly staged *bhāonas* are *Sri Sri Krisnar Vaikuntha Parayan*, *Narasimha Yatra* etc besides other cultural programmes.

Almost similar are the programmes organized by the Barpeta Sattra Management Committee during their three day long *doul utsava*. This festival of colours is also locally known as *Sunweri* by the people of Barpeta. Here too, people throng to take part in the festivities. The ceremony of the Purnima i.e. the full moon day includes bringing out the duo deities, viz. *Doul Govinda and Kaliya Gossain*, from their overnight resting position inside the *kirtan-ghar* to the courtyard of the Sattra. The previous evening, popularly known as *Gandha* ceremony, the duo deities are brought out from the sanctum to the *kirtan-ghar* where they rested for the night. At the courtyard the permanent resident *bhakats* of the Sattra worship the deities by replacing the old clothes and ornaments with new ones. After the worship is over the *bhakats* take the deity to the *doul* to be placed. At this time people make a circumbulation of the *doul* for seven times and then the deity is installed at a temporary altar for three more days for the rituals to be conducted. They then board both the deities on two chariots carried by men on
their sojourn to nearby Ganak Kuchi Sattra (about 1.5 kms away) to offer hekta, locally called hekta khowa utsava (hekta eating ceremony). Hekta is a kind of cereal similar to lentil. In Nagson hekta is known as hikata māh. Hekta khowa is thus a preparation of this lentil like cereal specially meant for this festival. During all this time, sprinkling of water and rubbing of colours on each other’s face and singing of holi songs accompanied by cymbals, drums and other traditional musical instruments are carried out by the devotees, male and female alike.

On the return of the deities to the premises of the Sattra a very distinguishing ceremony takes place known as Bah-bhanga (bamboo breaking) where the progress of the deities is blocked by long bamboos. People from whole of the Barpeta town take part in it. Tradition goes with the ensuing of a pseudo quarrel between a devotee playing the role of Krisna and another playing that of Lakshmi, where Lakshmi finally wins. With beating of drums and the singing of holi songs, locally known as bol-bolani, the deities are escorted to their respective sanctum-sanctorum to stay there for the coming days.

Today this festival has gained grounds in both the above mentioned Sattras and is celebrated in a spectacular way. It has been made more colorful and enjoyable through the staging of bhāonās performed by artists from every nook and corner of the state, nām-prasangas, special bargits composed by Mādhavadeva, doul-yatra. People irrespective of all caste and creed throng in to take part in this festivity. Local youths, clubs and other social organizations have been very instrumental in the conduct of this festival particularly in both these significant abodes. Along with it big fairs are held every year where house-hold goods and other local items are bought and sold and shops selling religious texts related to the saints’ lives are on display. It can thus be mentioned that both these Sattras has preserved a great deal of the Mahapurusiya tradition in respect of the doul-utsava along with other different festivities held at different phases of the year.
Through surveys and interviews conducted and as a participant observant attending a few important festivals and many of the ritual activities over an extended period in the Sattras, it has been discovered that many of the ritual practitioners seem to intertwine the diverse elements into their practice smoothly and consciously. According to an informant from the field, 'due to our professional commitments and responsibilities we sometimes have to cut short the ritual-process and this is more common in the case of the urban folks.' The fact that the rituals play a significant role in the life of every individual connected with the Sattriya culture is quite oblivious. Most of the traditional forms of rituals have been eliminated due to many factors. The changes are mainly due to professional commitments of the heads of a Sattra since most of them belong to house-hold Sattra, economic disparities, lack of proper education, urbanization, ignorance towards cultural development etc.

Similarly the ritual traditions and practices in the Sattras have changed over historical time and they differ from sect to sect and vary in their regional entity even though they are attached to the cultural and social order of Vaisnavism. The relation between the performance of rituals and communication is conventional. The ones covered under the study are distinctive and have been producing a set of rituals that are rudiment to the systematic way of a productive communication. A rational outlook towards the performance and communicative process of rituals through various festivals and ceremonials is necessitated so as to affirm their continuation in the Sattras. It is a means to include the whole of the community for proliferation of the traditional beliefs and practices. Thus instead of diluting their own customs and traditions in the quagmire of modernization, it becomes necessary for the whole of the Vaisnava community to stress upon the elaboration of rituals for a long term sustenance. And for this, the representational notion of ritual needs an acceptance from the individuals and its openness for

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8 Sri M. Bora, a teacher of a government school from Rupnārāyan Porābheti Sattra. Interview conducted on 04.05.11.
change. Rituals have a communicative function and if this communication does not take place at all, the rituals can be attributed to be non-functional. Thus the communicative aspect of a ritual characterized by symbols is essential to mark them as rituals in the social situations.
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Figure: 15 – *Khol-prasanga*, a part of the ritual performed during *Phālgutsava*.

Figure: 16 - A *pathak* recites verses from the *Bhāgavata* on the occasion of *Bohāg Bihu*.
Figure: 17 (a) - Part of the ritual of decorating Lord Krisna’s idol during Phālgutsava.

Figure: 17 (b) – An act of worshipping Lord Krisna during Phālgutsava.
Figure: 18 – Women-men performing together during *Krisna Janmāṣṭami*.

Figure: 19 - The functionaries of a Sattrā participating in various rituals.
Figure: 20 - Prayer services held in the holy month of bhādra (August-September).

Figure: 21 – Devotees during Phālgutsava at Bardowa thān.
Figure: 22- Daily ritual performed at Āuniāti Sattra.

Figure: 23- A sculpture of Garuda, worshipped as an important relic in the Āuniāti Sattra.