CHAPTER 5

ECONOMY AND THE SATTRA INSTITUTIONS

The growth of culture in any society or community is invariably connected to its economy. Economy is inextricably related with the growth of a religious institution playing a very important role in its growth. Religion, culture and economy are all interconnected. The mid 1990s witnessed the development of organizations which increasingly became responsive to the important role played by religion in the framework of culture and the role it played for enhancing economic development in the society. It is therefore, necessary to identify the systematic differences in people’s preferences and the belief system and relate them to various measures of cultural inheritance. The many sided developments suggest an approach to introduce culture-based explanations that can be tested and are able to substantially enrich our understanding of economic phenomena. The necessary step towards this objective is to define culture in a way that makes it easier to identify a causal link between culture and economic productions. And this is why, culture is defined comprehensively as 'the whole way of life' (Williams 1966, 226) which covers as well as ideational or non-material aspects like those customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups pursue, cherish and transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation. Raymond Williams, pointing out to the changed conditions of culture, also says, "the history of the idea of culture is a record of our reactions, in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life" (Williams 1966, 285). The 'changed conditions' necessarily relate to the aspect of changes in economic productions and situations necessitating such changes. As such, this definition focuses on those dimensions of culture that can impact economic outcomes or vice-versa. In addition, by restricting the potential channels of influence to two standard ones, beliefs as prior and values as preferences, this definition provides
an approach to identify a causal effect on matters ranging from culture to economic outcomes. Culture on the other, is defined as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group in the society from another. Religion defined as a “shared set of beliefs, activities and institutions premised upon faith in supernatural forces” (Iannaccone, 1998: 1466) is considered as a part of the domain of culture.

Contextualizing the Sattras as religious centers that opens up vistas for economic performances, the study focuses on the present state of economy in these institutions particularly in the district of Nagaon, which is the primary zone of the present study. The most desirable link that draws economy and religion together is that there can be an economy without religion but there can be no religious endeavor without an economic base or linkage. Every aspect of human life is affected by religion in one way or the other. The various Sattras, as considered in our present work follow a religious tempo encompassing the ancestral or cultural traditions, as well as the individual’s faith and spiritual experiences. Max Weber, in his seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1971) introduces for the first time the linkage between religion and economics and identifies the significant role that religion plays in bringing about changes to the society. Following the Weberian concept, it can be pointed out that as socio-religious institutions the Sattras have tried to draw a link between their religious dictum and economy. Weber viewed economy in part as an extension of religious belief and regarded religion as crucial to the development of capitalism. According to him, religion forms the base and economy the superstructure. As a result economic forces are best understood through the sociology of religion, which Weber introduces in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Karl Marx as an important representative of economic theory argues in favor of the reverse causality ranging from economic circumstances to cultural values and has inverted this direction of causality in terms of economic relations determining culture and cultural relations.
In a famous passage in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1859) writes:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. (425)

In this chapter the researcher looks at these theoretical aspects and on the basis of them tries to explain the causal relation between religion and economic growth and development that affects an institution like the Sattra. The researcher would also mention relevant works by different scholars on various aspects of the issue and restrict the details to a few studies.

Adam Smith in his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1976) says that one of the most economically significant functions of religious belief was to provide strong incentives to follow moral strictures that helped to support civil society, that is, honesty, benevolence, restraint from violence. The economic activities in Sattras can be described in this context to imbibe a value of self-support and self-sustenance instead of consumerism. The economic measures also inculcate a spirit of benevolence and restraint among the followers of the faith. Robert J. Barro and Rachel M. McCleary (2002) have argued that economic growth depends on religious activity of the economy's consumers. The consumers in the present study refer to the direct members from the laity who has an economic binding with the Sattras through their manifold religious performances. The laity of a Sattra being larger in number than that inside the Sattra premises are dependent on village *nämgars* which constitute units in villages. And such *nämgars* are assumed to be the main centers of
economic growth. The concentration of these institutions is more at the village level than the urban. It provides a platform for the individual to shift his focus to a collective effort. Day to day functioning as well as organization of small or large rituals entail an economic factor. Added to it is the maintenance of a relationship with the respective Sattras to which the individuals or the social unit have an allegiance. They define productivity of the religious sector to the level of belief expressed in relation to attendance in religious activities like congregations or rituals. The prayer services held in these institutions on account of various occasions, is one example to determine the level of participation and attendance of the laity considering their religiosity. The more they participate in the religious proceedings the more the question of economic relationship including growth comes. Following the arguments put forward by Barro and McCleary (2003), 'religious production efficiency' measure can be applied in the economic instances taking place in the Sattras and used in economic growth regressions in these socio-religious institutions involving quantifiable dimensions of culture.

Religion and religious activities can influence a society in two ways. First, we consider religious activities such as 'attendance' at the institutional level which are also looked at as a social activity that has an indirect relation with economy. With reference to our study and matters of field investigations, the Sattras of Nagaon mainly the ones of Karcung Teliā Pohukota, Kobāikota, Bardowa Narowa and Brahmadari Satstras, Kuruwābāhi have a unique way of reciprocating the religious sentiments by way of regular congregations, conducting rituals thereby attracting a huge crowd. This augments the economic flow to these institutions. The attendance here refers to the regular incoming of devotees to the Sattra to offer their prayers at different periods of time. The village nāmghar acts as a meeting ground for the community in establishing networks. And this is of immense importance for economic activities in the village as well as the Sattras in reference. It is also helpful in establishing a
'trading relation' with members from other groups in the community having similar faith and association with such other Sattras. Such networks could stimulate economic growth and the market relations thus established are sometimes sufficient to cause economic changes. Another similar observance is held during one of the village fairs in Nām-Doomdoomiya Sattra. It is known by the name ahini mela (refer to Nām-Doomdoomiya Sattra in Appendix I) which marks the death anniversary of one of the apostles of Mādhavadeva, Mathurādās Burha Āta. On this day the surrounding public offer agricultural and horticultural produces to the office bearer (bharali) of the nāmghar and in the evening he distributes the same among the members of the village nāmghar after being offered at the sanctum. This is known as lao-bhojani. A second conduit, by which religion influences society, is the values that are taught by the adherents of the faith or by the leaders concerned. It is assumed that these values will further influence the actual behavior of an individual and thus the functioning of society. This text of religion as a source of values belongs to the economic sphere and thus culture relates to economics, which studies the relation between values, economic institutions as well as economic performance.

By virtue, religion is a harmonizing as well as a motivating factor towards development. And this development is connected to economy. Religious people and institutions may be agents of advocacy, funding, innovation, empowerment of the youths, social movements, and service delivery. Institutions of course matter also in non-economic relations. They provide the necessary basis for all social interactions. Institutionally-oriented economists like Landes (1998) emphasized both the links from culture to beliefs and values and from beliefs and values to

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9During fairs and festivals held on important occasions in a Sattra especially at Bardowa, the people from the laity and also from nearby villages flock around the place with the purpose of selling their goods, mostly items of day to day use. They earn a profit by selling those goods in the fairs which provides them with a ready market. For example, indigenous items made of bamboo, cane and clay normally used in an Assamese household are sold at a cheaper rate and bought by the consumers. This definitely establishes a link through buying and selling of goods and contributing indirectly to the economy.
economic outcomes. The institutions hold communities together and allow the community to conduct themselves as members of society. Indeed, shared institutions define our culture and the society. The institutions are central to how people define themselves. Membership at the institutional level is a means of participation in a set of social relations, as well as adherence to a system of beliefs and practices. Although religions may not exist for the sake of networking, they do create social networks, connecting people to others who have information and resources. In the larger domain, economies work in religious communities in such a way that objects, tangible and intangible, symbolic and material, are distributed. Such a distribution is always unequal and necessarily involves power. But as observed during our field work and observation thereafter the question of power and hegemony does not hold good in the context of the economic management of the Sattra institution.

As Barro and McCleary mentions, culture is usually thought to be an influence on economic outcomes, by affecting personal traits such as honesty and work ethics. Considering religion as an important dimension of culture, they go on to consider it as determinant of growth, reiterating Weber’s idea that religious beliefs and practices have important consequences for economic development. An attempt is made to analyze the influence of religious participation and beliefs of the community on an institution’s rate of economic progress. To make it more comprehensive a chart is drawn comparing the number of religious minded people coming to the Sattras as regular participants. The religiosity questions used by the researcher concerns the frequency of attendance to the nāmghars for religious services and other similar festival held in the premises of a particular Sattra.

5.1. Interpreting Economy of the Sattras

Since the early days of their institutionalization, the Sattras have adapting to many changing environments and in course of time have embedded many such changes in their religio-ritual structures which have a direct or indirect bearing on
their economic growth. A historical perspective is necessary to understand the changing nature of the economic status of the existing Sattras, their relation with the state and the growth and ascendancy with periods of stagnation and decline in many of the Sattras. They act as the centers of social organization for the neighborhood and provide a social and cultural platform which serve as places of social communication or information transmission. An institution of this kind therefore, functions as a clearinghouse of useful communication, including communication about where jobs can be found. But with the growth of urban centres and multiple media of social communication the role of the above centres has considerably dwindled. The present study has brought to light the many sided loopholes that has made the Sattra economy stagnant in recent times. There is a vast difference in the economy which existed at the time of their foundation and that which is seen now.

Earlier the Sattras\textsuperscript{10} had been the most influential institutions in terms of both religion and economy depending on the laity for support. The long established economy of the Sattras was based on,

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\text{a})] the revenue yielded from the produce of the landed property,
  \item[\text{b})] religious taxes levied on the individuals,
  \item[\text{c})] contributions in the form of tithes by the frequent devotees,
  \item[\text{d})] donations in the form of cash or kind from the occasional visitor cum devotees.
\end{itemize}

The community at large always looked upto the Sattras as an ideal in spiritual and cultural respects. The sentiments of respect and reverance on the part of both the giver and taker and the entire Sattra community for that matter, are interlinked with each other. These institutions were sound in terms of economy since revenues were generated mostly from the agricultural lands granted in the name of a Sattra either by the kings or the village laity. Examples are Salaguri

\textsuperscript{10} Examples are Bhotāigaon Gajalā, Nikāmul Koliabor, Bardowa Narowa and Salaguri Bardowa.
Bardowa, Aibheti Salaguri, Karcung, Rupnārāyan Porābheti Sattra etc. Much of the wealth was accumulated by way of donations, a practice prevalent since their inception having both an economic and religious bearing. Contributions were made either in cash or kind to the Sattra as an institution for specific purpose like the conduct of particular rituals or constructing the structural features of the Sattras. According to their economic capability, the individuals subscribed to meet the expenses keeping in mind the status of the institution they are affiliated to. This form of subscription popularly known as guru-kar or barangani did not have a legal obligation but the moral obligation compels them to further initiate the process accumulating a major wealth to the Sattra's economy. Such donations and token fees collected from attending the religious functions and rituals within and outside the premise of the Sattra help in sustaining the continued flow of economy. This process is still continuing in many of the Sattras of the district as well. And this determines the variation in the state of economy affirming it to be rich and prosperous on one hand and poverty-stricken on the other. Based on field investigation the examples are Samaguri, Kuruwabahi, Auniāti Nagaon, Bholaguri Sattra located in different areas of the district.

It is natural that economy forms the basis of an institution and sometimes even the community. In our present context, the Sattras are considered as economic zones because they primarily operate through an economic system. This economic system, as discussed above, rests basically on the offering of tithes by the laity as well as other devotees who, one way or the other help to enhance the economy. These resources generated from the funds therefore go to the corpus fund of every Sattra. But the most interesting fact that is being observed with regard to the economic role of these institutions is how and where these resources are utilized. In respect to proper utilization of revenue yielded as a way of this, there are many Sattras within the district which further manages their economy and with the available resources various activities are conducted.
Basically being an agricultural land, Assam has an economy which is land-based. Incidence of tenancy is quite common in the lands occupied by a Sattra. The Sattras possessed huge quarter of lands mostly for the establishment of the institutions and for the cultivation of crops. A few of the Sattras like Jajori Dahghariyā, Narowa Bālisatra, the two divisional Sattras at Bardowa namely, Bardowa Narowa and Salaguri Bardowa still possess large areas of land, more of which are fallow and not suitable for cultivation. The above mentioned respective Sattras had large landed property at one point of time. The income generated through land has proved beneficial for the overall growth of the economy of many of these institutions. The produce from the lands utilized further by crop cultivation was used for the development of the Sattras. The maximum income of the Sattras mainly came from two sources,

i) the lands which were originally granted by the kings as part of their religious sentiments before the intervention of the British and in subsequent years these were confirmed and recognized by the British government,

ii) the regular flow of tithes both in forms of money or goods from the disciples as a complement to support the Satras. Sometimes even a piece of land was donated in the name of a Sattra as symbol of veneration.

These two sources played a very crucial as well as a conventional role in channelizing economic sustenance and growth of the institution. Some of them like Cipahā Ḥātbor, Brahmachārī and Rūpnārāyan Elengi Bebejia had land-grants in varying degrees which ranged from a few acres to a thousand acres of land. These lands were mostly revenue free or had the system of paying half revenue, which either had to be borne by the Sattras concerned or the individuals. A large number of acreage that too half free revenue, were possessed by many Sattras like Dakhinapāt, Kamalābārī, Āuniātī, Bengena-ātī (all of Mājuli origin). The

11 These Sattras are mentioned in S.N Sarmah's *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (1996). A detail of the estimated records of the lands possessed by the Sattras are mentioned in the District Gazetteer of Assam, Sibsagar (1905).
Garamūr Sattra in Majuli has 52 bighās of revenue-free land under its possession granted to its branch Sattras located in the district of Nagaon alone. Example can be cited from Garamūr Puranigudām Sattra having 34 bighās of the landed property in possession. Some other Sattras do not have as much revenue free land as the previous ones but the lands they possess are mostly assessed at half the rate of revenue from the usual. Another very glaring factor that accumulates the economic increase earlier was the yield of income through the number of disciples with their families belonging to the order of laity. If the number of disciples increased the tithes also increased. This was considered a moral obligation on the part of the individuals to give some amount of tithe in forms of cash or kind to the Sattras where they have been initiated. This process although was a kind of tax levy process for the people from the laity, but such a form of subscription was considered as a sacred task by the people and it otherwise contributed to the prosperity of a Sattra. In many Sattras the tithe meant essentially for the guru (guru here means the founders of the Vaisnava faith in Assam, Šankaradeva and Mādhavadeva and other apostles) and a kind of a religious sentiment attached with a moral obligation which also accounts for the economic welfare of the Sattras. In addition to this regular flow of income, another source of income was the offerings or presents from the devotees, special subscriptions collected from the disciples within the enclosures of a Sattra on special occasions. These suffixed the expenses meted out in carrying important functions and these helped greatly in making way for a steady economy. There was not an official imposition of religious taxes on them. However, the religious obligation was so strong that the individuals were keen to pay in whatever form they could afford. Apart from these, there was no such hard and fast rule to yield revenues for the economic growth of any Sattra. Such historical considerations are crucial in an understanding of the evolution of these institutions, especially in the district of Nagaon (specific Sattras as mentioned in Appendix 1), and the underpinning economic status in the changing scenario of modern economy. In the early years,
these institutions had different regulatory rules of economy as discussed, which enjoyed wider autonomy. The intervening concepts of the freedom of expression, community development, a right of belongingness and religiosity, cultural pluralism and procurement of more income for sustainability are all taken into consideration in this chapter. Through the lens of religion and economy, these concepts are explored and the relative impact on the economy is understood by an examination of all the Sattras scattered in the district.

To establish a grass root foundation for the society and narrow the gap of economic insecurity, the Sattras have a social responsibility towards their overall development keeping the question of economy in view. This is possible only when resources are channelized in the right direction. The Sattras are important institutions drawing a link between their economy and the society. They can be interpreted as the 'store-house' of economy. Besides being centers of socio-cultural and religious institutions, the Sattras also act as self-sustaining economic units. Till the end of the eighteenth century, they were all functioning well contributing to their economic self-sustainability. Most of them were allotted huge areas of land which did not yield any revenue as such. These lands known as devottar were mainly utilized for growing crops, vegetation, planting trees etc. The cultivation was mainly done by the bhakats and in turn they had to give certain amount of the produce to the head of the Sattra.

Another essential feature contributing to the economic status of the Sattras essentially in the district is the production of homemade items made out of readily available resources. It is estimated that the industrial productivity out of this, consisting mainly of the non-agricultural production like cattle-rearing, fishery, apiary and the making of household consumer goods catering even to the poorest sections of people in the society contributed nearly to 40-45 per cent of the total income. Cottage industries have been a respectable avocation since the days the Sattras came into being. This is one such area where a steady flow of income is
witnessed. There was a time when the economy of the Sattras flourished greatly due to the availability of raw materials in abundance. It may be mentioned that bamboo and cane are used abundantly for the making of handicraft goods in the than and Sattras. Hence the output is more at the village level due to the availability of raw materials and cheap labour. This increasing demand is proved beneficial for many of the Sattras in the region for sustaining their economy. Moreover, another observable feature is the geographical locations of these institutions, generally being situated close to the river banks, yielding more productivity of these raw materials. As such small scale industries involving in indigenous products used in the Vaisnava households and namghars grew up within the enclosures of a Sattra or within the village. These small scale productions have contributed to the economy of the Sattras as also ensuring the welfare of the people. Earlier buying and selling of several home made products like koth, kharahi, bisani and other implements have not only helped the small-scale industries to grow in the region but has also opened up vistas for employment in this sector. An ample number of potters, blacksmith and carpenters are associated with such institutions providing employment to a sizeable number of the population. But with changing times the demand for these indigenous items used in religious, theatrical as well as domestic purposes have lost its value gradually. Even the traditional craftsmanship is dwindling in most villages of the district. The popular and often used items in the Sattras have also been replaced by cheap and easily available market products. This has seriously jeopardized the traditional cottage industry thereby affecting the growth and development of economy. Moreover, due to the heavy rate of influx of immigrant population in the state and especially in the district where the survey has been conducted, major part of indigenous business has been taken over by them at easily available and cheap labor force. As such the traditional farmers and the craftsmen are facing a serious threat to their local economy.
It is a customary practice that the devotees from the laity affiliated to a particular Sattra contribute something either in cash or kind and this eventually helps in administering the Sattra well. The revenue thus generated is often utilized in the construction works or some other purposive ventures in the villages. It is often observed that quite a good sum of money gets generated during the initiation ceremony, when a devotee is newly admitted to the order. They voluntarily make the offerings in the name of the Sattra they are affiliated. As such the fund never goes to the individual account of the Sattradhikāra or his assistants but to the welfare of the community and the Sattra at large. However in respect of the Āuniāti Samaguri Sattra it was observed that the Sattradhikāra pays occasional visits to his Sattra to take part in ritual occasions as well as developmental works. But sometimes it so happens that the laity does not require the presence of the Sattradhikāra in day to day or routine activities of the Sattra. They also conduct agricultural activities in the land of the Sattra on their own and contribute a minimal amount of its income to the Sattra.

The Sattras also serve as a continuous link between past and the present, and the society and themselves and their mission is to care for the spiritual welfare of the inmates as well as the community at large, by means of regular prayer services, singing of hymns, mass gatherings during festivals and ceremonial proceedings and other forms of religious rituals. From an economic standpoint, the services provided by the Sattras respond to the needs of the consumers. The consumers as mentioned earlier are the members from the laity from whom a part of the income is derived.

5.1.1. The Sattras of Nagaon

Coming to the study area, i.e. the Sattras of Nagaon in the above context, it is observed that they act more than a mechanism for transmitting cultural heritage with an impact on the economic structure of the whole of the district. As regards to the internal financial resource management, the Sattras in different
places vary according to the local environment. Most of the lands granted to the Sattras as religious cum economy centers, by the Ahom rulers, continue to be occupied by them more due to the retention policy adopted by the British rulers and the governments after independence. It is also to be remembered that all the Sattras including some in the district of Nagaon did not enjoy the benefit of such land grants. So there are fluctuations in individual Sattras located in the district in respect of economic management as a whole. Incentives are taken both by the Sattra functionaries as well as the laity to develop and improve the rate of economic avenues in the district. One such instance is cited from the study of a few Sattras in Koliabor region where initiatives have been taken alone by the youths for self-employment. Since unemployment is a critical issue affecting the entire community since a long time, the youths have started investments at their own initiatives. For example, weaving traditional garments both for religious and household purposes, utilizing the farm-lands apart from growing regular crops like paddy, and making masks for bhāonās and other items regularly of use in the Sattras especially in villages of Koliabor, Dhing and Bardowa area of the district and for the larger benefit of the community and also to enhance the Sattra economy. Although the Sattra was established for the explicit or manifest purpose of providing a space for Vaisnava religious and cultural practices, it also fulfills the latent purpose of bringing people together where they can learn what opportunities are available.

During one of the field investigations, the researcher had the chance to interview Sri Narayan Muktiyār of Bardowa Narowa Sattra, an informant who retired as a treasurer of the respective Sattra and a regular member of the congregation. When asked about the present state of economy and the community's involvement, he remarked, '....at the Sattras we find out everything that is going on and try our level best to mend our issues and problems.'
Serving as a center of fostering cultural identity may be viewed as the major manifest function of the Sattra. It also has other latent functions of an economic character. The nāmghars situated in the neighborhood of each village also contributes a lot to the economy. Most of them play the role of a community center catering to the needs of the lay parishioners comprising agricultural farmers and other occupational villagers. At the same time it is seen that most of the villages in the district are affiliated to a single nāmghar as a group commonly known as khel. The khels vary from village to village. They provide a platform for the farming groups to discuss matters on their agricultural produce, land tenancy etc; women to interact and condition their co-operatives' initiatives and agendas; organizing the youths under different khels to hold various activities such as workshops on drama, dance and music, celebration of Bihu, the festival of the Assamese and other related rituals and festivals of the Vaisnavas etc. The lay people feel free to enter the premises of the Sattra or the nāmghars to discuss and carry out the various socio-religious and cultural events. They are structured in such a way that they could generate funds as and when necessary. In many cases the nāmghars act as an agency working for the welfare of the community. As mentioned above, it also serves a variety of new economic needs by providing a place where network connectors can connect members of the group with jobs and financial resources. Occasionally, special prayer services like pāl-nām, Bhāgavata pāth continue for days are conducted in exchange for donations, which bring income to the Sattras concerned which again flows to the Vaisnava community at large. The revenues collected out of this are normally utilized in construction of the buildings of both the Sattra and the nāmghars, preserving the valuable assets and for their all around development. Adding to this, an annual contribution is made especially to the Bardowa than by the devotees as part of the community ritual. Apart from making contribution in cash or kind they also offer rice, pulses, mustard oil etc. which are mostly for the resident bhakats. Such offerings are generally meant for the than rather than the Sattradhikāra. It is credited to its
account but there is no special fund in the name of the heads of the Sattras. Whatever is accumulated it is entirely for the benefit of the Sattras. He has to meet the social and cultural needs with expenditure and these practices are still continuing in many of the Sattras rich in conducting regular congregations, initiation ceremonies, theatrical performances like bhāonā etc. Mention may be made of Samaguri, Nikāmul Uriāgaon, Rupnārāyaṇ Gonāmarā Sattras situated in the district.

Especially the women are benefitted out of the co-operatives started solely by them as a cumulative effort. This is more prominent in the villages under the khel system. A special assistance is granted to the folk women as they form a large part of the congregations. They form units known as got from the members of the laity and invest whatever they could afford. The money collected from women of each household is either invested in a local bank begetting interests for their benefits or utilized during a ritual in the village nāmghar. At the end of the month or so the total investment is mostly utilized in conducting a religious affair like āiati-nām, pāl-nām, Bhāgavata pāth in their respective Sattras, starting small scale business like weaving and food, or seldom for personal benefits. This way it helps in the economic development by way of self-funding for the poverty stricken Sattras since women form a major part of the daily congregation. As such they are engaged within their own group and even they could invite people from other communities for help. Since the laity essentially invites the religious professionals, decision-making in the Sattras has shifted from the heads to a committee of laymen composed of the same successful skilled craftsmen who normally administer the proceedings of the Sattra. Apart from this some of the Sattras surveyed, it is observed that financial management of the Sattras has become undemocratic. There is a continuous blame-game process going on

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12 Traditional weaving of attires like mekhela-cadar, curia, gāmocha, seleng, eri-cadar etc. and preparation of traditional Assamese snacks like pithā, laru, pickles etc.

13 The respective Sattras are Narowa Bālisatra, Māhārā Dimow, and Puranīghar (Koliabor), Āibheti Salaguri Nasatra.
between the lay parishioners and the heads of most of the Sattras concerned resulting in their decline.

The Sattras of Nagaon portray a grim representation of economic assuage in contrast to a sound religious economy where the Sattras have been reduced to a level of inept management thereby inviting low economic growth. The same institution may function differently in different environments. Because of the encroachment of the landed property of the many Sattras in Nagaon, particularly in Dhing and Bardowa areas of the district, there is a sharp decline in revenue generation. It may be mentioned here that an approximate of 130 bighās of land reserved only for grazing was allotted in the name of Bardowa thān, located to the west of Akasi Ganga in the year 1979. For a period of around ten years or so, the Satras adjoining the thān allowed some local people to cultivate in these lands for their economic benefit. But in course of time, the management committee of the Satras found that these lands are not economically viable and as such they returned them to the Department of Social Forestry in the year 1989. But at present there has been a problem of encroachment of these Sattra lands for which the government has also interfered. It is found that an Islamic primary school known as moktāb has been established by the local Muslim population in the lands given to the forestry department by the representatives from the Sattra. In a recent news published in a newspaper\(^\text{14}\) it has been reported that the Muslims residing in the surrounding areas have decided to establish a prayer hall in the Sattra lands which was vehemently opposed by the Assam Sattra Mahasabha and others. If this intrusion continues, the Satras will lose their landed property in due course of time. This is one problem we observe while dealing with the economic state of the Sattras in the district. This is imminent in many other Sattras too.

As observed, the crisis underlying the Sattra in the rural sector is mainly due to rural unemployment. Economic or employment generation through

\(^{14}\) This is reported in *The Assam Tribune*, published from Assam by a local correspondent from Nagaon on the 19\textsuperscript{th} of March, 2012.
agriculture has virtually stagnated and there have been hardly any parallel development of non-agricultural livelihood opportunities instead of depending on the agriculture. Had it been taken care of, the Sattras would have allowed themselves to tackle with the problem of unemployment. The opportunities for rural non-agricultural employment should be increased as the Sattras have been providing scope for developing co-operatives for poultry farming, weaving and other non-agricultural activities. This has benefitted the indigenous non-farming class within the community with better conduits of employment. And this way the Sattra economy could be raised as it is an institution based on aspects of community level participation.

5.1.2. Land-use and Agricultural Economy in the Sattras

Land is an important component of economy. The process of globalization has greatly affected the economy and has undergone two major changes, one in the non-availability of agricultural lands in the rural sector and the other, rapid urbanization. There arises a competing demand on the use of lands and an underlying tension in the agrarian relations especially in the rural areas where huge properties are under the possession of individuals and local institutions. The Sattras too have witnessed changes as a result of this process. These changes are caused by new forces like urbanization, spread of education, outmigration, occupational shift, globalization, illegal immigration from Bangladesh and similar other factors. These affect the social system and lead to changes in the land ownership structure. This further generates an increasing demand on these community-based institutions, mostly rural based for private property and for commercialization of the existing land relations. There are also a few Sattras in certain areas of the district where land ownership has been recognized but they are without a title deed (patta) of the acquired land.
The availability of land suitable for agriculture has been shrinking on account of the competing demands from various sectors. And agriculture being the mainstay of the economy of the Assamese community at large, the Sattras are more or less dependent on the agricultural produce of the lands that they have acquired by way of donation in the name of religion at the time of their establishment. Donation of a piece of land was a means of acquisition by an individual household Sattra and this is prominent in most of the Sattras of the district. All the major Sattras have huge acres of land which are either suitable for cultivation or lying fallow. The forest and agriculture departments of the state as conveyed by an informant\textsuperscript{15} have acquired some acres of land for multi-purpose projects like plantation, fisheries etc for the larger benefit of the Sattra and also it is considered to be a check for the illegal settlers occupying the Sattra lands. The model of the whole economic system rests on the agricultural land and the ways of their usage. The Sattra is not an exception and has been mostly under an agriculture based economy.

Leasing has become one of the fastest growing activity of the Sattra institutions especially the ones in and around the main Bardowa thān and Dhing as demarcated in the map of Nagaon. A major economic support from the land lent out on lease for a stipulated time-frame. The agricultural lands are often leased out and leased in on an informal basis by the beneficiaries of the Sattra. The Sattras are benefited when the lease is granted in exchange for a specified rent. The amount which is paid is generally known by the Sattradhiṅkāra and other functionaries in advance and the asset remains the property of the individual who lends it out. But many of the Sattras under the survey show a variation. It happens sometimes that on the expiry of the term of lease the lessee becomes the owner of the assets. In most cases it is done forcibly and thus the Sattra loses its own

\textsuperscript{15}During field visit to a village called Rāidengia adjacent to Bardowa, the researcher interviewed (09.06.11) Sri Sashi Ram Saikia (aged 65 years), a bhakat and an active member of the village nāṃghar.
property. The later factor has brought the affluent Sattras of Nagaon\(^{16}\) under the shades of decline and stagnation in terms of economic growth. And most importantly the Sattras being house-holders, the families are scattered and their lands distributed have no systematized land-holdings. Suffering from paucity of labour to work in the agricultural fields, the members from the household Sattras have started hiring people from the economically poorer and socially depressed sections including immigrant settlers to work in their respective agricultural lands. In many Sattras especially the ones situated around Bardowa and Dhing, we observe that these lands are also provided on lease to certain landless agricultural workers for their family sustenance. This has enhanced the mobility of a cheap and easy labour force. And for these many external factors have taken the full advantages out of this and settled down in the landed property of the Sattras. Moreover, in some rural areas of the district, it is also observed that the grāṃsabha or the village panchayat acts as a competent authority pertaining to matters relating to transfer, acquire, purchase or lease of land. This creates a rapport between the representatives of the Sattras and the local bodies in the management of economic resources.

The major share of the Sattra lands is in the name of the Sattradhikāra who acts as the landlord as also the caretaker of the Sattra property. The acquired land is inherited and it moves down generation after generation. Of the total establishment of Sattras in the whole of the district with regional variations like geographical location, quality of the soil, labor force etc, an overall estimated cultivated area culminates approximately to around ten per cent of all the land. The ownership of the lands is the only aspect of the Sattras that has ramifications for the economy at large. Since these establishments cater to the needs of the people and lay a claim on them, it could be better employed for other uses. Moreover almost every household in the village has bari or homestead land which

\(^{16}\) Barjahā, Āhataguri Hujgaon etc. are few Satras in the district of Nagaon which have not so far been able to retrieve their lost lands from the lessees.
also contributes to the economy. Half of the incomes yielded from these lands have been supplementing their growth.

5.2. Challenges to the Growth of the Sattra Economy

The Sattras, in recent times have been facing a number of problems which have posed as serious threats to their existence and in the pursuit of socio-cultural contributions to the community. The problem in the Sattras covered under the present study is quite different from the ones lying in other parts of the state. Apart from the major problem of illegal immigration and encroachment of lands within the district as discussed below, there are other factors that have hindered the economic condition of these institutions to a great extent. In many places however, the devottar lands given to the Sattras have been acquired by the government under Assam State Acquisition Act of Land, belonging to religious or charitable institution which was amended in 1987. The money that comes from the government for the maintenance of the Sattras is not sufficient to make up the costs and this has been severely hampering the economy.

Factional disputes have also taken place in some other Sattras in the district. Since almost all the major branch Sattras follows the non-monastic order, there is a difference in the organization and management of all proceedings in these institutions from the ones following the stricture of a strong monastic order. Even though the Sattra heads are hereditarily selected and sometimes based on seniority as well as other consideration of necessity and priority. Yet some conflicting situations also, at times arise in view of the power and authority associated with the position of the Sattra head, leading to disputes in income and economic management.

As immigration from other lands increasingly grows within a community, it changes the cultural perceptions in various ways which in turn increases the
probability of migration in future. It is a general tendency that if someone has once migrated to a place, he or she is very likely to migrate again, and therefore the probabilities of taking an additional trip rise with the number of trips already being taken and this often pose as a serious hazard. Continuous influx of migrants from outside the country has become a threat to the indigenous people living in the state and has led to a shift in the demography of the Assam valley. The once self-sustained economy of the Sattra is also now burdened with illegal migrant issue and encroachment of the Sattra lands affecting the demography and ecology of the areas. At various points of time, the indigenous properties of the Sattras have been subjected to encroachment due to the continuous flow of immigrants. As such at present the Sattra property is at stake. In most cases, indigenous inhabitants have either moved away from these places leaving their ancestral land holdings or sell them out for various reasons due to which the Sattras have lost their original landed property with no substitution of regular revenue yield. This is stated to be a perennial problem creating a demographic as well as socio-economic and cultural crisis in the Sattras of Assam and the worst affected is the district of Nagaon. The rate of influx is so high that they have in fact occupied most of the barren lands of the Sattras and even reserved government lands. This has created a sense of religious insecurity amongst the local masses, mostly at the village level since most of these illegal immigrants have occupied the village stratum.

Mass immigration and respective occupancies of the immigrants on the waste lands, forest reserves and grazing lands mostly on the lands belonging to the Sattras has posed a serious threat. The immigrants, mostly cultivators have been continuing to infringe upon the land rights of the indigenous Assamese population since the days of the British. This immigration taking place under the colonial policy was purely based on economic grounds. It is to be noted here that the indigenous Assamese people had huge amount of lands under their possession and cultivated in them also. But they were not steady in their cultivation
techniques and methods. They cultivate in their lands for a maximum of three to four years and then leave the lands fallow without cultivation for years. They abandon the lands claiming to have lost the fertility due to constant use. It is also observed that the tendency of evacuating their place of origin from a rural to an urban base for better avenues prevails among them. This is also quite common amongst the members of the Sattra since many of them in the surveyed region belong to the grhaasti (household). They settle down mostly in towns and cities across the state after being employed in lucrative jobs or professions leaving their original land holdings. Under such circumstances the immigrants find an easy trespass to the fallow lands and start cultivation. After a period of time of using the land, they prefer to acquire legal settlements of such abandoned lands and even pay good prices to purchase these lands. And this way they continue to cultivate for years and finally settle down at those places. Apart from this there are many illegal occupants too, who are landless but work as hired laborers in the fields of the indigenous Assamese cultivators. These landless immigrants often encroach upon the nearby lands and declare themselves as permanent settlers. Due to all such reasons the Sattra property is at stake. The worst affected ones are those who possess unused lands under a Sattra. This case is quite common in the Sattras lying in the vicinity of Bardowa-Dhing area of the district. The influx rate is so high that the occupants do not even fear to encroach the lands belonging to a religious institution like the Sattra.

5.3. Present Economy

It is now a common assertion that the problem of illegal international immigration has constantly been affecting the state. It is evident from the survey that they are the earlier migrants mostly of whom came after the Indo-Bangladesh war in 1971 A.D. and have formed settled groups with third or fourth generations. Land encroachment has become a much debated issue having political, economic and cultural ramifications in recent times. The present state of economy of many
of the Sattras mainly in the areas surrounding Dhing and Bardowa has been under pressure. There is no transparency observable in the policies of the government regarding this continuous flow of illegal occupants. No restrictions have been imposed on these settlers in taking up more lands in the villages. Had this been checked from time to time, there would not have been further settlement of immigrants mostly in the lands already under the occupancy of the Sattras. In view of the fact that major economic support for the Sattras came from the cultivable land and its produce, the constant influx rate and encroachment have eaten up large amount of income. This infiltration has now assumed significant proportions in the whole economic status of the Sattras.

Based on the above analysis, the researcher has put forward two main problems in harnessing the wealth of the Sattras of the district in particular. One, there is dearth of adequate man-power for cultivating the available lands for wet as well as dry cultivations round the year. As such the labor force flows generally from the immigrant population who cultivate in the fallow lands and also the cultivable lands. Moreover they are also employed as domestic help in many of the residential Sattras. The other is lack of interest from the government in issues concerning the Sattras, many of which are already on the path of decay in many areas of the district. Since the Sattras have huge lands acquired in the name of religion at the time of their inception, the search for cheap and docile labour in the agricultural lands has become one major concern. These are labor intensive sectors where most of the laborers are from the immigrants. Due to lack of proficiency in the indigenous groups, these lands are easily accessed by them. In course of time they have used their skill to develop a niche in the community and this is largely affected the present day economic state of a majority of the Sattras in the district. No matter the government is trying to find out a better solution to this current issue yet no such meticulous steps have been underlined by both the central and state functionaries. As such the property of the Sattras is at stake and it is directly affecting the landscape of the place. Data collected from the field
reveal the fact that in recent year the problem of cross-country clandestine immigration has become more pronounced affecting the economic output of these institutions and their landed properties. There are instances of migrant women identified as domestic helps in most of the Assamese households in the society. Even the members directly acquainted with a Sattra also hire them as laborers for domestic chores or other similar activities.

It can be cited here that many of the Sattras are surviving still, depending entirely on the donations in terms of money provided by the laity having both a religious and economic meaning since the time of their inception. Sometimes the disciples donate money for the renovation and repair works of the architectural features of their respective Sattras. This forms a major source of revenue to substantiate the poor economic condition of many of these Sattras. These donations, however accumulates on a yearly basis or on sporadic proceedings taking place in a particular Sattra. This sums up to be a very subtle amount which does not help in to keep pace with the changing state of economy in present times. Moreover, the lands which are donated and not being utilized for growing crops round the year could be used for other purposes such as fishery, poultry and rearing cattle which will yield more revenues. In turn this will not only suffix the pain of seeking for appropriate funds from the government but also it would prove to be a long term engagement engaging members from the laity as well as the beneficiaries from the Sattras. The Sattras therefore should act as self-propelled institutions.

If culture can be thought of as a system of beliefs, values, customs etc. shared by a group, as discussed earlier, then cultural interactions among members of the group or between them or members of other groups can be modeled as transaction or exchanges of symbolic or material goods within an economizing framework. Considering the role of culture in the economic development, it places cultural traditions and aspirations of the people from the community into
an economic framework. It is seen as a means of identifying ways in which their material circumstances can be improved in a manner consistent with cultural integrity. And that is why the concepts of culture and economic development are considered to be inextricably intertwined with any religious institution. The following observations are cited in support of the relation between economy, religion and culture enabling an institution to grow and develop. The discussion can be concluded with the following remarks:

First, the Sattras were established at a specific stage of socio-economic mobility, when members of the ethnic communities had begun to experience collective socio-economic upward mobility. The village nämghars act as places of religious practice in order to maintain a sense of cultural identity.

Second, the Sattras as socio-cultural and religious institutions had the latent function of serving as a network center of economic activities. This means that the religious institution was both cause and effect of socio-economic mobility. While mobility was initially a source of the formation of congregations, the congregations in turn fostered continuing mobility.

Third, it provided the primary manifest function of preserving cultural traditions. Religion acts as a cultural marker and a way of preserving the cultural heritage of the Sattrra institution.
REFERENCES


Figure: 24 - The campus of Āuniāti Sattra in Nagaon.

Figure: 25 - A make-shift arrangement of the maṇikūta at Letugram Sattra.
Figure: 26 - Land utilized as children’s park near Samaguri Sattra in Koliabor.

Figure: 27 – A kind of mask used in bhāonā.
Figure: 28 – The newly constructed *nāmghar* at Boraligaon, Samaguri.

Figure: 29 – Dāmodaradeva Āta *thān* at Bālisatra, Nagaon.