Heritage is considered to be a part of a common past. “Heritage by its nature values the past and is concerned with the manner through which the past is constructed in the present” (Soderland 2009, 55). Heritage provides an enduring process of producing the past knowledge through documentation and thus elucidates the relationship between knowledge, text and value. “The historical dimension of heritage provides an enduring context within which its changing meanings can be traced” (Soderland 2009, 55). We can find a validation of the above formulation in respect of the Sattra institution as the Sattra with all its paraphernalia constitute in itself the phenomenon of heritage as well as functions as a pursuer and preserver of heritage. By way of constructing the past into the present, the history of heritage in the Sattras bears a new dimension with its changing meanings.

The past with historicity and even beyond it is at the root of heritage. The historical value can accrue from its association with people or events, its uniqueness of a past event or monument assessing the age of the heritage material. Thus the capacity of a site or an object to convey, embody or stimulate a relation with the past is part of the fundamental meaning of heritage objects. History and heritage also remain at the core of culture and its elements of ideas and habits passed through time. Equally with historical values, cultural value is of immense significance. According to a report based on assessing the values of cultural heritage, “cultural values are used to build cultural affiliation in the present and can be historical, political, ethnic, or related to other means of living together” (Mason 2002, 11).
Heritage of the Sattras provides the knowledge created and assimilated at various points of time in the history of development of these institutions. The embodiment of a Sattra sheds light on how history was created in the past and why it is important to incorporate its heritage resources and works for their sustenance in the present. The recognition of heritage in the Sattras reflects the identity of the Assamese as a community. But with times this perception has changed and it nurtures the essence of a new Assamese identity valued through the heritage of the Satras. In other words it can be stated the religio-social preserve of the Sattras began to be viewed as a major part of the heritage of Assam and Assamese culture.

Cultural heritage requires memory. Memory, as an aspect of the past which has not been witnessed or experienced is essential in constructing the identity of both individual and collective. Heritage exists in reciprocity with memory and identity. The heritage of the Sattras displays the contours of memory and identity by asserting collective and individual uniqueness. The memories connected with the development of these institutions meet the needs of present times on the lines of a constructed past. The Sattras through its multiple resources have been able to reconstruct the past constituting an influential force in the whole of the Assamese cultural identity. Hence the heritage of the Satras is a form of an ‘objectivised culture’ as mentioned by Assmann (1995, 128) which marks the identity of the Assamese Vaisnavas in general. An objectivised culture can be in the form of texts, images, buildings and rites reproducing knowledge and which can be assigned as having a structure of memory. This draws a close connection between individuals and their identity. Knowledge acquired this way is identical to identity and so the individuals connected to these institutions bases their consciousness of unity upon such knowledge.

Now to define heritage, it is considered as a possession of the community, a rich inheritance that is carried on and which invites the appreciation and
participation of all members from the community. Considered as important to have passed on to future generations, heritage is perpetually connected to culture. Since culture includes languages, traditional practices, literature, religion and religious beliefs, performing art manifested through the medium of dance, music and other expressive forms as important assets of the society, they are a part of the heritage which is acquired through inheritance. It can be coupled with the human and social development activities which individuals cannot get away from. Cultural heritage denotes those conditions or things related to culture which are also passed on from one generation to the next.

This chapter is an analysis of the aspect of heritage associated with the Sattras which renders rich cultural traditions involving community participation and recognition. The Sattras do not exist only as an individual and exclusive entity, but they are the components of larger historical, cultural and traditional unities. By way of associating heritage with the Sattras, they include the idea of a cultural landscape displaying the tangible and intangible resources and the process of interaction with the society surrounding them.

6.1. Cultural Heritage Preservation

Cultural heritage was first addressed in international law in 1907 and a body of international treaties and texts for its protection has been developed by UNESCO and other intergovernmental organisations since the 1950's (Blake 2000, 61). The question of cultural heritage has become an important issue which has greatly transformed the meaning, use, extent, and possibilities of the heritage concept. Preservation of heritage means conserving all elements included in it in the best possible conditions. The preservation of the material culture includes various objects of daily use and also the intangible cultural forms like dance, music, theatre and rituals is necessary to generate the shared notion of a common
good which is for the benefit of the whole community. Such activities involve proper maintenance, repair, safeguarding from external elements and restoration to prevent deterioration and devastation of the existing heritage. Cultural heritage has become a vital ingredient of cultural identity and the need of the hour is to protect the cultural identity of individuals and groups which substantiates the requirement to protect and preserve cultural heritage. Cultural heritage preservation is growing in this shifting world and henceforth the custodians of heritage need to adapt with the changes. The most debatable concern in relation to the heritage preservation is the challenge currently faced by the heritage stakeholders of the community, professionals and individual performers in terms of training, funding from the government, job opportunities, or the status of heritage in the public domain. Preservation has now become a major cause of concern for the ones invariably connected with the socially and culturally recognized heritage.

Working for the preservation of heritage contributes to strengthen a common sense of identity within a community. Through the recognition of the past, preservation of heritage helps in the preparation of a better future. And it is only through these cultural heritages which draw a tangible link between the past and the present. The essentiality of a cultural heritage to survive in the long run is in its potential for preservation. Heritage preservation has also become a major concern in recent times with relation to the Sattras. Protecting and preserving the culture of the Vaisnava community through the Sattras has now become an immediate concern that holds many challenges for the community. The Satras being an important centre for cultivating and producing a rich segment of cultural heritage, its resources in both tangible and intangible forms need to be preserved. As such the available cultural products should be such that they educate and at the same time attract individuals from both inside and outside these institutions.
6.1.1. Sattras as Living Religious and Cultural Heritage

The Sattras in Assam are repositories of the elements of heritage in both tangible and intangible forms having a historical, cultural and aesthetic value. The existing resources are unique creations of the saint and his immediate apostles who tried to give the nascent Assamese society and culture a new look, form and identity at the time of crisis. These are forms of a coherent collective memory which transcends into the lives of an individual. As mentioned by Confino (1997, 1386), “collective memory is a representation of the past and is a making of a shared cultural knowledge by successive generations in vehicles of memory.” The Sattras too are the outcome of a collective memory of the rich Vaisnava tradition in Assam. Right from structuring a composite culture in the form of religious pursuits through diverse forms of arts including performing ones to housing various sacred artefacts, these produce a unique cultural history. Moreover the built-in vernacular heritage of these institutions occupies a central place in the affection and pride of the whole of the Vaisnava community. Considering the numerous heritage resources available throughout these institutions they still have traditional mechanisms to maintain respect for culturally significant resources. Since these institutions also cater to the religious indentation, the heritage content in it can also be termed as religious cultural heritage. But an immediate concern is that the various aspects of the heritage of these Sattras has to be identified, recognized and protected against the risk of the loss of its historical roots. For long term sustenance the culture, memory, hybridization and tradition of these institutions have to be preserved in respect of its distinctiveness and requirements. Valued as socio-religious institutions and catering largely to the cultural elements the Sattras have so far been able to display the richness of their cultural heritage. But this has not been the similar scene in all the Sattras established in the state at various periods of time. Employing secondary data source in the form of continuous participant observation for collecting information, heritage dimension of the Sattriya culture
in the Sattras of Nagaon and their present ramification in the process of protection and preservation are being discussed.

6.1.2. Locating the Tangible and Intangible Resources

Cultural heritage contains both tangible and intangible resources. Tangible and intangible are two intertwined concepts. They cannot be separated from each other. Heritage therefore, connects the physical to the non-physical. The tangible or the substantial and the intangible or non-substantial resources contribute to the heritage. The intangible cultural performances and the tangible objects enhance both personal and community identities which produce a fundamentally strong collective identity. Cultural identity is thus nurtured by the cultural heritage of that particular group or individuals so far as their identity is influenced by a sense of belongingness. It is further vitalized by an understanding of both tangible and intangible heritage resource of that culture. As suggested by Laenen (1989, 90), “the main reason for the massive interest in heritage and the past can be located in the moral, social and identity crisis experienced over the past decades.” It is however, not only for the conservation and promotion but also for a wider understanding and assessment of their values, a holistic approach to the recognition of the elements of heritage is considered necessary. And in regards to our study, the intangible heritage of the Sattras can only be recognized with an understanding and appreciation of its enduring expressions including the tangible forms.

While talking about heritage, it is important to understand the tangible and intangible aspects of heritage. Even though there is some element of differences between the two, yet they are important in defining heritage. The tangible or the substantial heritage and the intangible resources contribute to the heritage. The heritage of the Sattras is also built on the edifice of both physical and non-
physical objects. Generally the cultural heritage products in a Sattra are both tangible and visible (artefacts and crafts, buildings) and intangible or invisible (songs, dance, drama, indigenous knowledge, folklore, rituals including their enduring practices).

The definition on Intangible Cultural Heritage provided by UNESCO Convention of 2003 is,

practices, representations and expressions, and knowledge and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (Keitumetse 2006, 166).

6.2. Situating the Sattras of Nagaon in the Process of Preservation

The Sattras lying in the district are a treasure trove of all cultural embodiments, be it tangible or intangible. Since the time of their inception, they have been able to maintain a status quo with other Sattras in the state regarding both preservation and protection of the tangible and intangible forms of heritage. The present study brings in the various resources available in the Sattras scattered in the region which culminates to the heritage of these institutions.

The Sattras in this part of the state have been playing an influential role in recapitulating the past, maintaining the present and bestowing the traditional attributes upon the future since a long time. Recapitulating meaning a majority of the Sattras have preserved their age-old traditions which they have inherited from their past generations and have carried on further. Examples can be cited from a
few of the most influential Sattras of Nagaon. These include Bardowa Narowa, Karcung, Puranighar and Nikāmul Uriāgaon Sattra which have maintained the tradition of preserving and protecting both the intangible and tangible objects and members of the community are very hopeful that the various aspects of cultural heritage will be bestowed upon the future generations as part of the veneration of the Assamese cultural identity. Through the recognition of the past, preservation of heritage helps in the preparation of a better future. It has also been observed that regardless of the position one holds in the premises of the Sattra, it is upto that individual or the collective effort of the beneficiaries to determine the prerequisites of preserving the cultural artefacts and ensure that adequate resources are provided to protect the resources. It is an established phenomenon however; when people start participating in the decision making they will be committed more to the notions of conserving and managing the cultural heritage resources. This phenomenal change has taken place in Nagaon to a very limited extent where the decision as to what is deemed worthy of protection and preservation has been made by State authorities on a national level and through the constant negotiation between the Sattra representatives and the authorities of the state. The challenge is to strike a balance between the supply of informations with authenticity and accuracy and also to stimulate the interest of the concerned heritage professionals. However there are some possible weaknesses in the findings of the research. As mentioned by Hewison (1987) regarding the nature of heritage experiences, he proposes that cultural and educational museums will become largely redundant as consumers demand more and more interactive, live history. Complementing his views in my own research findings, displaying an item of the Sattra in the museums has masked the absence of a reality. Rather a living and interactive experience gathered through the use of the artefacts instead of display in the museum involves more community participation. It keeps the

17 The Sattradhikāra of Letugram Sattra in Kolabor made this comment in an interview where he has witnessed the shortcomings evolving in his Sattra. According to him, there has been constant efforts by the community members in the decision making process which has indirectly stimulated the process of their preservation.
individuals occupied without a static representation and consequently these are considered to be authentic as heritage value. Moreover, both the tangible and intangible resources as already been mentioned also serve as a means of livelihood and ways of sustenance. Endowed with a cultural significance these resources comprising the cultural elements of the heritage of a Sattra survives on the representations, the performances, ritual practices, craftsman skills along with the objects of daily use, artifacts etc. It is important to note that in a majority of the Sattras in Nagaon the utility of these resources have become an important source of livelihood. Apart from keeping a variety of objects in the lone museum located in Bardowa as a way of preservation, the community has made a reciprocal effort to use these items for means of occupational living. This is more prominent in the Sattras situated in the rural areas of the district. This is a new means for gaining economic solidarity directly helping in the sustenance of the cultural artefacts considered as inherited and useful. The market economy rises as a result of this and this affects the economic dynamism of the Sattras. For example a good number of individuals have taken up the art of basket-making, drums, wood-sculpture, weaving as their basic means of livelihood\textsuperscript{18}. For generations, these indigenous arts are displayed with intricate designs and vibrant colours authenticating the traditional cultural aspects of life in the Sattras. Traditionally in Nagaon these items were mostly used for religious ceremonies and as offerings in the form of tithes to the head of a Sattra. And still this process is continuing. Through this indigenous craftsmanship they have been able to engage themselves in a modest mode of living and have grown a business amongst the community. Moreover raw materials required for the crafts are easily available in many of the Sattras around Dhing and Bardowa out of which the artefacts could be made and sold in the market. This also indirectly boosts the

\textsuperscript{18} As for example weaving has become a major profession in most of the villages of Nagaon. The weavers weave the traditional \textit{gamocha} which is also used as part of congregation in the Sattras apart from using it as a regular item of use. This is a kind of a business involving the community at large and this has enhanced the community participation in maintaining and preserving the traditional aspect of the living heritage of the Sattras.
economy of the Sattras which is essential for its sustenance. As a result of this ongoing process there is a subtle amount of reciprocity between opening up of economic avenues and preservation of cultural heritage. This has helped in the growth of the Sattras lying in close proximity to both a rural and urban setting. One fine example can be cited from one of the Sattras surveyed, where the individual was involved in the art of making-masks where masks are popular objects generally used in bhāonās and other important artefacts like guru-simhasana, manikūta, thāpona etc. He was of the opinion that people from adjoining places come and purchase the masks to be used during festivals and ceremonies held in the Sattras from time to time. He also said ‘if this process is endured for long the Sattras will be benefitted largely as this would involve more and more individuals within the community as also the lost artefacts would continue to be restored.’ This involves not only an interaction amongst many but also portray the cultural forms of the Vaisnava culture in Assam through different models of art. Moreover these artefacts are sold to customers mainly for two purposes, one to be displayed as decorative piece and the other for regular use in the household. Few have even been sent to the museums as models for preservation so that the identity of the culture is not lost at all. On the contrary this has also created some sort of displeasure amongst many of the informants as mentioned earlier.

The Sattra nāmghar is an important heritage building site of a Sattra. Its location in many of the rural and urban settings of the district plays an important role in disseminating the cultural and religious verb and contributing to the tangible heritage resource of the Sattras. These have tried to maintain this continuum so far as most of these artefacts are utilized in the nāmghars on a regular basis. Be it a festival or ritualistic performance the artefacts in the Sattra are utilized for multiple purposes on the selected days of ritual undertakings as well as in the daily chores of the Sattra and most predominantly in the nāmghars. Certain indigenous items such as tou, sarai, kharahi, bānbāti, soria, thāl, ghontā,
orgha etc. are in regular use. Several of them are used for the purpose of distributing the offerings made to the Almighty in the form of māh-prasada after conclusion of the regular prayers in the form of nām-prasanga. The bhakats normally uses the traditional items made of brass and copper, most commonly available metals in the whole of the state. There are evidences of the use of copper (tām) in many of the older Sattras in the surveyed region but commodification of the traditional items for a good market value have taken place in almost all of the Sattras. For longer duration and utility, the use of steel as a cheap means of commodity has replaced the traditional artefacts bringing in a visible decline to the growth of cottage industries associated with the development of the Sattras as has already been discussed in my previous research findings. Copper-plate inscription (tāmor phali) is one such artefact which had been in use in these Sattras for a long time but now it is treasured in the museum as an item of display with less heritage value. The commodification hypothesis proposes that culture becomes popular culture and in the process a series of staged authenticity occurs. This staged authenticity is said to thwart the visitor’s genuine desire for authentic experiences (Goulding 2000, 837). The buildings, artefacts and other tangible items may be cited as authentic but the selective portrayal of events such as a ritual taking place in the Sattras and the history related to it are all to a great extent tailored to appease the visitors who are not directly from the community.

Another interesting feature of the Sattras of Nagaon is the growing popularity of the intangible resources, regarded as important heritage property that defines the cultural life of the Sattras. The popular forms of entertainment which falls under the category of intangible resources are the plays, musical performances, songs and dances. These form an indispensable part of each and every Sattra. Most of the Sattras of the district have been pursuing these art-forms and are connected with the task of maintaining such traditions in a continued form. Important themes of the bhāonās are staged and performed by members of the Sattras. This is a sort of a community-based performance when young or old,
the individuals take actively roles as participants. Bhāonā or the dramatically
performed acts display different levels of participation at different phase of time.
This is a special acquaintance observed in the Sattras of Nagaon. It has been
observed that bhāonā performances are more pronounced in the Koliabor region,
with scintillating performances by actors of various age-groups, thereby attracting
a huge crowd (see fig.39). They also perform outside the region on varied
occasions displaying their art and culture. These different art forms- dance, music
and drama help to foster an awareness and appreciation for the past and present
relationship and introduce a sense of stewardship amongst the individuals. These
forms of art performed at various nuances of time and space represent some of the
most compelling means of communication about the need for protection and
conservation of the cultural heritage. By looking at the past work of these
performers and their performances, the individuals can form an idea of their
perspectives on the socio-cultural environment of the Sattra. Similarly watching a
bhāonā or participating in a dance or musical performance, one can experience
the Sattriya cultural traditions blending with the socio-cultural climate developing
in the Sattras. So unlike the tangible items of use there are also intangible objects
for display through mediating art in content and form.

As already discussed in Chapter 3, the Sattras are not only religious
embodiments containing all sacramental qualities but they also acts as institutions
where art and its different forms-dance, music, drama are spaced in a specific way
for enrichment. These popular forms of entertainment described as the ‘living
cultural’ forms of expression has to be promoted as a means to engage the
neophytes and the already existing members of the community to protect and
preserve the cultural heritage. The Sattras of Nagaon is under pressure and
demand so far the process of preserving the rich Sattriya tradition is concerned
and most of them are also under the threats of extinction as a consequence of not
being able to retrieve their lost traditions of heritage. An outcome of the survey of
the field is that there is lack of quality utilization of the resources of cultural
heritage. The method of analysis of data has been done through interviews of
individuals engaged in that setting as contemporary heritage consumers and based
on observations. It has been observed that there are frequent conflicts over
indigenous landed property of the Sattras which forms an inherent heritage
resource of the Sattras. The lack of provisions for protection, ownership, storage,
curation and management of historic artefacts has been addressed by various
individuals over the past decade, all of whom requires the need for official
repositories, better protective measures and more precise assessment criteria
(Mackay and James 1987, 41). The Sattras therefore requires attention and
adoption of punitive measures to address the right to protect their property.

6.3. Problems of Preservation

Despite the fact that state repositories for providing funds in support of the
Sattras has been established and meet the demands of the time, it has not been
accredited to have endowed with necessary resources to manage and curate the
artefacts. There is a need to encompass the variety of the cultural elements, both
tangible and intangible as connected to the Sattra and the Sattriya culture at large.
These include the illustrated miniature paintings depicting the stories from the
_Bhāgavata_, ritual sites, items of daily use and ritual items, musical instruments,
idols and images worshipped, musical traditions like _bargits_, _sattriya nāc_, _gayana-
bayan_, ceremonial and ritual traditions, aspect of the way of life of a Vaisnava
individual and the relationship which exists among the individuals affiliated to a
Sattra.

In some cases, the culture of the Sattra disappears because most of their
adherents die out. Lack of proper care, non-adoption of scientific techniques, poor
resource funding and community negligence are many reasons of impediment to
the growth and development of a Sattra. However in recent times the Sattras at
Majuli and adjoining places of upper Assam have made remarkable contributions in the domain of enlivening the Sattriya culture. In this way these Sattras have also served its purpose of preservation of its cultural heritage in both tangible and intangible form.

The Sattras have borne a new dimension through its various migrated cultural elements. When two cultures come together a number of changes take place through mutual interaction. The migrated elements give rise to a process of new acculturation through which the existing culture undergoes certain changes. Such changes are often perceived in respect of cultural expressions in some Sattras of the district. An example can be cited in this regard with reference to Baghargonya Sattra which originally belonged to the Bengal school of Vaisnavism initiated by Caitanyadeva. But in course of time, it incorporated into its ritual order and some other aspects elements from the existing Satras of Assam Vaisnavism. Some of their elements also came to impact other nearby Sattras through mutual interaction and exchange. Every Sattra in each locality of the district is currently facing new challenges which have affected the Vaisnava community at large. The increasing concern for protection of its cultural heritage has brought to light the importance of standardization. Intangible forms of art like bhaonas have gained grounds in this district with a developmental strategy adopted in its form and kind. The concept of a bhāonā has taken a place in the stage rather than its performance in the premises of a Sattra or the village nāmghars which was earlier a notable and spectacular phenomenon. Apart from these the Sattras possess unique architectural features which has lost its aesthetic value in due course of time. Concrete structures have replaced the age old traditional structures of a Sattra. This is done to control the deplorable condition due to natural calamities.

Citing the causes regarding their preservation and maintenance, it has been observed that the most troublesome issues include the physical and
economic factors such as lack of adequate funds for their protection and regular conduct of management programmes. Cataloguing in a standard format irrespective of all requisite information collected, excavation records as well as all relevant documentary materials should be stored in for perpetuity. It becomes necessary to deposit a comprehensive catalogue so that the institutions could manage the relevant artefacts. There is also a lack of museological research on the techniques and methods of their preservation in addition to lack of awareness among the general public relating the value of these rich cultural heritage. Museums are a common and important cultural asset displaying various cultural products belonging to a particular community. It displays its own culture. Culture, within this reach is defined as the totality of ideas which are inherited, activities of a group of people with shared traditions transmitted generations after generations. To showcase the cultural elements of a Sattriya lifestyle, a museum culture would definitely give commitment to becoming the custodian, preserver and conservator of the rich tradition of Vaisnava culture for future generations. Within the district, there is only one museum\textsuperscript{19} showcasing composite cultural artefacts mostly from the region. The museum has displayed the visual forms of culture, often featuring the artefacts and works produced by the local population, providing a better picture of the cultural characteristics of the Sattras. It has been able to serve as a major source of attraction for the non-Vaisnava, who is benefitted by the exposure to this unique historical and artistic production through the display of the various tangible artefacts in the Sattras. In order to preserve the cultural heritage connected to these institutions more museums can be developed within the locality so that the traditional role of curatorship of the existing material culture, documents or objects are maintained. The need to protect and manage these cultural properties has been increasingly felt in the wider academic circle in recent times which means enabling the cultural heritage resources to be rescued from the disabling

\textsuperscript{19} Batadrava \textit{Than} Museum established for the benefit of the community is the only museum preserving the rich heritage of the district as well as the state.
conditions of fragmentation. A matter of immediate concern is the vulnerability of the state government in respect to matters of preservation which often shies away from the question of dealing with the statutory protection for artefacts. In most of the Satras in Nagaon it has been noticed that taking advantage of this susceptibility of the state apparatus many unscrupulous and greedy people act with impunity for their own benefits, as a result of which the Satras' property are at stake. Examples are cited from the Samaguri Sattra in Koliabor of preserving the indigenous manuscripts of the Sattra, which were of great importance at the time of their creation and acted as the multiple knowledge bearer of the Vaisnava tradition. But when few of them could not be preserved with proper treatment they were taken over by the state for preservation and declared them as protected resources. The Sankaradeva Kalakshetra, a government organization of the state has played a unique role in the process of preservation. Efforts have been laid to curate many of the tangible items such as the manuscripts and rare books written by the apostles of the faith, illustrative plays which have been in use in these Satras for the last five hundred years. Even at the local level, a Nagaon based non-governmental organization named Prakalpa Sangrakshana has restored a four-foot tall broken Viṣṇu idol from Narowa Bālisatra. A series of restoration works have been carried on by this organization in several other Satras of the district which include Leteri Sālaguri, Bālisatra and Kobāikota. This is possible due to the initiative and efforts by Srimanta Śāṅkaradeva Research Center situated in Bardowa. The heritage building of the Sattra such as the nāmghars and manikūta also deserves attention. Through application of scientific methods in preservation these heritage buildings could be retrieved from getting damaged in course of time. Almost a quarter of the one affluent Sattras presently located in Nagaon have been abandoned at some point of time or the other. With passage of time, stealthily and openly the landed property of the Sattras has been encroached upon in the name of religion and for offering worship. There are circumstances
when the community set up around these places, is not in a position to retain the
resources. Though these institutions house scores of tangible objects as their
inherited collections, yet as a result of adequate funding provisions, thorough
and effective conservation work has not been carried out on the collected and
excavated materials, which have deteriorated the process of integrating the
cultural manifestations. Since Nagaon has numerous family oriented Sattras,
individual properties of the Sattradhikāra have also substituted the cultural
heritage property of a Sattra. Though many of these resources are not in regular
use but they have not altogether lost their importance. Through such a holistic
approach towards their preservation, the past heritage of the Sattras could be
made more physically and economically sustainable for long term survival.

So far my observation from the field goes, preservation process by itself is
problematic as it requires dedication and involvement from individuals and
groups, suitable climatic conditions for continued existence. Assam is a land
mostly prone to natural calamities like cyclones, earthquakes, floods etc. The
demography of the place is not favorable for long term preservation of the
tangible goods. And Nagaon being at the heart of the state is no exception to it. As
a matter of fact however, efforts have been made to a considerable extent in
preserving the heritage of these institutions. They have undergone many changes
mostly due to two factors; one the natural calamities which come without a
warning and the other human ignorance and instability to regard the resources as
valued treasures. There are many Sattras still lying in a deplorable state due to the
negligence on the part of the government or due to ignorance of the individuals,
who claim to be the custodians of the heritage of these institutions.

Standardization with a scientific approach is a major challenge faced by
the cultural heritage curators today. Documentation and archiving of all available
cultural heritage resources have brought to light the importance of
standardization. Information from the field has shown that there is lack of
provision in formulating a standard technique to catalogue, present and conserve the heritage resource of these Sattras. Standardization efforts in cultural heritage have several kinds of problems that need more time to be solved and then visualise the benefits of standardization.

One of the most significant pressures on their conservation was the high and increasing cost of maintaining these properties. The preservation and maintenance of a heritage depends on how effectively the public are involved. For that purpose, people must collaborate and help in maintaining the tradition. The valuable religious heritage of a Sattra can be made practicable for survival only through the actions performed responsibly by the community and its stakeholders that have guarded them to a possible extent till now. Traditional performance and craft skills began to decline as the impact of modern amenities of lives as the predominant typology. Heritage preservation in the Sattras mostly depends on the public funds or the funds generated by the government for the overall development of a Sattra. But there is a sort of a blame-game amongst the stakeholders of the Sattra and the government. The former claims to have not been granted requisite funds for preservation and continue with the heritage perspectives and on several occasions criticized the later.

Even so, the individuals claim that, over recent years, there had been a relative decline in the conservation of both tangible and intangible heritage resource, with much of the remaining funds being swallowed by the administration of the state. For instance, the head of the Letugram Sattra denies the effective role played by the government in matters of fund and blames the
government for showing negligence towards the growth of the Sattra\textsuperscript{20}. It is therefore necessary for every individual in the Assamese Vaisnava society to relate the human past through the preservation of this epitome of culture, the Sattras. In many cases, it has been found that the society is informed about the growing need for preservation but they are not adequate to meet with the crisis at hand. The members of the community know very little about the developments taking place in the act of preservation and even why there is a need to preserve the heritage of the Sattras. Insufficient funds from the government and negligence on the part of the individuals have greatly affected the preservation strategies of the Sattras. The individuals blame the government to have turned a deaf ear to the problems concerning these institutions and their institutional growth. But there is an exception noticeable in the case of Bardowa. There is a potential feature associated with the preservation of antiquities in the museum situated in the Bardowa \textit{Thān}. The tangible items of daily use and the ones which require a replacement have been collected from different Sattras and associated nāmghars in the district and have been organized for public display as modes of preservation in the near future. This has inevitably supported eco-tourism in this sector as also indirectly contributed to the Sattra economy. When it is linked to tourism, heritage can also become a direct source of income raising its economic value.

But to avoid the consequences of an uncontrolled development of mass tourism and its negative impacts on sites preservation, local communities have to be directly involved in cultural and eco-tourism.

\textsuperscript{20} Sri J. Mahanta, the present \textit{Sattradhikāra} of this Sattra lamented on the lack of concern by the state. According to him, few Sattras were provided with funds in the year 2011; his Sattra was also included amongst those. A sum of one lakh has been granted so far of which only a quarter of the amount has been granted and utilized in the reconstruction of the \textit{satra-griha} but the rest has not yet been received. He further adds, if the Sattra is regarded to be a heritage identity of the Assamese Vaisnava, then why there is no proper generation of the fund.
6.4. Involvement of the Community in Preservation

Heritage is a basis of the community identity. Both tangible and intangible heritages play a role in the development of local communities. The Sattra is directly linked up with the community. The communities revolving around these institutions have a concurrent role to play in future preservation and protection of the available resources. Communities shape the culture of a heritage. The impact of heritage on local communities is not only immaterial; it can become very concrete as soon as local actors are involved in the preservation and promotion processes. Local communities which have for a long time had an active participation in the Sattras can be inspired more to come forward and be fully involved in formulating better methods of preservation and developing the lost heritage of these glorious institutions of the state. The local actors with reference to this study are the stakeholders who are invariably connected with one or more Sattras, the head of the Sattras concerned as also the members from the laity who have been maintaining the tradition so far. A survey of the Sattras lying in this district has revealed the fact that there is optimal potential to carry forward the rich cultural heritage mostly through the intangible resources. Moreover heritage when well managed can become a tool to share experiences, exchange know-how and to integrate local communities into international networks. Involving the community is an important and powerful vehicle to procure more effective results in preserving the heritage which is more or less dying.\textsuperscript{21}

An important feature involving the community in the process of preservation is developing a heritage inventory as guide for the benefit of the Sattriya community at large. The Satras, whether big or small, or situated in rural and urban vicinity, they are valued for their association with the community history of the Vaisnavas. The present study cites the Satras of Nagaon as the historic places which contribute to the benefit of the community through its

\textsuperscript{21}Remark made by Sri Haren Mahanta, an artist who is indulged in the art of mask-making and sculpture in an interview conducted on 28.07.11 at his residence in Koliabor.
versatile components and help to define the unique character of the Vaisnava community in general. Community heritage inventory can be used as an important tool for the community to develop effective strategies for managing the heritage resources of the Sattra. The inventory record of a Sattra should contain a historic description of them, information about their location and usages of the tangible indigenous items. A community heritage inventory associating the Sattras is essential to improve the community’s understanding of its own heritage, identify and protect important heritage resources and promote community involvement for effective preservation of both intangible and tangible resources of a Sattra. The community schools or Sanskrit tols developed under the aegis of a Sattra, the research libraries associated with it, Vaisnava community developmental organizations can be regarded as examples of the custodians for an inventory. A survey of the field has reflected the necessity of creating a heritage inventory for the Sattras lying not only in the district of Nagaon but also the entire state in general, to fill up the information gaps for the known Sattras, identify and record other lesser known Sattras which may have been previously ignored. Depending on all the available resources, the community heritage inventory would help identify the value these Sattras holds for the community. Hence the resources—both tangible and intangible and their usage, location, and cultural associations or meanings that contribute to the heritage value of the Sattras must be retained in order to preserve its heritage value. Value is an important asset of heritage. “Heritage is valued not as an intellectual enterprise but because (as one aspect of material culture) it plays instrumental, symbolic, and other functions in society” (Mason 2002, 8). The value ascribed to heritage is multivalent. As for example the Sattras as mentioned in our study, it has spiritual value since it is designates as an important place of worship; it has a historical value because of the rituals and other performance related events that have transpired here; it has an aesthetic value because of its beautiful architecture; it has economic value as a huge landed property; it has political value since it represents symbolically certain kind of a
social order. This multivalence is important while discussing the notion of heritage values to be intrinsic in regard to these institutions.

Sometimes reaching out to such a community with specific religious traditions becomes more complicated. The aim of raising awareness of the heritage and developing them at times is difficult since along with a will to modernize many traditional ways and values are maintained. Examples can be cited from the sacred scriptures housed in many of the Sattras. The government has made a considerable effort to preserve those in a modern and scientific way rather than keeping those manuscripts in the Sattras to decay due to damp condition, insects and other calamities. Thus the goal of actively involving the community in preventive conservative measures and monitoring those institutions for long term survival lack at times and cannot be realized. This lack of awareness and participation from the public in the preservation of cultural heritage has created a cause of concern. Many of these Sattras sites have been abandoned and left to decay since the community start losing interest in their maintenance. It is considered that the state has a responsibility to take care of those eventually losing the traditional values associated with the heritage.

6.5. Necessity of an Institutionalized and Sustainable Support

Despite its obvious benefit to the society the cultural heritage of these institutions is increasingly threatened with destruction and degradation. The cultural heritage of the Sattras is a priority area of concern now since they have started falling under the root of decadence. The question of sustainability arises when cultural heritage is threatened due to neglect and allowed to deteriorate. It is also damaged when the natural integrity of the particular site or the people involved herewith is deluged by external influences. Such instances have affected the Sattras in sustaining their heritage to a great extent. The present study
investigates many such institutions in the entire district which are vulnerable to extinction. The support of the government as well as the laity is sought for preserving them for future. The task of the individuals and government funding agencies is to encourage the particular Sattras around the district to strengthen and increase efforts for proper conservation of the available and accessible resources, their preservation and promotion and enhancement of their cultural heritage as part of its sustainable mission. The cohesive co-ordination between the state functionaries and the central government is commendable only to a limited extent, directly or indirectly paving ways for preservation of heritage of these Sattras. Though many of them as mentioned are in a dilapidated condition yet the generous funds provided by the government from time to time seems to have controlled the situation of crisis in matters of preservation and protection (Choudhury 1990, 3). Many Sattras are in the progress through the funds provided though a very meagre amount. The Sattras are expected to grow and take up the task of protection and management of their cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, only by moderating them towards this goal and energizing the concerned individuals with more economic and moral support. While talking about economic support, generally the state government is responsible for providing the requisite support for maintenance and preservation. Even many non-governmental organizations have provided help in the process of preservation, though the major role has to be played by the government, both at the centre and the state. The concerns of these local organizations with their youth sensitization programmes have helped to promote the cultural heritage have contributed greatly to the local provision of employment, wealth generation and improvement in the environment for long term sustenance. Taking examples from the field, it has been observed that many of the Sattras have adopted their own survival strategy, like adopting new and modern scientific methods for preserving the indigenous manuscripts, worn out texts which form an important segment of
Sattra's property\textsuperscript{22}. Given the problems with current state-based approaches to heritage management the question of how to develop a sustainable and successful framework for the effective management of heritage sites imbued with sacred values becomes an important one. It is imperative that arrangements are made in such a way that the main custodians of these heritage resources carry out the compulsory analysis and undergo proper curation instead of the help provided by the state repository. Even though there is a poor and irregular funding from the government at the state level, yet there are some Sattras in the district which have been provided with minimal funds for utilization. Particularly in Nagaon, the \textit{Asom Sattra Mahasabha}\textsuperscript{23} is one such organization who has been mobilizing the government to a considerable extent. Consolidation of contacts and cooperation with governmental and non-governmental organizations has involved active participation for the promotion of cultural heritage issues. The \textit{Samanwita Yuva Tirtha}, the youth wing of the apex Sattra body, has also been playing a vital role in influencing the youths in creating an awareness to preserve and protect the heritage of the Sattra. Though a collective effort has been made, both at the centre and state level to raise these institutions and protect their socio-cultural entity with the estimated funds. The governments definitely cannot be expected to support preservation of cultural heritage in the private domain. As such the responsibility lies in the society to engage more and more people in the process of preservation and protection. This dexterity through constant interaction and negotiation between the state and the centre has been brought into focus by the media. Yet, despite its obvious contributions towards the social, cultural and economic benefits to the society as a whole, the cultural heritage of such institutions are still at stake. They are increasingly threatened by destruction and degradation. Human

\textsuperscript{22} Samaguri Sattra has taken the initiative to preserve and protect the indigenous manuscripts and other important religious texts. The government funds have been utilized and also the community efforts to protect the traditional artefacts and the intangible forms of art are worth mentioning.

\textsuperscript{23} Information collected from the Secretary of the Asom Sattra Mahasabha, who is a resident of Nagaon and has been playing an active role in negotiation with the government of Assam in matters of preservation of the Sattras.
activities are mostly responsible behind the decay and loss of the cultural assets of the Sattras. Rapid urbanization, theft and vandalism, illegal immigration are such important factors affecting the growth of such institutions\textsuperscript{24}. Thus the development of the Sattras and the society can be interpreted through the notion of heritage which throws light on the problems and difficulties facing both. If properly utilized, the heritage of the Sattras provides an identity and a measure of stability and growth adopted for these institutions to sustain in times of rapid change and development. To understand this decree of concept, Williams (1982) mentions,

\textit{For tradition ("our cultural heritage") is self-evidently a process of deliberate continuity, yet any tradition can be shown, by analysis, to be a selection and reselection of those significant received and recovered elements of the past which represent not a necessary but a desired continuity (187).}

This discussion can be concluded with the fact that the cultural heritage of the Sattras in the study is at a crossroad. It is time to look to the future and make positive decisions for the generations to come. In due course of time the cultural heritage of these institutions tends to get threatened when neglected or allowed to deteriorate. The external influences like constant influx of migrants and their occupation of the indigenous landed property considered as a tangible resource of the Sattras also penetrates into the natural setting into which the cultural heritage is set. In this context the most affected ones are the indigenous people inhabiting the Sattra land. In true sense the heritage requires being dynamic, active and well performed so as to reveal its meaning and potency as both tangible and intangible objects rather than being inert and static. Moreover the heritage resources are a part of the dynamic eco system which requires community participation for long

\textsuperscript{24} Sri Paramananda Deva Mahanta, the Deputy Secretary of Batadrava \textit{Thān} Management Committee and present \textit{Sattradhikāra} of Salaguri Sattra has lamented on the fact that Bardowa alone houses a property of around one crore, but in recent times many of the important artefacts has been stolen. He added that the government must give protection to the remains, otherwise Bardowa would lose its importance as an important heritage site in coming years. This was stated in an interview conducted on 21.12.11 by a local television channel (Nagaon Talks) in Nagaon.
term survival and productivity. Thus the concept of heritage is one which serves many important purposes at present, be it political, social or economic or cultural and this is crucial to understanding the meaning of the term while approaching the heritage of a Sattra. The development of the Vaisnava community in general can be interpreted through cultural heritage which sheds light on the problems and difficulties being faced by the Sattras in particular. Cultural heritage is no longer confined to a group of experts, it is for all. Members from the community has major role to play both in the decision-making process and continuous care for longer term. It is done to ensure the preservation of the tangible and intangible aspects which forms the heritage of the Sattras in full richness of their authenticity. Therefore, if properly utilized, the cultural heritage including both tangible and intangible resources providing an identity and a measure of stability for the Sattras to grow and develop and in periods marked by mobility and rapid change. Thus the material cultural heritage of the Sattras always reflects and communicates the essential immaterial heritage too maintaining the religious and devotional traditions, customs and practices of congregations characterizing the Vaisnava faith.
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Figure: 30 - The dilapidated state of the nāmghar at Letugram Sattra.

Figure: 31 - Manuscripts preserved at Mādhatāri Sattra.
Figure: 32 – An old nāmghar and relic shrine at Samaguri Sattra.

Figure: 33 - Inside view of Brahmachārī Sattra.
Figure: 34 - The well used by Srimanta Śaṅkaradeva preserved at Bardowa.

Figure: 35 - A specimen of astrological calculation prepared by a Sattradhikāra.
Figure: 36 - Newly constructed Narowa Bálisatra *doul mandir* cum mini museum.

Figure: 37 - Sattra land utilized for cultivation by encroachers near Dámodaradeva Áta thān.
Figure: 38 – A type of drum (dobā) used in prayer-services at Narowa Bālisatra.

Figure: 39 – Scenes from different bhāonās in the premise of a nāmghar at Koliabor.
A case study on Bardowa Thān: The heritage site of Assam Vaisnavism.

The existence of a pilgrimage cum tourist center named Bardowa or Batadrava in the heart of the state of Assam would definitely give an insight into the cultural history of the place. Bardowa, being the place of birth of Śaṅkaradeva, also happens to be the sacred site from where the saint and preacher started the journey of the Bhakti Movement and thereby it marks the nucleus of a Sattra as an institution of popular participation. Born to the family of the Bara-Bhuyans25 who were believed to have migrated earlier from Kanauj in North India, the saint began preaching the Neo-Vaisnava faith from here with multiple activities. Located at an approximate distance of 18 kms north-west of the Nagaon town, Bardowa has gained reputation as a religious center over the years being Śaṅkaradeva’s birth-place as well as the foundational site of what transpired as a cultural resurgence. It came to be considered as thān meaning a sacred place. Unlike all other prominent Sattras and thāns in the state, Bardowa has definitely etched a name in the socio-cultural scenario of Assam. It was only because of the untiring efforts of this great soul that the Assamese culture got a distinct identity and form. Since then it grew into prominence as an important centre disseminating all socio-cultural and religious activities. It was in this place that the saint gave birth to a new religion in Assam which brought about a religious resurgence in the whole of the state.

25 In the book written by Nakul Chandra Bhuyan titled Bara Bhuyans there is a mention of the Bara-Bhuyans of Assam who ruled over certain principalities in middle Assam and were either the original inhabitants of the state or have migrated from other parts of this land during the early medieval period. They became the principal rulers on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. The Bhuyans came to Kamatapur and presumably were given the royal status of Zamindars (landlords) called Siromani Bhuyan by the king of Kamatapur. Śaṅkaradeva was the progeny of the Bhuyans. In another note Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa mentions that the Bara-Bhuyans were not the rulers appointed by a superior king but they assumed the title of Bhuyan because of their physical power.
Sankaradeva was born in the family of the Bhuyans in the year 1449 A.D. (1371 śaka) at Ālipukhuri near Bardowa or Batadrava in the district of Nagaon, Assam on the bank of the river Brahmaputra. There is however a sort of a controversy for long in respect to the location of his exact place of birth. Many scholars claim Patekibari a place about 8 miles (an approximate distance of about 12.8 km) to be his original birth-place while others have regarded Bardowa. During my period of field work, different notes and documents were made available to me, which had little evidence to claim Bardowa to be his actual place of birth. There are notable accounts relating to Bardowa to be the actual birth-place of the saint. In one of his own creative writings, the saint provides his own identity. An excerpt from the Rukmini-harana-kavya (verse. 527) by Sankaradeva goes like this:

\[
\text{bardowa nāme grāma} \quad \text{śasye matsye anupāma} \\
\text{laūhityara āti anukula}
\]

[Bardowa, the village situated near (on the bank of) the Laūhitya (Brahmaputra) was full of all kinds of agricultural products].

As the researcher has specified and limited its area of work to the Sattras of Nagaon, Bardowa than has been taken as a site for case study with a view to highlighting on the history of the institution enduring with its cultural legacy and the process of changes. It is important to analyze the facts underlying the changes and also determine the continual process of maintaining the tradition based on the model of the than.

Acknowledging the fact cropping out of the controversies related to the birth-place of the saint, Bardowa has a long history behind and the events that took place. As Kalita (1985, 2) states, it is a than, a seat of pilgrimage, for containing some relics of the past which are directly related to the birth and activities of Sankaradeva. However we find no significant difference between a
than and a Sattra. The ones initially established by the two saints, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva came to be known by the name than (sacred sites) while the later establishments came to be known as Sattras after their demise. The only difference is in the time of their establishments and association of memories of the saints. Except for the nomenclature, these two institutional set-ups display similarities in their ritual calendars, architectural features, apparatuses for functioning and stratas of individuals. The institution like the Sattra never took a formal shape in style and function during the period of the saints’ stay in Bardowa, it was him who only paved the way for setting up an institution catering to the socio-cultural life of the Assamese community. The Bardowa than is one such fine example among all the other prominent ones scattered in the state and became the first one to have been popularized by the saint himself. Śaṅkaradeva started preaching his new-found faith here and the seeds of Vaisnavism were sown more than five hundred years ago and gradually it took a permanent seat giving a niche to the Assamese identity.

The history of Bardowa presents very interesting features. As we trace back to its history, it has to be recognized as the first entity ever in the history of Vaisnavism in Assam. The saint set out on his first pilgrimage from this place at the age of thirty-two in 1481. Inspired by the philosophies of other contemporaries of his times, immediately after his return back from the pilgrimage for twelve years across whole of north India, he thought of bringing about a reform in the society. He set himself to the task of propagating the new faith of Vaisnavism (Sarma 1996, 16). During this period he made great contributions in the literary field. He composed several works, translations and adaptations, songs and lyrics, narratives and doctrinal treatises which are also celebrated as masterpieces of Assamese literature. But his stay in Bardowa did not continue for long because of growing political conflicts with the neighbouring tribes. In 1516 A.D., the saint along with the members of his clan had to evacuate the place due to the invincible attack of the Kacharis. After this retreat,
Śaṅkaradeva never came back to Bardowa in his lifetime. For as long as 140 years, the place where the saint first started a revival in the society, religion and culture remained stagnant. No developments took place during this period. As such after about hundred and thirty years later, Bardowa was re-discovered by the saint’s grand daughter-in-law Āi Kanakalatā, wife of Caturbhuj Thakur. It was at her initiative that Bardowa was rediscovered and renovated and it was possible during the reign of the Ahom ruler, Jayadhaj Simha (1654-1663). She greatly contributed towards radiating its refulgence by discovering and reclaiming Bardowa, the ancestral seat of Śaṅkaradeva (Sarma 1996, 129). Over the years it got divided between the two families who were descendants of Śaṅkaradeva, Rāmakanta and Anantarāya. During the reign of the Ahom king, Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811) the tussle between the two parties became more intense. At the command of the king, his able prime minister, Pumananda Burhagohain examined the whole issue and finally divided them in 1799 A.D. Each set up a distinct house-hold Sattra at Bardowa namely Narowa (known as barfāl) and Salaguri (known as sorufāl) which rose into prominence in later years. The kirtan-ghar built in its premises is an important component whilst the hatis or cloisters set up in four different directions serve the purpose of accommodating the residential bhakats. Added to the main premise of the thān in the year 1509 A.D. these hatis still accommodate a number of disciples as regular inhabitants and also devotees from across the state on special occasions. The kirtan-ghar was re-established to serve the purpose of both the parts only in the year 1958 A.D. after a gap of around 160 years of the division. However it has bonded the members of both the Sattras till date by way of their participation in the religious and cultural affairs. The members of both these Sattras have been managing the thān since the day of its establishment. In course of time, Bardowa became the nerve-centre of many activities in nurturing the faith, as mentioned in many of the later biographies and the Katha-Guru Carit. It was in this place that a spacious devagriha was constructed to hold regular prayers and religious discussions, creating
an atmosphere to propagate the faith at the nascent stage of the movement (Sarma 1996, 16). The manikūta, cāri-hati, guru-padaśila, doul-mandir built in the premises of the thān have made remarkable contributions to the Vaisnava heritage of Assam. Added to this is the granary built during the days of Śaṅkaradeva is also present till date.

The myrobalan (silikha in Assamese, scientific name- *terminalia cebula*) tree, under the shades of which the Guru wrote many of his important renditions and preached his faith is still alive within its enclosure. One interesting fact is that this tree is as old as the birth of the saint. This has now become an important heritage symbol. The celestial pond Akasi Ganga is another very interesting heritage resource of Bardowa with a natural landscape and scenic beauty. This was created by the saint after his return from the pilgrimage when people from the village were under the spell of a drought. It is interesting to note that this pond survives till date in Bardowa. The bank of the pond has been utilized now as a picnic spot attracting huge crowd every year but as an act of veneration to the Almighty fishing and boating in the pond is not allowed even today. This kind of gathering has given an ample scope for visitors to enhance the serene beauty of the place. Even the thān authorities have allowed these visitors to cook meals in its premise which culminates to a kind of community interaction.

The holy text *Bhāgavata* symbolizing God at the altar is placed in the *simhasana* of the manikūta. He set up the kirtan-ghar for the first time in Bardowa in 1468 A. D. In the subsequent years, he composed the verses of the *Kirtan-ghoṣa*, several episodes of Assamese rendering of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, so that people could get into the depth of the new religious order. Starting with all praise for the Lord Krisna, a major portion of this treatise on Vaisnavism was written in Bardowa. Inspired by the verses from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Bhāgavata Gita*, his new creed came to be known as the *Bhāgavata dharma* or *Ek saran nām dharma*, that is finding solace in only one supreme God. This came to
be popularly known as the *Mahapurusiya Dharma* as Śaṅkaradeva was believed as an incarnation of God in Assamese Vaisnavism.

At Bardowa itself, he started to manifest mostly through his literary creations and musical compositions, the practice of which has been continuing in many of the distinguishing Sattras of Assam today. He wrote verses in the form of musical compositions which were known as *bargīts* and other poetical verses. These are some of the finest compositions ever done in the history of Assamese genre of music and also make a prodigious contribution to the cultural life of the people of Assam. Bardowa thus became the nerve-centre of the new faith and in developing a socio-cultural norm in the whole of the state. Since then Bardowa has become a role model for whole of the Assamese Vaisnava tradition and the Sattras built in its proximity have grown into institutions maintaining an interactive relationship with Bardowa in practicing the faith. The serene atmosphere of the place still attracts thousands of devotees and has become an important pilgrimage as well as a recreational centre. Since the saint had spent the initial years of his life at Bardowa, so naturally this place has become famous by preserving certain relics related to him and his childhood. These relics form an important heritage resource. One of the important relics preserved in Bardowa is the foot impression of the saint cut on stones known as *guru-padasila* where homage is paid to the saint through regular offerings in the form of *naivedya*. Amongst the Vaisnavites of Assam this is of vital importance and symbolic for paying obeisance. This is considered to be a part of an invocation to the supreme deity in some Sattras. The well from which the saint used to take water for religious and personal uses, popularly known as *pāt-nād* (see fig. 34) is also preserved as an important relic in the premise. It is an attraction for the devotees.

The word *thān* has moreover attained a significance since it houses the saint’s foot impressions known as *guru-paduka*. It is still considered to be holy and pious. But this form of relic worship became more significant only after the
death of the two great apostles, Śāṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. The importance of these foot impressions has already been discussed in the third chapter. Thousands of devotees irrespective of caste, creed and religion throng in every year and include it in their itinerary to visit and bow down at the relic and pay rich tributes to the saint. Consequently, over the years it has gained a vital importance amongst the Assamese Vaisnava community as also attracting a huge non-Vaisnava crowd from across the country. A very conscious observation was made during one of my field visits to Bardowa, during the celebration of phālgutsava. Devotees from every nook and corner of the country come in to offer prayer to the deity and as part of the congregation they have stayed here for months and took part in the festival. This has not only popularized the faith but also paid rich veneration to the saint and his birth-place. Assimilation of people from different cultures and religious groups during this festive season and other significant occasions makes an important mark in the history of Vaisnavism in Assam today. Fairs are held during this time, local traditional goods are made for display and sold and this way an interaction with the community takes place. The death and birth anniversaries of the saint and his disciple, Mādhavadeva are celebrated with reverence and this way more and more people are attracted to this faith.

The Batadrava Thān Managing Committee known as Sri Sri Batadrava Thān Parichalona Samiti established in the year 1968 A.D. is an apex body which manages the thān to its credit. The democratically elected members mainly comprise a president, vice-president, general secretary, assistant secretary, treasurer and executive members. These members take utmost care in maintaining the day to day affairs conducted inside the premises of the thān. The members must be initiated into the faith before he takes up the responsibility of being the office-bearers of this committee. After about five hundred years of his birth at a place like Bardowa, the ideology of the saint and his identity as an iconic figure is still nurtured by the people who strictly follow Vaisnavism today. At the social level his works and ethos have been the exemplifiers of a radical change in the
society. This is only because of Bardowa, Batadrava or as been called Tembuwani that Nagaon has become one of the important locations of the state of Assam because of this heritage site. Its influence has been so immense that it spread to even the remotest parts of the district and also to other parts of the state. Even devotees from remotest villages visit the place at least once a year and consider it to be the ‘Dvitiya Baikuntha (second heaven) and an important pilgrimage center.

Recognized as one of the heritage sites by the government of Assam, Bardowa is no less significant in terms of its socio-cultural manifestations. It is still the abode of aficionados congregating for the faith. The two Sattras situated close to the thān have been functioning well under a systematic organization. The rituals, rites and festivals are performed and celebrated in a collaborative manner. One of the essential elements of daily rituals taking place in Bardowa is the ‘prasangas’ divided into fourteen units held at different intervals from morning till evening. This marks the uniqueness and systematization of the rituals. The rituals are accompanied by the beating of the khol-tāl in a rhythmic way, singing of the nām-ghoṣa, the kirtana and other scriptures, community prayer specially by women, mid-day prayers conducted by men, recitation of the bhatimā, gunamala and sastras. However in recent times there have been certain alterations in the performances due to constraints of time and space. Moreover most of the adherents are non-celibates; as such have not moved away from their regular duties and responsibilities. Apart from the regular conduct of religious services and discourses, they also perform certain cultural functions which are also an important feature. Among the festivals celebrated in Bardowa, the most prominent ones are the birth and death anniversary of the saint. Being the birth place of the saint it is celebrated for a day or two with day-long programmes. Nām-kirtan or congregational prayer is a part of the ritual programmes for the day and held in high esteem. To mark these occasions now, at several places around Bardowa sapling of trees are planted at the initiative of the government, the thān management committee and the local people. The death of the guru is also
commemorated every year with special prayers and recitals which conclude in a day. *Khol-prasanga* is a part of this religious ritual held on this particular day. Infact this is a part of the daily ritual activities in the Sattras along with the *thān*. *Doul-utsava* is another important festival celebrated during spring which attracts a huge crowd every year. Celebrated with great pomp and grandeur the festivity lasts for three days. *Ram dhemali* is a major attraction during this festival in Bardowa. Śaṅkaradeva was the first to have introduced this festival amongst the Assamese which bear great relevance today. The biographies of the saints, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva narrate that it was Śaṅkaradeva who celebrated the *doul utsava* or *holi* at Batadrava after his return from his pilgrimage to propagate the cult of Bhakti. And since then this has been continuing. Fairs are held to mark the occasion and the festival is celebrated with great pomp and show concentrating on all the rituals related to it. Apart from the local devotees there are many who gather here from different parts of the country and pays homage to the ideologies of the saint and his contributions to the Assamese community. *Ghoṣa-kirtan* also known as *ghura-nām* is especially performed on the last day of the month of *bhādra* (August-September), which is considered auspicious amongst the Vaisnavites of Assam. Participants belong to different age groups irrespective of castes. They move in circles singing hymns from the saints’ compositions accompanied by the beating of the *bar-dōbā*, *bhortāl*, *nagara* together. Moreover *gayan-bayan* also form an important part of all the programmes held on different occasions at different times in the premises of the *thān*.

Bardowa is no exception to the many folded cultural expressions in thoughts and performances through the popularization of *bargits*, *bhāonās* and *sattriya-nāc*. The saint wrote and enacted his first play, *Chihna-yātrā* or the ‘drama with illustrated paintings’ in the year 1468 A.D. in Bardowa. The enactments in such plays popularly known as *bhāonās* are another set of regularly conducted cultural event in the *thān*. The performers are trained by experts and
most often the members are from the Sattra itself. They are even artists who have performed in the state as well as the national level. In rarest of occasions, experienced people are hired to perform the act. Wood-carving is another form of art gaining popularity in Bardowa since long. It also preserves a considerable number of wooden crafts of the past. Apart from this it also houses many artefacts used during the days of the saint and his successors. A mini-museum has been set up at the premise of the than which is run by the Directorate of State Museums for the preservation of the long lost artefacts of the Sattras. It contains manuscripts written on the aguru (scientific name-aquilaria agallocha) barks, exquisite masks and dresses used in traditional dramas and various musical instruments dating back to the period of Śāṅkaradeva. This has been set up mainly for two purposes; it is the treasure-house of many indigenous artefacts and traditional items of use in the Satras in order to preserve its rich cultural heritage, secondly it has been attracting tourists all over the country every year²⁶ turning it into a hub of the Satriya culture. A research centre cum library with a sound archiving on Vaisnava literature and other related texts have been set up with a view to provide ample scope for further research and knowledge. Apart from having hātis for accommodating the disciples, rest houses have been built inside its premises for travelers from distant places. This has been a very recent development in the than. And as such there is a swarm of devotees from nearby places including visitors from all over the country. If the tourism industry develops in another couple of years it would definitely attract crowds from other parts of the world too. Though meagre, yet these contributions have enriched the place since then. Bardowa has been declared as one of the major tourist attractions in the state. Mostly during important occasions like the guru-tithi, janmāstami, doul-utsava, pāl nām devotees along with many tourists from other parts of the country visits this place. It is mostly during this period of the year that Bardowa sights a festive look. Apart from the Assamese Vaisnava there is an inflow of devotees from different parts of

²⁶ As commented by Sri Maniram Bhuyan (aged 45 years), an attendant in the than who has been actively connected with the Than Management Committee for the last 30 years.
the country and the world as well. Blending both the spiritual and cultural stances, it has been attracting a huge crowd every year and has been able to maintain its traditional variety till date. Even though major changes have occurred in recent times in the administration and management yet Bardowa has retained its popularity through its religious proceedings and its varied cultural expressions.

Integrating many tribal folks from different surrounding areas into the faith, Bardowa is a fine example in the creation of a socio-cultural cohesion in the state. So far as religious and cultural ethos is concerned, there is no such profanity observed amongst the folks. Even if there are some, they are not pronounced since they have been following the virtues of the gurus in their blood and soul. According to some informants within the premise of the two Sattras lying adjacent to the than, there are many adherents being converted into the faith mostly from the tribal society. And this has never been a problem. They are regular in the nāmghars and normally it is the always the women who have the majority participation. One observable fact is that here the participation of women is increasing day by day. It is not exactly the case noticeable in the Barpeta than in the district of Barpeta, Assam where since ages women are not allowed to enter the main nāmghars with certain taboos and restrictions. Bardowa is at an elevated position. The Bardowa than management committee is up-to-date about the system prevalent in the than and have been trying their level best to maintain a status quo with other religious forms that are growing at an alarming rate in the whole of the state. The head of both the Sattras- Narowa and Salaguri are also actively participating in all the activities and rituals with devotion. Apart from holding the performances in the form of daily rituals and ceremonial functions, the members are also keen on preserving the cultural heritage in the museum which has been an important contribution to the Assamese Vaisnavas. This has indirectly contributed a lot to the economy as well. It has geared up the process of eco-tourism as well as heritage management in recent times for the larger benefit of the masses.
The tangible and intangible heritage of the place demands necessary preservation and maintenance. The premise of the than can be utilized as training grounds for craftsmanship, artistic performances etc. thereby enhancing community presence. It can convert into beacons of cultural and environmental sustainability by providing scope for social interactions, engaging the youth for services, and recreational activities for moderating eco-tourism in the region. It can be mentioned that the Bardowa than has been able to bind the members of the Vaisnava community together and has retained a great deal of the Mahapurusiyā tradition. Especially in respect of the daily and occasional rituals, the than has been continuing the process. Conditioned as an important heritage center it has to maximize the utilization of its available resources. This can also largely contribute to the communication process by involving in socio-cultural matters and promote cooperation at all levels in order to guarantee sustained survival and prosperity for the whole of the Vaisnava community scattered in Nagaon. As such Bardowa than along with its Sattras should exemplify the richness and glory of the Vaisnava tradition in Assam in general and act as an ideal institution for the general mass in particular. To a considerable extent it has bind the people of different communities and castes coming from near and distant lands, thereby maintaining the traditional facets and the legacy left by the scholarly saint during those times.

Acknowledged as being one of the most celebrated institutions in the whole of the Sattriya culture in Assam, Bardowa has been continuing with the promotion of the cultural values of the Vaisnavite tradition till today. There have been changes but the continuum is maintained to a great extent. It has been still been generating the religious ethos amongst the Vaisnava as well as the non-Vaisnava of Assam. According to the informations collected from many of the informants residing within the premises of the than or elsewhere, it has undergone changes. As an institution of repute Bardowa, certain phenomenal changes have
taken place in the public as well as private life of an individual in and around the than complex and beyond.

Change is evident. But it requires the cumulative efforts of the individuals as members of the society to bring about a transformation. The Vaisnava philosophy of the great saint has not been diminished from this place and present day evidences claim that tradition alone cannot survive a culture. The Bardowa than along with its two Satras at a closer radius has been till date able to popularize the faith amongst the masses vis-à-vis maintaining the age-old tradition approving the religious sentiments and ethos of the individuals basically. Irrespective of all major changes in recent times, it has been able to contribute a lot to the Assamese society in general and the advocates of Vaisnava philosophy in the district in particular. But one vital issue concerning the present situation of Bardowa is that of the illegal occupation of lands by the migrant population which is growing at an alarming rate especially those originally belonged to the Sattras. The problem of land encroachment, included in the discussion in the previous chapter on economy, is to a large extent diminishing the heritage of this living tradition. An investigative report by the Northeast Policy institute (NPI), 2012 has brought to light the fact that near about 283 bighās of land has been encroached in Bardowa alone so far for the purpose of either settlements or cultivation of seasonal crops. Governmental measures and local initiatives should be such that it benefits the entire community. Apart from illegal occupation of the lands in and around the than, they have also indulged in heinous crimes such as thefts and loot of Sattra’s indigenous properties, thereby affecting its economic prosperity. The pristine atmosphere of the place is undoubtedly been engulfed by both internal and external forces of illegal migrations and encroachment of lands possessed by the local inhabitants, the crave for power and status amongst the members of the than management committee, lack of awareness to preserve and maintain the indigenous heritage etc. Since all these have become a persistent reality for the
original settlers, it is essential to create an environment where tradition goes hand in hand with development.

In spite of all these developments, Bardowa than has much more to add to its glory. With changing times and development in all segments of the society, Bardowa has also come under the grasp of constant change and development. According to the statement made by an informant27, “the socio-religious and cultural attributes have slightly lost its value. The restraint is from the younger generation as they are not willing to participate in the interactions and performances as well. A less participation is also noticed from the women folks. If this continues Bardowa will lose its glory in times to come.”

In view of the theme of the thesis, Bardowa than taken as a case study has helped to establish that the changes taking place in recent times is seen exhibited in certain important areas. These include the leadership of the head of both the adjoining Satras, a rationalist and democratic approach to the direction of the ongoing changes, an expression of freedom and responsibility among the members of the laity and a network of many of these similar institutions that sustain and propagate the ideals of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement and hold the community together. In present times, the than is posed to have captured the great diversity in the socio-cultural and religious paraphernalia in Šaṅkardeva’s Ek saran nāma dharma.

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27 Narayan Muktiyar, aged about ninety said this in an interview conducted on 11.03.10 during one of the field visits. He is a staunch follower of Vaisnavism with a very liberal and broad outlook. He once served as the treasurer of the than.
REFERENCES


Figure: 40— The newly constructed *doul mandir* at Bardowa.

Figure: 41 - Inside view of *maṇikūta* at Bardowa *thān*.
Figure: 42 - Congregation during the *doul-utsava* from all over the country.

Figure: 43 – The main *nämghar/kirtan-ghar* in Bardowa.
Figure: 44 - Entrance to the main nāmghar.

Figure: 45 - Akasi Ganga, the celestial pond in the premise of Bardowa Thān.