3.1 Introduction

*Satra, Thān or Namghar* are the institutions, basically conceptualized and established categorically for the religious purpose. These institutions sprouted and flourished under the sacred ideology of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva. Considering the wider canvas of *Satras* all over the Assam, the institutions played a significant and vital role to paint the religious and cultural panorama of the Assam and North East since the sixteenth century. It has been an assiduous zeal, to mould and alleviate the Assamese society for the last five hundred years which rigorously administering the spiritual and cultural urge of the people. Sankardeva, according to the earlier chronicles of Assam (*Buranji*) established his first *Satra* at Bardowa, in his birth place, and then at the different centres of Assam as he had to travel from one place to another. Gradually over the centuries, *Satras* has become the integral essence of the Assamese life and culture and unified the society from west (Koch Behar) to East (Majuli) of the land. (*Kakati: 1959*)

Derivation of the term ‘*Satra*’, as per the majority of opinions expectantly perceived from the Vedic scriptures *Satapatha Brahmana* and *Naimisa-Ksetra* in the sense of a revered sacrifice; it can be traced abundantly in the *Bhagawata-purana* also. Some other authorities used the word in the sense of gathering or assembly where the gathering observes religious induction in presence of guru and the devotees, at a glance it looks similar to the Vaisnavite institutions of Puri (Orissa), but it would not be wise to delineate the exactly similar and confined meanings for the Vaisnavite *Satras* of Assam (Goswami:1946), as they have been cloistered religious, social, cultural, educational and moral progression and effected the every aspect of Assamese life and society therefore the term
acquired a significant meaning in Assam. Maheshwar Neog compared it with Shankaracharya’s residential institutions called ‘Math’ and Buddhist viharas where monks reside, learns, and pray but he asserts Satras in broader terms.

The Satras in Assam are a unique type of multidimensional socio-religious and cultural institutions, a place, where Guru stays with devotees and preaches through congregational prayer, religious discourses, sacred cultural manners, art and literature. Indeed it’s an institutionalization of socio-religious amity with a sacred ideology of Neo-Vaisnavism. (Neog: 1980)

\[
Yatacaranti sad dharman kevala bhagwat –priyah \quad \text{Navadha bhagvad bhakti ptryaham yatra vartate}
\]

\[
Tat sattram uttamah kshetram vaisnavah sura vanditam
Tatrastha vaisnvah sarve harinam parayanah
\]

“That supreme place adored by god and Vaisnava monks, where ardent devotees perform duties pleasing to god and where nine –fold Bhakti daily prevail., such sacred place vaisnavas resides there, are naturally prone to Harinama”

(Sarma, 2012)

The Satra institutions of Assam are basically an outcome of Neo-Vaisnavite ideology of Sankardeva. But the present system of the Satra Intuitions probably was not accurately conceptualized, initially by the Sankardeva at that time as he simply initiated with some congregational assemblies where the devotees gathered often under the shade of trees aiming to religious discourses and to propagate Vaisnavism. Later when he started preaching in Belaguri dhuwahat at Majuli, then gradually it took a form of a Satra including congregational prayer hall though residency of the preacher and the monks incorporated further by the time of Madhavadeva and Damodardeva, after the demise of Sankardeva, (Goswami: 1946) Madhavadeva conceded all the
activities and cultural notions initiated by the Sankardeva. But very soon in the
tenure of Madhavadeva only, Damodardeva initiated his own sect by recanting
the leadership of Madhavadeva, as Damaodardeva was also one of the senior
and prominent followers of Sankardeva and expected to become the head
preacher after the Sankardeva. As per kathaguru-Carita (Biography of both the
proselytizers) by Daityari Thakur, when Damodardeva didn’t became the
successor of the sect he couldn’t found himself in a comfortable position to
regard and continue with Madhavadeva and the other associates and from here
the sub-sects or schisms came into prevalence in the main sect. (Nath: 2009)

The situation became more frenzied when Madhavadeva passed away
and just before his demise, disciples came to his death bed and requested him to
decide someone as a forthcoming successor but he didn’t authorized anybody
and replied “I have thought deeply for long but I didn’t found anyone eligible to be
the next Guru, I have transmitted my soul in the form of knowledge and wisdom
into my ‘Namghosa’, so whatever may be required to you and the devotees, will
find here if they truly search”. Consequently only two Mahapurusas or guru
(supreme preacher/personalities) has been considered in the neo-Vaisnavite
tradition of Assam. However this decision of Madhavadeva has created the
internal divisiveness among the chief followers, Gopal Ata and Mathura das Ata
were the major disciples of the Madhavadeva and both aspired to be the
successor of Madhavadeva, whereas Purusottama Thakur being the grandson of
Sankardeva claimed to be the real successor. (Neog: 1965)

Though Narayan Thakur, companion of Madhavadeva was the next
senior devotee to him but he was not in a situation to bear the responsibility
being too old. Therefore three other seniors’ namely Gopal Ata, Pusottama
Thakur, and Mathuradas Ata respectively made another three sub-sects from the
mainstream with their group of disciples besides the sub sect of Damodardeva.
Though slight difference can be traced in some of the practices, but the
fundamental ontology and the objectives remain same in all the sub-sects. The
sub-sect laid by Damodardeva and Harideva called Brahma Samhati, Gopal ata
and Pursottama Thakur founded respectively kala and Purusa Samhati and
Mathura das Ata and Padma Ata made Nika Samhati, hereafter these sub-sects, were popularly came to be known as ‘Samhati of Samprada’ means association or organisation.

There are the different explanations of the terms Brahma, Kala, Purusa and Nika however, Brhma samhati is derived on the name of Brahma, the creator deity as per Hindu mythology, Purusa Samhati termed on the name of his founder Purusottama Thakur, kala samhati as considered got this name from kalajhar, a place where Gopal Ata preached and stayed for most of the years of his life till death and in Nika samhati, where Nika means pure and virtuous, this samhiti probably formed properly after the other ones as the situation of declination and mayhem might be observed by the disciples in above three samhatis therefore the name Nika was given to this samhati which shows the pure and absolute form of the Madhavadeva sect. (Sarma: 1966)

All the samhatis flourished as per the expectation parallel to time and established hundreds of Satras in all over the Brahmaputra valley under their flagship by propagating the agenda of neo-Vaisnavism. Moreover it is believed that more than half of the population, under this period of activation has been positively converted into Vaisnavism in this wave. More than hundred of Satras were affiliated to the Bahma Samhati of Damodardeva and have maximum number of disciples compare to the other samhatis, patbausi is the most celebrated Satra of this samhati at western Assam established by Damodardeva himself. The most influential Satras of the eastern Assam, situated in Majuli are Auniati Satra, Dakhinpat Satra, Garamur Satra, and Kurwabahi Satra popularly known as ‘Cari-Satras’ among these first three are the monastic Satras. Further Purasa samhati is divided into three groups and around one hundred Satras associated with it, main Satras are Kurcung, Catamiya, Bargaon, and Bardowa Kowamara etc. Satras of Kala Samhati are mainly located in Eastern and central Assam and the main Satras are Gajala, Ahataguri, and Bahbari popular as Dihing besides many other Satras. Similarly Nika Samhati is also associated with several Satras of Western and Eastern Assam, most prestigious Satras of Nika samhati are Barpeta Satra in western Assam established by Madhavadeva.
himself, and *Kamalabari Satra* located at Majuli in eastern Assam. (Goswami: 1946)

3.2 Structural Plan of the *Satra*

A Vaisnavite *Satra* of Assam generally constructed inside a square enclosure wall, varies according to its capacity and area with four openings or gateways called *karapat* derived from Sanskrit word *kapata* (doors), generally containing four rows of huts or four long dwellings, each divided into a number of rooms at the sides. The structure situated in centre of the site, always a temple or complex of a shrine called the *manikut* (shrine) and *bhaj-ghar* (prayer hall) or *Namghar* (prayer hall). But initially, since early times to the eighteenth century no such structural plan was formulated to built a *Satra*, even the concrete building materials like stone and bricks were also not been utilized to make a permanent site, and generally made by the bamboo armatures covered with thatch, wood and other provisional materials. Consequently these structures were supposed to re-build time to time according to requirements. (Dalton: 1851)

In some cases another term ‘*Thān*’ is popular colloquial to *Satra*, were basically regarded as the residences where the two Gurus (Sankardeva and Madhavadeva) stayed and preached. *Thān* probably derived from Sanskrit word *Sthāna* (situate). There is a difference of slight nomenclature between *Satra* and *Thān*. In the post-Sankardeva period, the holy places particularly where some saints passed their life came to be known as *Thān*. In some of the cases a prayer-hall built later on such places and these were popularized as *thā-ghar* (*sthana-grha*) or situate home. The places where Sankaradeva stayed - even for short period - are also called *Thān*, for instance *Bardowa Thān, Belaguri Thān, Barpeta Thān*, etc. In early Assamese chronicles also Bardowa is referred as a *Thān*, certain biographers however used the term *Satra* synonymously for *Thān*. *Bardowa* or *Batradrava* is the first *Satra* of Assam established in 1468 AD. It was facilitated with a big hall for community prayer, which was called *Kirtanghar* or *Namghar*. Another component *hati* or residential quarters for the devotees was added later in 1509 A.D. and there were four units of *hati* in the four directions.
Later on the components like Manikut, Karapat etc. were added in the premises Thān or Satra. These components were not basically visualized at the time of Srimanta Sankardeva; consequently the institution has undergone some minor transformation over the time. But undoubtedly Sankardeva himself made to construct a prayer hall and organized the congregational prayers here, and conducted parleys on the religious matters in his times. The concept of this particular institution which might have been taken from the Bhagawata, over the centuries have multiplied into some hundreds in all over the state simultaneously struggled with the inadequacies of social and political resistance, natural calamities and others. Now a completed established Satra comprises the different components like Namghar, Manikut, Hati, Bharal, and Batcora, (Goswami: 1946)

Namghar, Kirtan-ghar or the prayer hall is the primary structure and centre of the main activities of the whole Satra premises, it is a spacious open structure sometime covered by thatch walls. The ridged roof of the complex is supported by the massive wooden pillars and the endpoints of the structure generally located on the east and west directions varying in size according to the number of disciple (plate-3.01). Mainly the scheduled and routine prayers have been observed in the hall including the addresses and religious discourses among the disciples and orator. (Rajguru: 1988) Namghars are also utilized as the assembly halls to conduct the seminars and to discuss all the matters related to the Satra and to celebrate festivals and occasions, it plays active roll both as the seat of religious erudition and to cultivate Satriya culture as well. The sisyas (pupils), and bhakats (monks), have been nurtured here under the guardianship of the Satradhikar, who was responsible for their temporal and spiritual welfare and all around progress (plate-3.02). The monks received education not only from the Vaisnavite texts but also from the Vedic and Puranic scriptures, Besides the Satradhikar, other senior monks and functionaries of the Satra, namely the Bhagavati and Pathak, also imparted knowledge to the monks through discussions and occasional debates. Subsequently to decorate the interior of the
*Namghar* various objects of painting and carving were incorporated with floral and figurative designs on the wall (plate-3.03). The wooden pillars were drew by *Khari-mati* (chalk) and earthen colours, wood-carvings were rendered to represent the pranks and narrations of lord Krishna’s life, full-size sculpture of *Garuda* (plate-3.04,3.05), *Makara*, as well as other floral and creature forms were placed inside and outside the hall (plate-3.06) and the sculptures of two heavenly gate keepers namely *Jaya* and *Vijaya* were the prominent and interesting feature of the main gateway, walls of the *Namghars* were interestingly painted with the visuals based upon the narrations of epics and *puranic* lore. (Neog:1965)

The decorated hall creates a vibrant and glorious environment thus it is also known as *rangiyal ghar* or *rangiti ghar*. Noticeably there is no provision of offerings and rituals akin to *sakta* temple (plate-3.07) which can disturb the pious environment and cleanliness of the hall, every nook and corner of the hall being kept in serious care in terms of graciousness and purity by each and every devotee of the *Satra*.

*Manikuta* by word, means a house of jewels, basically is an original shrine, an extended small chamber of the *Namghar* situated adjoining to the eastern end of the *Namghar* one can reach strait towards the *Manikuta* through the entrance of *Namghar* hall including other options from the sides (plate-3.08), where the Idol of Vaisnava image or the Holy Scriptures are enshrined (plate-3.09,3.10), on the Asana or divine seat, are mainly three types ‘*Simhasana*’ (loin motif seat), Guru-asana (seat of the Mentor Sankardeva or Madhavadeva), Mahapurusa asana (recognize as a seat of the supreme guru). *Asanas* are the obligatory attribute of *Namghar* and significantly represents the reverential lord as well as the Guru in the form of the divine works of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva respectively *Kirtan-ghosa* or *Bhagawat-Adi ‘X’* and *Nam-ghosa* or *Bhakti-Ratnawali* respectively based on *Bhagawata Purana*. As stated in the *Bhagawata Purana* when Lord Krishna has to leave the form of being, thy for the sake of his seeking devotees, induced himself in the form of energy or absolute Knowledge into the *Bhagawata Purana* thus the *Bhagawata Purana* is
acknowledged as the image of the Lord Krishna, and came into the worship as thy himself. (Roychoudhury: 1936) These decorated wooden seats structurally made on three, five or seven tiers and each layer are supported by four wooden hinge models also known as ‘Thapana’(an establish unit) and on the top of the simhasana there is a fixed decorated hanging shade with five girdles persists on the centre. Manikuta always faces the entrance of Namghar and the Simhasana is visible almost from all the sides of the hall, separated by the decorated wooden or now a day’s mettle railings and also consist it own doors decorated by religious and floral motifs. (Sarma: 1966)

As Manikuta is the most sacred place of the entire premises and considered as the situate of God himself, hence all the precious items like jewels, costumes and ornaments of idol, rare and holy manuscripts, historical icons, antiques and mementos of royal offering are preserved here including Daba(drum), Kah(bell), Tau (a brass Utensil), Horai (beetle nut tray) and other valuables especially in some of the ancient Satras the relics of the early reformers are also preserved mainly ‘Pada-sila’ (foot impression stone or wooden plank) it is an holy wood plank containing the foot impressions or foot wears of the early saints(plate-3.11,3.12). Often an another small room Called Cho-Ghar (preparatory room) is also situated on one side of the Namghar which is basically works as a dressing or preparatory room for the various occasional and festive performances like Bhaona, ankiya-nat, Oja-pali and Satriya dances of the Satra and all the related accessories are preserved in this room mainly Masks, costumes and Ornaments.

Hati the word supposed to be derived from Sanskrit word Hatta means gathering referred to the rows of huts or the dwellings (plate-3.13, 3.14)for the resident celibate devotees and sisyas (pupils) who fully devoted themselves in the scheduled life of Satra (plate-3.15, 3.16). Every hati contains numerous huts made by sectioning the row of hati, each devotee allotted by a hut consisting one or more rooms accordingly. Hatis are usually established in monastic Satras by
creating a quadrangle or square which covers the *Namghar* by all the sides, these four rows *hatis* are collectively called ‘Cari-Hati’ (four-Hati).

**Bharal or Bhandar** is generally the store house of the *Satra* and used to preserve food stuff and other necessary items as the resident monks has to lead their life inside the *Satra* including the guests as it was not in tradition for the visitors to bring their own food, the arrangement of food and other routine necessities were provided from the *Bharal* it plays more significant role at the time of flood and natural calamity not only for the residents but equally for the needy ones of the village.

**Batcora** is a small ridged roof hut or a shade situated on the entrance gate of the *Namghar* known (plate-3.17) as *Karapat* also, it can be said an extension of entrance door of the *Satra*, utilized as the gate house and all the guests received here by the dignitaries of *Satra*, it represents the stylistic features (plate-3.18) of wood-carvings, paintings, and sculptures of *jaya* and *vijaya* ‘Duar-pal’ or the divine gate keepers. (Neog: 1965)

### 3.3 Categories and Dignitaries of the *Satra*

The whole *Satra* system can be divided mainly into four categories as per their nature and proceedings, some of the *Satras* those who follow the celibacy and purely asceticism in nature. Here the *Satraadhikara* and all the devotees leads there life as celibate called *kevala*, *kevalin* or alone who remains unmarried for whole life, detested the whole worldly things or illusions and who dedicated his life to achieve the consciousness of soul and desires final deliverance (*Moksa*). Though Sankardeva founder Saint of neo-Vaisnavism was married but his successor Madhavadeva spent his whole life as a celibate and devoted himself solely in *Bhakti* (devotion) or religious contemplation and this probably influenced and organized the asceticism in this category and persuaded this ideology to the forthcoming Vaisnavas.
In the second category the *Satradhikara* and *deka Adhikar* (associate *Satradhikara*) only follows the celibacy but other devotee can lead their household life with their families. Third category consist the *Adhikar* and all the devotees who lead their household and family life as well altogether, in the fourth category the *Satradhikar* and his associate *Dekadhikar* are married but the devotee can be married and celibate both as well, where celibates generally resides in the premises of *Satra*. Consequently the first category is top on the development order of *Satra* system as full-fledged *Satra* set up with *cari-hati* dwellings of the monks, *Namghar*, and all other units can be found largely in strictly followed monastic nature *Satra*. (Nath: 2009)

**Dignitaries of the Satra**

*Satradhikara* literally means *adhikari* (prime authority) of the *Satra* also known as *Adhikars, Satriyas* (superiors) and *Medhis* and referred as the *Mahanta* (great one) or *Gosai* (head preacher), are the solely responsible for smooth management and function the *Satra* and appoints functionaries to hold the various departments among the present devotees of the *Satra*. *Satradhikar* is the religious head, preceptor and spiritual guide of all the devotees of *Satra*, though Sankardeva in his times and still regarded as the prime Guru of the whole Vaisnava order but after his demise Madhavadeva continued as the successor, according to the *Kathaguru-Carita* (biography of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva) both the Masters mentioned as *Dujana* guru ‘the two Masters’, Ata and *Chota Ata* (father and Junior father). Since Madhavadeva, has not authorized anybody as his successor after both of the formers, so nobody has regarded as the similar authority identical to them in the order. However, Later on Damodardeva initiated his own sub sect and with the flow of time many pontiffs started the various *Satras* and considered as the head or referred as the term of *Satradhikara*.

*Bhagvati or Bhagati* is the reader and communicator of the *Bhagawata-Purana*, as *Bhagawata-purana* is the fundamental authoritative of Sankardeva’s Vaisnavism therefore it is made necessary to recite the original form of *Bhagawata-Purana* regularly in the *Satra*. According to the Daityyari the two
Brahmins Ratnakar Kandali and Vyasakalai used to recite the Bhagawata-Gita in the early times of Sankardeva at Dhuwahat, since then it became the tradition and responsibility of the Bhagwati to recite the original scripture in routine, in the Satra.

Pathak means reader, is associated basically to recite the renderings of the Bhagwata-purana poetics works and the congregational prayers like Baktiratnawali, Kirtan-ghosa, Nam-gosa wrote by the Masters. Pathak has to recite all these works according to the routine of the Satra and on the other occasions in presence of the Bhakats and the audience.

Sravani derived from Sanskrit word (sravana means listening) are the constant and some time permanently engaged listeners of the Bhagwati. Pathak, Sravani may be one or more and they have to listen what Bhagwati and Pathak were reciting in the presence of devotees and other listeners.

Gayana –Bayana made from two different words of Sanskrit Gayana associated to Singing and Bayana made from Vadana means Playing musical instruments. Therefore the words associated with the singing and playing musical choir of the Satra. The role of Gayana and Bayana are very spectacular in every Satra they have to perform not only in the routine prayers and programmes but also in all the occasions and festivals observed by the Satra community, in a general choir party there are number of drummers, Cymbal players (metal-plates), singers, pipers and sometime other instrumentalists. The choir keeps a copy of the Bhagwata and other Manuscripts in their liability and performs prose and narrations from them, and creates a pious and sacred environment in Satra through their often performances.

Natuwa and Sutradharas are the dancers and actors, associated to the Satra; they only perform sacred and religious dances and Acts like oja-pali, Ankiya-nat, Bhaona etc. Sutradhara is the senior or chief among the group and plays an important role as a director and anchor in the different plays and dances.

Pujari or Deuri are the priests who performs puja (prayers) and rituals to the Idol in the Manikuta, and distributes the Prasada (sacred food) among the
devotees some time there may be more than one pujaris in the Satra and chief of among them is called Bar-Pujari (senior priest).

**Bharali** is the in charge of (Bharal) storehouse of the Satra, including all the stored and preserved items in the store like food items, writing materials, paintings materials, furniture, belongings, utensils, cloths, musical instruments, and the offerings received by the Satra time to time from the royal court and other sources.

**Likhak** are the copiers and preservers of the manuscripts as number of the copies of Holy Scriptures were required by the devotees and disciples of the Satra, accordingly likhaks take care of all such requirements and preserves and make copies of the old and rare manuscripts.

**Khanikar** There is a special class of artists among the devotees in the Satra known as khanikar. They make illustrations or miniature paintings for the manuscripts, are equally experts in wood-Carvings and makes idols of wood as well and responsible for painting and adorning the Satra premises besides these Khanikar also produce masks to be used in theatrical performances like Bhaona. Contribution of Khanikars is remarkable in the visual culture and in development of Satriya art of painting and wood carving.

**Majumdar** is basically the accountant and registrar of the Satra also issue orders to working groups of the bhakats (devotees) and if some time needed communicates with other Satras and court by sending and replying letters.

**Paldhariya and Dvari** are respectively Watchmen and gatekeepers of the Satra and responsible for the safety and security of the different units of the Satra. (Neog: 1965)

### 3.4 Study of the Important Satras of Majuli

The island Majuli came into the prominence after the fifteenth century due to the Vaisnavite preachers and practitioners who stayed and established Satras here, primarily after the holy arrival of Srimanta Sankardeva the pioneering Vaisnavite reformer and Saint, Majuli flourished in significant way. He rooted Vaisnavism in the land of Majuli through establishing the first Vaisnavite Satra at
'Belaguri Dhuwahat' in West Majuli, which turned into a place of grandeur for the historic and auspicious, ‘Manikanchan Sanjog’ (accumulation between Sankardeva and Madhavadeva), as Sankardeva accumulated with his foremost Disciple and Associate Madhavadeva here and together propelled the new simpler form of Vaisnavism and started the socio-religious and cultural reformation of the place and then large number of monastic Institutions and Satras has been developed in Majuli, it is considered that around sixty five of Satras were activated in the Majuli before the massive earthquake of 1950, but now they are only left around the eight or ten compare to the former ones nevertheless they are still holding the flag of the live culture of Assam and satisfying the religious and cultural urge of the society, though surviving in catastrophe of erosion and other non feasibilities. The major existing Satras of Majuli are Auniati Satra, Garamur Satra Dakhinpat Satra, Kamalabari Satra, Samaguri Satra and Bengenati Satra.

3.4.1 Auniati Satra: The Grand and prestigious Satra of Majuli was established in the year of 1653-54 A.D, Niranjan deva became the first Satradhikar, who earlier was the Bhagwati of the Kuruwabai Satra. The name Auni-ati came into the persistence from two words Auni means (a species of betel vine) whereas ati means plenty, the abundant land. Consequently Aunitati is the profuse land full of Auni Pan of Majuli, where the Satra has been established (plate-3.19). There is an remarkable historical background of the Satra which shows the significant connections with the Ahom royal court, as per the present reliable sources of the Assam chronicles King Jayadhwaj singha who came to the throne in 1648 A.D has became attracted towards Vaisnavism of Sankardeva as some astrologers of his court suggested him to recompense, while the state struggling with the impacts of natural calamity and misfortune due to some past transgressions by his ancestors of the state, as Misradeva Satradhikar of Kuruwabahi Satra died under the prison of the state. However, under the feeling of expiation king decided to favor Vaisnavism by donating a grand monastery including all the grants to Misradeva’s son and to become disciple and a heartfelt follower of
Vaisnavism, on the other side when Misradeva’s widowed wife was informed about the interest of the king, she refused to send her minor son to the king under the fear, as her husband was died earlier in the court’s custody likewise son may also face the same, subsequently Niranjandeva Bhagwati of the Kuruwabahi Satra sent to the royal court and the king, assuming him as the son of Misradeva, became his disciple and donated him a splendid monastery that is Auniati Satra of Majuli. The Auniati Satra attained the prominent place amongst the various Satras of Assam distinctly for the Ahom royalty and received around 81,650 bighas (one bigha is equal to about 14,400 sq.ft.) of land from the royal court in two different categories of Devotra and Brahmotra to be maintained and utilized by the Satra.

The Manikuta, temple of the Satra is enshrined with the Idol of Lord Krishna synonymously Govinda which had been received from the sacred place of Jagannatha (Puri) at Orissa and personified here with all the religious and Vedic rituals of the Satra, including some other indigenous idols of Lord Krishna. The Satra accommodates around 325 numbers of celibate resident disciples of different age group including the Satradhikar, and Deka-Satradhikar. The routine religious activities of the Auniati Satra are observed as Shravana, Bhajana, Nam-Prasanga (listening and congregation), religious ceremonies and related devotional performances dedicated to Lord Krishna. The Satra has been an active centre of Vaisnavism and Satriya culture of the Assam (plate-3.20). In spite of regular sacred performances and rituals, Satra conserves numerous of cultural and literary delicacies including biographical works of the Vaisnavite Saints, concertos of ‘Satriya songs and dances’, Bhaona performances and other religious and cultural festivals like Paal-nam, Raas-leela, Janmastami, Dual-Jatra (Holi), Dewali, Bohag-Bihu, Kati-Bihu (Assamese New Year), etc. Birth and death anniversaries of the Vaisnavite Gurus are also observed ritually. Auniati Satra is country wide famous for celebrating the Pal-nam festival mainly and its Satriya dance and theatrical performances like Natuanac, Apsara-nac, Oja-Pali, Jhumura, Krishana Gopi Nritya, Sali-Nac, Sutradhar-
Nac, Baona and Ankiya-Nat are based upon the classical Sanskrit scriptures of Bhagwata-Purana, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagwata-Gita. Presently Dr. Sri Pitamabardeva Goswami is serving the sacred seat of the Satradhikar of Auniati Satra, under his guidance the disciples and Satra is rising and earning the name and fame in all over the country and abroad, Simultaneously Satra is positively collaborating in the upbringing of society and culture of Majuli. (Nath: 2009)

3.4.2 Garamur Satra: Garamur Satra of Majuli was established in the year of 1657-58 by the king Jayadhwaj singha after the establishment of Auniati Satra, according to the chronicles as Jayadhwaj singha donated the Auniati Satra to Niranjandeva to amend the curse by assuming that Niranjandeva is the son of Misradeva who was Satradhikar of Kuruwabahi Satra, but over the years king came to know the fact that Niranjandeva was the Bhagwati of the Kurwabahi Satra is not the actual descendant of the pontiff therefore he thought to beneficiate the actual person and established a new Satra near by the Auniati and donated all the grants and wealth including the idol of the Lord Krishna. Moreover as per the another opinion it is considered that Laksminarayandeva, a family descendent of the Vamsigopaladeva was the founder of the Garmura Satra of Majuli, it is also having a branch called Saru Satra (small or junior Satra) situated adjacent to the main Satra (plate-3.21). (Nath: 2012) Garmura Satra is celebrated for Satriya dance and music form of Assamese Classical dance and music as well as the art and culture which all the devotees and disciples of the Satra learns from the senior artisans of the Satra under the guidance of Satradhikar including all the religious and Vaisnavite teachings, and performs time to time as per the regular and occasional schedule of the Satra of Bhaona and Raslila with the other Vaisnavite festivals and functions. The idol of the deity personified in the Manikut represents the image of flute playing Lord Krishna regarded as Vamsigopala there are two other idols of Achyutananda image with four hands made of black stone is placed on the left side of the Vamsigopala image; on the right side, idol of Mohanmurari is placed which is an image of deity
Vishnu made from brass. Schedule of the Satra mainly divided into two branches one is Nitya or daily customs and second is Naimittika or occasional and annual customs. Daily customs of the Satras includes fourteen prayers called ‘Chaiddha Prasnga’ it persists the different sets of prayers performed four times in a day since morning to evening, first prayer of the Satra starts by early morning is called puar prasanga. After this next prayer includes the reading of Bhagwata, therefore next session is called Dupariya Prasang before noon prayer observed by the disciples by performing the congregational prayer from Kirtan-ghosha of Sankardeva, then next session of prayer starts by afternoon which is called Nam prasanga performed by reading of Sanskrit Bhagwata with musical instruments, evening prayer is called Gadhulir prasanga performed with playing drums called Daba (big drums) and the last prayer is called Palnam. This schedule of the prayers is almost same in all Satras with minor changes. (Nath: 2012)

Naimittika the annual customs of the Satra comprises various kinds of celebrations related to the pranks and activities of the Lord Krishna, religious festivals based on the Vaisnavism and secular festival like Bihu. Main observances of the Garamura Satra are Raslila, Palnam, Janmastami, Mahanam utsav, sripanchami Tithi or Saraswati puja, Phalgutsav or Dual Yatra, Barsik sabah or Bhaona and Bihu moreover the Birth and death anniversaries of the earlier saints and Satradhikars are also observed accordingly. Garmura Satra is popular for Raslila festival across the country its musical and dance forms are the vital and interesting feature of the all the annual celebrations, disciples and inmates of Satra keenly learns and participate actively in all the dance performances like Rasar nac, Bhaonar nac, Sutradhari nac, Gopir nac, Krishna prabesar nac, Gayan-bayan, Oja-pali, and others organized by the Satra. All these dance forms and music taught by the experts in Namghar (plate-3.22) by conducting the regular modules. Presently Satra is flourishing under the reverend Satradhikar Sri Hari Deva Goswami, taking enormous initiatives to develop the art and culture and integrating the young talents in the cultural performances of the Satra. He also initiated an institution Vamasigopaladeva Natya Mandir for the
seeking talents of the village. Moreover Satra is contributing uniformly in all the positive aspects to the society (plate-3.23). (Nath: 2012, p-179)

3.4.3 Dakhinpat Satra: The Satra is one of the grand monastic Satra among the three Satras (Dakhinpat, Auniati and Garmur) which established by the royal patronage of king Jayadhvaja singha. According to Dr.D.nath, the Assamese biography of Sri Vamsigopaldeva mentioned that Vanamalideva the foremost disciple of Vamsigopaldeva was established the Dakhinpat Satra, there is a narration also behind the event, we can trace in the earlier chronicles related to King Jayadhvaj singha, it is cited that when the Ahom king was in the Koch Behar to perform a great Yajna (grand religious ceremony) he invited Vanmalideva with all the major Satradhikars in the ceremony but due to inclination of the koch king he could not attend the ceremony but in another incident when the king made to dig out a water tank near his capital Rangpur but water didn’t cascaded till the completion of the tank, therefore king somehow remembered Vanmalideva and requested him to perform a ritual, after this the tank became flooded with water and the pleased king as a gratefulness established for him Satra known as Dakhinpat Satra by donating land and all the grants and became disciple of the Satra (plate-3.24). This was the last Satra among the three royal Satras of Majuli. Dakhinpat Satra is a marked preserver of relics and various rare manuscripts on Sanchi-pat made from Sanchi-tree bark (Aquilaria malaccensis) including Satriya dance, music, art and culture such as Bargit, Jhumura, Cali-nac, Oja-pali, Apsara-nac, Bhaona, ankiya-nat and other performing Arts. There are around hundred and twenty five devoted celibate disciples in the Satra who positively contributing in cultivation of Satriya art forms (plate-3.25). Raslila is the main celebrated occasion of the Satra and thousands of devotees from different places comes to observe the holy festival of the Satra; it is also celebrated as one of the National festivals of Assam.

3.4.4 Kamalabari Satra: was established by Badal ata in the year of 1673, Badal ata who also known as Padma ata was earlier a swordsman in the Ahom army and found deep repugnance and disbelieves towards the worldly affairs as he
witnessed big annihilation in battles and seeking for peace and real aphorism of life he became an erudite apostle of Madhavadeva. *Kamalabari Satra* belongs to the *Nika Sanghati* and the name derived from *Kamalabari* means garden of oranges where the *Satra* is located. Badal-ata after receiving the directions from his master moved to the Ahom state (upper Assam of that period) to propagate the Vaisnavism and to preach the people of the area as it was not been covered by the Sankardeva. According to the *Kathaguru-Charita* Badal-ata passed through the different places, far distances, holding the campaign of Vaisnavism and preached among the people at various stopovers of his journey, ultimately got settled in *Kamalabari* Majuli and established a *Satra* here moreover he stayed and involved himself in development of *Satra* and society for whole life later he nominated one of his disciple Srirama as the pontiff of the *Satra* before his death.

*Kamalabari Satra* has been a preserver of the cultural heritage since centuries as classical literatures and art forms, which are still in practice and *Satra* is producing eminent figures in the field of art and culture like late Maniram dutta, Muktiyar bayan, Raseswar Saikiya Barbayan and others are names who contributed greatly to uplift the *Satriya* dance and Culture across the country. Moreover *Satra* is a prime institution for the budding artists and providing plethora to nurture their talents. *Satra* is mainly popular for *Ankiya-nat* performances. At present *Satra* consists three more branches one in jorhat district of Assam that is main branch and another two *Natun Kamalabari* and *Uttar Kamalabari* are situated in Majuli, Sri Narayan Chandra Goswami is the *Satradhikar* of *Natun Kamalabari Satra*, he is a learned personality and achieved many rewards as Sankardeva Award from the Government of Assam.

### 3.4.5 Samaguri Satra:

The *Satra* is mainly popular for the traditional art of Mask-making in all over the state and country. The new branch of *Samaguri Satra* which is known as *Natun Samaguri Satra* (New *Samaguri*) is situated near to the market of Rawnapar at Majuli, established in the year of 1824 A.D (plate-3.26). considering the Sama tree as a symbol, the name *Samaguri* was acquired,
According to the Satradhikar Shri Koshakanta Goswami the art of mask making has been cultivated since mid of the seventeenth century in the Satra as these masks are the vital attribute of Bhaona, Satra is diligently carrying the tradition of mask-making and providing masks to almost all the Assamese theatrical performances. Addition to that they organize many workshops and seminars on this traditional art in various places inside as well as outside the state to demonstrate the importance and technique of this art. This Satra is a Grihisthi Satra in this category the Satradhikar and all the devotees leads their household and family life altogether as well, whereas the earlier original Samaguri Satra popular as Purani Samaguri Satra (Old Samaguri) was situated at Bangaon in Salmora Mouza village of Majuli, which was established by the Chakrapanidev and Niranjan Gabharugiri also known as Petphala-ata and his wife (daughter of Purushottam Thakur) in the year of 1663 A.D. This Satra is said to preserves the genuine Paduka (Footwear), a ghoti (pot), a part of Padsila (foot print stone) of Sankardeva and a leaf of Bhagawata Dasam (tenth Bhagawata) in the holy handwriting of the Saint himself, all these items were earlier potted in the Belaguri and Bardowa Satra, both were established by Sankardeva himself. As per the earlier records a connection between Samaguri Satra and Ahom Kingdom can also be traced as the Prince Chakradhwaja singha once assured to Niranjan Ghabhaguri that if he would become the king in future, will donate a Satra and become his disciple. Subsequently when Chakradhwaja singha came to the throne, he invited Niranjan ata to his capital but soon Niranjan ata died before the implementation of king’s promise therefore king Chakradhwaja singha established a Satra for Chakrapani, son of Niranjan ata at Samaguri in Majuli.

3.4.6 Bengenaati Satra: Is one of the admired institution and having a cultural significance of the Vaisnavism and preserves a wide collection of antiques like the royal dressing robe of the King Swargadeo Gadadhar Singha and other gold work (embroidery) gowns, including a rare umbrella of gold work. Bengenaati Satra belongs to the category of Purusha sanghati and established by Murarideva grandson of Sankardeva’s step mother. As the story stated in the
records, Purusottam Thakur the grandson of Sankardeva appointed twelve of his disciples to proceed to the different directions of the state to propagate Vaisnavism and establish Satras, in which six were from Brahmin community and other six were from Sudra (low caste) community, Murarideva was one of Sudra among them and he established the Bengenaati Satra in Majuli around the year of 1773 A.D. Satra is a prominent centre of performing arts and museum of antiques of cultural significance. (Nath: 2009)

3.5 Significance of the Satras in socio-cultural aspects

Implications of the Satra institutions is undoubtedly immeasurable and conscientious not only in implementation of the ideology of Vaisnavism as well as to establish and reform the aspects of social and cultural life since centuries. These institutions enormously elevated the paradigms of society, education, ethics, literature, art and culture of the Assam. In this course up gradation of backward and marginal creeds is the important one, as the Satras were always been easily accessible to the so called periphery, (Bhuyan: 1956) consequently lot of such communities had brought under the umbrella of Vaisnavism. The spiritual bonding of integrity has been cultivated by the indiscriminating and liberal environment of the Satra which merged the preposterous caste distinctions. Similarly the institutions have been rendered the inimitable service to the tribal societies as well, and the Koches, Chutiyas, Morans, Kacharis, Ahoms, including other tribes incorporated within the phenomenon of Vaisnavism. In addition to that Sankardeva in his reverend interpretation of Bhagawata Purana indicated to the Assamese tribes to be amalgamated with the progressive persuasion of Vaisnavism. Remarkably the kala sanghiti Satras of Dihing, Maomara, Budbari, Kataniapar, and Bareghar has noticeably served their consecrated deeds amongst the tribal and backward society. Thus the Satras contributed vitally to uphold the harmony of socio-religious alliance and the expansion of culture among the general inhabitants. Simultaneously Satras has equally disseminated the knowledge of classical Indian scriptures to each and everyone. (Saikia: 2000)
Satras played an important role to produce the treasure of religious literature it is a remarkable contribution of Vaisnavism through the network of Satras and it would not be an erroneous to say that whatever the regarded classical Assamese religious literature is available today is the product of these institutions of Vaisnavism, as Sankardeva initiated to transcript the classical Sanskrit scriptures including his successor Madhavdeva’s similar deeds pursued the forth coming generations to increase and establish the tradition. The translation and interpretations of the Bhagawata Purana and the other texts opened the doors of creation of various prose, poetry, dramas, lyrics and songs subsequently the translation of the epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana in Assamese verse had been also rendered, similarly Vadha-Kavyas and Harana-kavyas portrays the stories of Pandavas and narrations of purans respectively. Noticeably the other writers like Ananata Kandali, Aniruddha Kayastha, Kesava Kayastha, Ratnaker Misra, Visnu-bharati, Gopala-Carana Dvija and Ratnaker Misra had joined the venture. Bhattadeva pontiff of the Patbausi Satra translated the entire Bhagawata-Gita into the Assamese and contributed greatly to the tradition of literature. Besides these theological literature had also drawn abundantly as Sankardeva’s Bhakti-ratnakara and Bhakti-pradipa, Madhavadeva’s Namghosa and translation of Bhakti-Ratnawali, Ramacarana Thakurs Bhakti-ratna, Bhattadeva’s Bhakti-Viveka and Bhakti-Sara, Narottama Thakur’s Bhakti-Premavali are the pioneering works in this section. Moreover in the category of dramas Rukmani-Harana, Rama-vijaya, Patni-prasada, Rasakrida, Parijata-harana and Kaliya-damana narrated by Sankardeva and Chordhara, Arjuna-bhanjana, Bhojana-vihara, Pimpara-guchua, and Bhumi-letowa written by Madhavadeva are the esteemed works in Brajwali language which is a graceful combination of Maithili and Assamese language. Satras are still carrying this cultural heritage and the disciples practice these dramas in various occasions. (Sarma: 1966)

Addition to this plenty of biographical literature known as Caritra or Carita-puthis in Assamese has been produced in the Satras by the pioneering writers
like Daityari Thakur, Ramacarana Thakur, Ramraya Dvija, Bhusana Dvija of 17th century and Ramananda Dvija, Aniruddha Dasa, Nilkantha Dasa of 18th century are remarkable, though most of the biographies are based on the legendary masters but undoubtedly these works are the vital source of information regarding the life and deeds of eminent personalities as well as the history of that period. Consequently the Satra system immeasurably contributed to the literature and education as almost all the erudite and laureate figures were taught in the Satra institutions and this tradition of education and learning transmitted continuously to the upcoming generations of disciples and devotees, even the stimulation is still flowing through the practices and motivations of the Satradhikars of the various Satras among their disciples and the contemporary generation. (Sarma: 1966)

Satras and the theme of Vaisnavism were extraordinarily outshine the creation of devotional songs and music since the times of Sankardeva, and devotion was the basic inspiration behind these, nevertheless these songs are the affluent combination of subtle attributes of various sentiments, poetic sublime and classical compositions of music. Creation of this virtuous stream was sprouted from Sankardeva and Madhavadeva popularly known as Bargit which means higher and ideal songs, there are around two hundred and forty number of songs are available which considered as the Bargit originally composed by both the Masters mainly in Brajawali language are generally based upon the six Rasas (sentiments) which are – Lila (childish activities and holy pranks of young Lord Krishna), Paramartha (Salvation and supreme knowledge of Lord Krishna), Viraha (feeling and expulsion of separation), Virakti (detraction towards worldly things), Caura (thieving of milk and milk products of child Krishna), Caturi (cleverness and pranks of young Krishna) these Bragits are still in practice in all the Satras and popularly performed in congregational prayers including different ceremonies and occasions and the tradition of writing and composing such songs were transmitted through the generations from head of the Satra to disciples. Besides these progression of musical rhythms has been
carried out uniformly by all the Satra institutions all these devotional songs are composed in different rhythms based on the Classical music (Sanskrit music treatise) and every song composed in the particular classical rāgas (rhythmic composition) are conscientiously sung in that particular tune and rāgas only, which are still followed in all the Satras and interestingly before singing a song it is customary practice to explain the origin, subject and particular raga by which song belongs. Including this Tāla (time-beat) are also maintained in the performance with musical Instruments like khola (drums) and cymbals (instrument made of brass-plates). The vocal choir is called ‘Gayan’ and the group of instrumentalists is known as ‘Bayan’ and both the groups performs together in every musical performance and for that various musical instruments are utilized by the musicians of the Satra among these some popular instruments are Tokari (single String instrument), Cymbals, Kara-tala (instrument made of split Bamboo and sound produced by rubbing another piece ‘cowri’ on across the notches of stripped bamboo), Ghanta (bell), Kah (gong), Daba (kettle drum), Nagara (conical drum), mridanga (long conical drum), khol (medium size drum), dhol (large drum), Sankh (Conch), and Kati (long pipes). Similarly a well institutionalized classical dance form, completely religious in nature also cultivated in Satras which is popularly known as satriya-nac. (Sarma: 1966)

Though the tradition of Dance and theatre can be traced from early period in Assam even before the Sankardeva, like Oja-pali performance, which performed in the worship of Snake Goddess Manasa but it is considered that Sankardeva himself used to organize the Oja-pali performances for devotional prayers, consequently the tradition of dance and theatre has been institutionalized in Satras. Still today every Satra is a school of this classical dance form and contributing assiduously to nurture the cultural heritage among the forth coming generation. Dramatic performances celebrated as Bhaona was also introduced by the Sankardeva, Bhaona is completely religious in nature and depicts the events of the epics like Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Bhagawata. Addition to that art of Manuscript painting, Mask making and wood carving and
many other crafts developed altogether in the Satras. Thus the Satras depicted the religious aura subtly, moulded the society, institutionalised the education, and cultivated the Art and culture since the centuries nonetheless became a plethora of creativity for young disciples of the Satra and presently nourishing the future of budding generations.

3.6 Conclusion

Satras played an important role to cultivate the treasure of religious literature, education and several art forms. It is a remarkable contribution of Vaisnavism through the network of Satras and it would not be an erroneous to say that whatever the regarded classical Assamese religious literature is available today, is the product of the institutions of Vaisnavism, which was uniformly accessible to the mundane and backward classes, as all the Satras maintained Sanskrit ‘tols’ (traditional schools) and usher the spiritual bonding of fellowship nurtured by the atmosphere of freedom, equality and integrity. Similarly the tradition of dance and theatre has been institutionalized by the Satras. Still today every Satra is a school of classical Satriya dance form and Bhaona theatre and contributing assiduously to nurture the cultural heritage among the forthcoming generation nevertheless art of manuscript painting, mask-making, wood carving, religious music and many other crafts developed altogether in the Satras of Majuli and other places of the state. Satra is equally noteworthy for its architecture being a composite unit and a complete established Satra comprises the different components like Namghar or Kirtanghar (prayer hall), Manikuta (shrine), Hati (huts), Bharal (store), and Batcora (entrance gate).

The fundamental objective of the Satras was to spread the monotheistic Vaisnavism through involving the disciples, inducing ethical and devotional manners among them and conducting the religious and cultural modules to incorporate the maximum populace. The Satra institutions acted as the sentinel to the religious and cultural progression of the disciples and society, every Satra engaged the representatives called ‘Medhis’ for different localities who continuously maintained contacts to elevate the moral and spiritual values.
among the society. Subsequently Satra institutions established social harmony, spirit of cooperation and spirituality through disseminating the learning of ancient scriptures amongst the society. Often Satra intervenes in the cases related to the social matters and resolves the social and religious disagreements as the society faithfully regards the veracity of Satras.

The religious Satriya dance form of Assam has developed in the Neo Vaisnavite monasteries achieved the status of Classical dance in India and Several art form like wall and panel painting, Manuscript painting, wood carving and mask-making were achieved the grades altogether. Consequently these institutions organised the socio-religious culture, moulded the society, institutionalised the education, and cultivated the Art and culture since the centuries simultaneously provide a plethora of creativity for young disciples of the Satra and nourishing the future of budding generations of society. Around Sixty five of Satras were activated in the Majuli before the massive earthquake of 1950, but now they are left only around eight to ten and they are still disseminating the live culture of Assam and satisfying the religious and cultural urge of the society, though surviving with catastrophe of erosion and to manoeuvre with modernization.
Plate 3.01 Namghar of Kamalabari Satra, Majuli

Plate 3.02 Painted entrance of Namghar, Majuli

Plate 3.03 Painted Corridor of Namghar, Majuli
Plate 3.04 Prayer hall of Garamur Satra, Majuli

Plate 3.05 Prayer hall entrance of Kamalabari Satra

Plate 3.06 Namghar, Kamalabari Satra
Plate 3.07 Interior view of Prayer hall of Satra, Majuli

Plate 3.08 Interior view of Namghar and shrine of Satra
Plate 3.11 Horai (Royal gift) preserved in manikuta of Garamura Satra

Plate 3.12 Carved wooden Throne in Manikuta of Garamura Satra
Plate 3.13 Hati of Kamalabari Satra

Plate 3.14 Hati of Auniati Satra
Plate 3.15 Bhakat (Monk) of Kamalabari Satra

Plate 3.16 Bhakat (Monk) of Auniati satra
Plate 3.17 Batcora of Garamur Satra

Plate 3.18 Batcora of Auniati Satra
Plate 3.19  Arcade of Auniati Satra, Majuli

Plate 3.20  Prayer hall of Auniati Satra, Majuli
Plate 3.21 Enterance of Garamur Satra

Plate 3.22 Namghar of Garamur Satra

Plate 3.23 Arcade of Garamur Satra
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