



The monastic Sattras of Assam : tradition and tribulation

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Abstract

The Sattras of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam is a new type of religio-social and cultural organization of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by saint Sankaradeva. This institution served the purpose of spreading the faith of *Bhakti* far and wide. It helped to sustain and stabilize vaishnavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social life. In spite of the Sattras diminished importance, they continue to an important role in the religious life of the Assamese Hindus. These institutions perform manifold activities like initiation among the local people, practice of Sattriya music, dance and drama etc. These Sattras have been facing various problems, which have come to pose as threats not only to existence of the institution but also the unique socio-cultural setting of the state. In monastic Sattras both *adhikara* and *bhakats* spent their life in celibacy. The impact of modernization on the society is one of the factors leading to decrease in *bhakat* population. People who seek to become *bhakats* are declining day by day. There is a fear that if such a trend is continues, the institution of monastic Sattra may become extinct one day. An attempt has been made here to analyse the characteristics, contribution and present day problem faced by the monastic Sattras of Assam.

Keywords : *Bhakat*, Celibacy, Neo-Vaishnavism, Monastic Sattra.

1. Introduction

The Sattras were a product of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva towards the closing decade of the fifteen century of the Christian era (Sarma, 1966). During that time the Sattras were a new type of religious-socio and cultural organization in Assam. They helped to sustain and stabilize vaishnavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social life. The basis of Sattra institution was to sustain '*Bhakti dharma*' propounded by Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva and other apostle of neo vaishnavite movement. It had connection with the vaishnavite movement of other part of India.

The very fact that Sattras as an institution have continued till today indicate their importance although their contemporary status in Assamese society is a poor shadow of their status in previous centuries. In spite of their diminished importance,

they continue to have an important role in the religious life of the Assamese Hindus. The Sattra aimed at teaching the common people simple ways of living, equality of all men in the field of religion, and practicing non-violence and doing away with the belief in sacrifice of birds and animals which was largely prevalent in the society of that time in the name of religion. The Sattra institution spread to various parts of the Brahmaputra valley and several geographical factors were important in their location. Factors such as proximity to river transport, availability of fertile agricultural land and the presence of caste Hindus population were instrumental to the location of these institutions.

Sattras are classified on the basis of celibacy of '*Sattradhikara*' and '*bhakatas*'. It is of four types – monastic, *grihasthi*, semi monastic and admixture. In monastic Sattras both *adhikaras* and *bhakats* spend their life in celibacy. Celibacy is

professed in other religious and non-religious institutions as well. For instance nunneries in Christian missions all across the world. In India the numerous nunneries, the Missionaries of Charity of the late Mother Teresa being one such instance, follow celibacy.

At present there are only twelve monastic Sattras in Assam. But formerly the number was greater than present. Now a days most of them, donot remain celibate. In '*grihasthi*' sattras the *adhikara* and *bhakats* do not follow celibacy.

These institutions perform manifold activities. The different activities and customs practiced in the Sattras have been instrumental in producing the Sattriya music dance, drama, literature, art and craft. Sattras have important functions in Society as they offers 'Sarona' and 'vojona' among the people of locality and binds all the disciples (Sisyas) closely together.

A strong economy is needed for the survival of any institution. The Sattras are dependent on agricultural production of lands that were donated to Sattras centuries ago. Apart from Auniati and Dakhinpat Sattras all other sattras practice agriculture. Auniati and Dakhinpat Sattra collect agricultural production from *Chahor* and *Khat*. Handicraft is another important economic activity of the Sattras.

These Sattras have been facing various problems which have come to pose as threats not only to existence of the institution but also the unique socio-cultural setting of the state. Apart from the erosion of the river and encroachment of the Sattra's land (The *Amar Asom*, 12 June 2008) other major problems facing the Sattras are –

- 1) Most of the trained *Bhakats* are under a compelling situation to leave the Sattras for livelihood. Therefore the training that was traditionally imparted in the Sattras received a set back.
- 2) Growth of modernity has also come to affect the Sattra institution. Philosophy of Sattra institution is contrary to the so-called modern culture. Adverse affects of modernity have obviously seen in the Sattras outside Majuli.

- 3) Flood problem is another unavoidable problem of the monastic Sattras of Majuli. Because of this natural hazard many valuable books and other important traditional properties have been lost as Sattras have no Museum.
- 4) Lack of good transport facility to the Sattras, especially river transport facility and lack of guest house facilities in these Sattras are some of the vital problem faced by the sisyas of the respective Sattras and pilgrims as well as tourists.
- 5) The *devottor* land of the Sattras have been acquired by the government of Assam under the section 8 (s) of Assam State Acquisition of Land belonging to Religious or Charitable institution of public nature Act. 1959 (Amended in 1987). Instead of this the government offered A few thousand of rupees which is not sufficient for the maintenance of the Sattra (Deva Goswami, 2009). This severely hampers the economy of the Sattras.
- 6) Theft in the sattras is another major problem faced by the Sattras now a days. *Monikut* of the sattra has accumulation of certain valuable traditional properties. Therefore protection of these important things is necessary.
- 7) Apart from this, encroachment of land belonging to Sattra is increasingly occurring largely due to pressure on land by increasing population and growing immigrant population.

2. Objectives

The present study is conceived with the following objectives—

- To assess the importance of geographical factors behind site selection of Sattras.
- To study the influence of Sattra institution at present
- To assess the socio-cultural contribution of the Sattras in the past vis-à-vis their contemporary status

- To identify the problem faced by the Sattras and suggest measures to protect this important socio-religious institution and its heritage.

3. Research questions

The following research questions are put forward :

1. Whether geographical factors determined the location of Sattras and changing cultural values reduced their importance in recent decades?
2. Have the changes in population composition at affiliated village of the Sattras adversely affected the status and standing of Sattras?
3. Whether the distance from Majuli and the winds of change brought in by modernization are inversely related to the status of Sattras (among the population owing affiliation to the Sattras)?
4. Have monastic Sattras, which have now earned popularity within and out side the state, been able to preserve their cultural identity?

4. Database and methodology

To study the problems as outlined, primary data has been collected from the field through personal observation, scheduled and questionnaires. The investigations were carried out at monastic Sattras primarily through field study for qualitative data.

Consultation of records and documents has been necessitated in order to draw a continuous history of the Sattra from the past. Data for

understanding the average condition of the, demographic and social characteristics of the Sattras have been collected from the field study at the respective Sattras. The data thus obtained have been processed and analysed through appropriate quantitative and cartographic techniques.

Initially books on philosophy, religion, society, economy, social geography, social anthropology and other related disciplines were consulted. Then, materials and information to understand the economic, social and demographic situation relevant to the present study were gathered from different books, journals, administrative reports and records, documents, hand books and publications. Secondary data were also collected from the office, State museum library and the department of Historical and Antiquarian studies.

An interview schedule was also prepared for collecting requisite data in the field for first hand information. Each monastic Sattra was visited for personal observation and for getting an insight into the working of these Sattras. The schedule was so prepared so as to cover all the historical, demographic, economic, social and cultural aspects of each and every monastic sattra and their branch sattra. Further, information was also collected through informal discussions with the Sattradhikara, *bhakat* and *sisya* of the Sattra.

- **Study area :** Assam as a whole has been taken as the study area. But the Sattras are confined only in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Figure 1 Shows the distribution of the monastic Sattras of Assam.

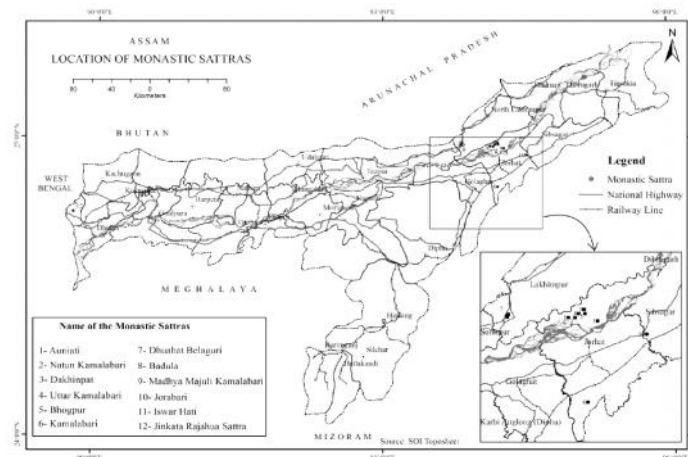


Fig. - 1 : Distribution of monastic Sattras

There are only twelve monastic Sattras in Assam of which six are located in Majuli island of Jorhat district.

Following table shows the mathematical location and district of the monastic Sattras.

Table - 1 : Distribution of monastic Sattras of Assam.

Sl. No.	Name of the Sattra	Place	District	Latitude & Longitude
1.	Auniati	Majuli	Jorhat	26°56' 20.39" N 94°07' 35.36" E
2.	Natun Kamalabari	Majuli	Jorhat	26° 56' 13.42" N 94° 9' 34.37" E
3.	Dakhinpat	Majuli	Jorhat	26°55' 1.18" N 94° 16' 12.16" E
4.	Uttor Kamalabari	Majuli	Jorhat	26°57' 22.22" N 94°10' 38.78" E
5.	Bhogpur	Majuli	Jorhat	26°57' 17.85" N 94°12' 37.95" E
6.	Kamalabari	Titabor	Jorhat	26°31' 52.82" N 94° 12' 11.92" E
7.	Dhuahat Belguri	Narayanpur	Lakhimpur	26°57' 39.00" N 93° 51' 46.38" E
8.	Badula	Narayanpur	Lakhimpur	26°57' 22.86" N 93°51' 29.90" E
9.	Madhya Majuli Kamalabari	Majuli	Jorhat	26°58' 31.53" N 94°12' 18.72" E
10.	Jorabari	Janji	Sivasagar	26°50' 35" N 94°30' 40.54" E
11.	Iswar Hati	Sualkuchi	Kamrup	26°10' 15.27" N 91°33' 56.9" E
12.	Jinkata Rajahua Sattra	Jinkata	Dhubri	26°15' 27.37" N 80°46' 10.56" E

Source : Field study at respective Sattras, 2010

Characteristics of monastic Sattra

The monastic Sattras have some special characteristics. They are—

1. Each Sattra has a distinct compound with one to four *hati* (lines of cottage).
2. It has special features like *Boha*, *Korapat*, *Kirtonghor* or *Namghar*; *Monikut*, *Bhoralghor*, and one or two special type of house like *Podosilagriha*, *Guru Smriti griha*, *Mohavira griha* *Akhora griha* etc.
3. Both *adhikara* and *bhakats* are unmarried.
4. *Bhakats* live in small cottage called *boha* in *hati*.
5. *Adhikara* lives either in east *hati* or north *hati* except Auniati Sattra who live in the central of the Sattra near then *namghor*.
6. The *bhakats* generally wear white *dhoti* and *cheleng* and when goes out of the Sattra wear *dhoti*, *kurta* and *cheleng* of white colour.

7. The *bhakats* are not allowed to grow moustaches or beards; they have to remain clean.
8. The Sattra contains traditional and sacred property.
9. *Dhari* and *koth* (mat) are used for sitting arrangement instead of table and chair.
10. The *bhakats* use special type of conversation when talk with each other and guest. As for example instead of 'I' they say 'we'
11. Wearing of shoes and riding on cycle or other vehicle inside the Sattra's compound is strictly prohibited.
12. Fourteen *prosonga* is compulsory in these Sattras. Annual functions are also held in time without interruption.

5. Structure and Traditional Plan of Monastic Sattras

Each monastic Sattra has its own structure. It has a traditional plan based on which it is built.

The traditional plans exist in the modern period also. In every monastic Sattrā, there is a distinct compound. It may be large or small. In this compound several houses are found. The presence of these houses is necessary for performing different works of the Sattrā. The important houses within a Sattrā are *namghar* or *kirtonghor*, *monikut*, *korapat* or *batchora*, *hati*, *boha*, *bharalghor*, and some other special houses. All these houses or structures within a Sattrā are called the physical structures of a sattrā without which a Sattrā cannot exist. The descriptions of these structures are given below.

5.1 *Hati*

Hati is a line of houses or huts, the alignment of which is done by taking the *namghar* and *manikut* in its front, where there are individual

houses known as *boha* of *bhakats*. The line of these *bohas* is called *hati* (Deva Goswami, 2001).

5.2 *Boha*

The term *boha* is used in the monastic Sattrā only. A *boha* simply means a cottage. A *Boha* is a small house in the *hati* of the Sattrā where *bhakats* live. According to the Hemkosh dictionary – the meaning of *boha* is *prabasua ghor* – living for sometime (temporary living) (Barua, 1985). Life itself is not permanent. Every person will die one day. The small house where *bhakats* live in a Sattrā, temporary in nature is called *boha* (Deva Goswami, 2001). A *boha* provides shelter for the *bhakats*.

The following table shows the total number of *boha* and total number of *bhakats* in all the monastic Sattras of Assam.

Table - 2 : Total number of *boha* and total number of *bhakats* (2010).

Sl. No.	Name of the Sattras	Total number of <i>boha</i>	Total Number of <i>bhakat</i>
1	Auniati	110	330
2	Natun Kamalabari	75	165
3	Dakhinpat	23	80
4	Uttar Kamalabari	27	75
5	Bhogpur	18	63
6	Kamalabari	28	45
7	Dhuahat Belaguri	9	20
8	Badula	8	15
9	Madhya Majuli	6	15
10	Jorabari	1	8
11	Iswarhati	1	4
12	Jinkata Rajahua Sattrā	1	2
	Total	307	822

Source : Field Study at respective Sattras. (2010)

The figures show that Auniati Sattrā has highest number *boha* and *bhakat*. Its *boha* is elongated so as to accommodate all the *bhakats* within the limited area of the *hati*. Thus, it is observed that the number of *boha* is directly proportional to the the number of *bhakats* in most of the Sattras.

Figure 2 shows the total number of *bhakat* and total number of *boha* of monastic sattras of Assam (2010).

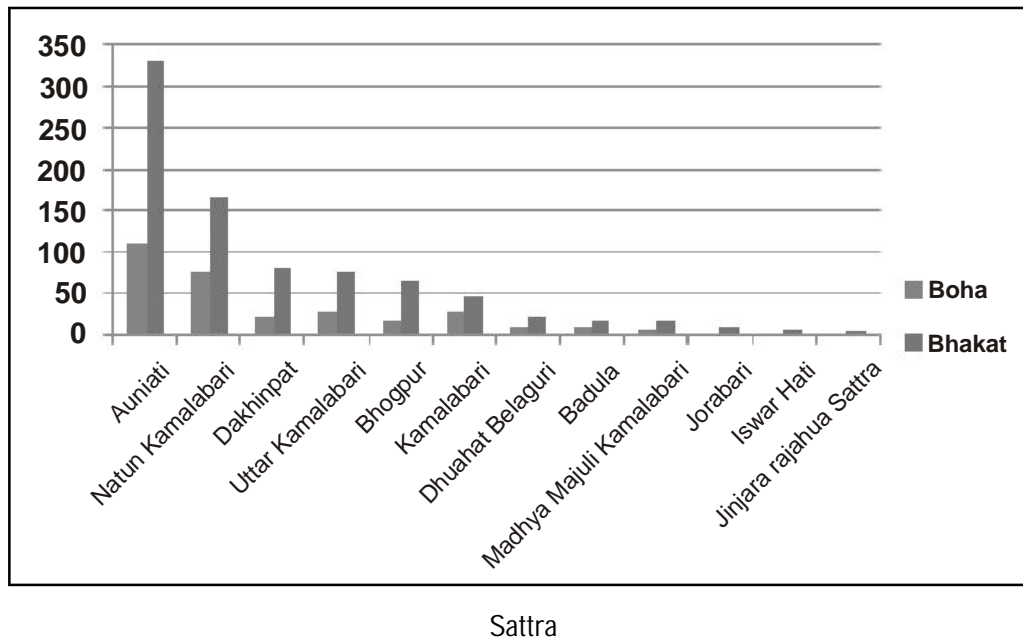


Fig. 2 : *Boha* and *bhakat* of monastic Sattras

5.3 *Namghar* and *Manikut*

The central institute within a Sattra is the prayer hall known as *namghar* or *kirtonghar* (Neog, 1998). *Namghar* and *Manikut* are considered as the central structures in the Sattra. On its eastern end is constructed, at perpendiculars to it, another small hall, whose length roughly equals the breadth of the prayer hall (Neog, 1998). This small hall is generally known as *monikut*. According to Maheswar Neog, "it is the house of the jewel."

5.4 *Korapat* or *Batchora*

Korapat is another essential component of Sattras. The entrance leading to the interior of a Sattra is usually marked by a small open house known as *batchora* or *korapat*. (Sarma 1966). *Korapat* is the gate-house of the Sattras.

6. Components of Monastic Sattra; *adhikara*, *deka adhikara* and *bhakats* :

6.1 *Adhikara*

The head of a Sattra is popularly known as *adhikara* or *Sattradhikara*. His position is similar to that of the *Mohunt* of medieval *maths*. He is the religious head and spiritual guide of the folk under his care. The formal initiation ceremony –

sarona and the confirmatory *bhajana* are conducted under his direct supervision (Sarma, 1966) *Sattradhikara* is the *guru*. *Guru* is the guide of *Sattriya* life (Deva Goswami, 2001). *Adhikara* may be compared with the abbot in Christianity. According to Compact Oxford dictionary 'abbot is a man who is the head of an abbey of monks.' The term *adhikara* has resemblance with the head of the '*matha*' of Kashi.

6.2 *Deka Adhikara*

Next to *adhikara* in power and prestige, is the *deka adhikara* who usually becomes the head after the demise of the *adhikara*. When the *adhikara* remains absent or goes out on a tour the *deka adhikara* performs the duties of the head (Sarma, 1966). The trace of 'tutor' abbot, like Sattra's *deka adhikara* is found in Tibetans Buddhism (Palakshappa, 1998).

6.3 *Bhakat*

Bhakats of the monastic Sattras are called *udasin bhakat* in upper Assam and *kewalia bhakat* in lower Assam (Dutta Deva Goswami, 2010). Celibate devotees are recruited in their early years (5 – 10 years of age) by elderly celibate *bhakats* and under the guidance and supervision

of the latter, they remain as apprentices for a few years (Nath, 2009). The relation between head of the *boha* or *burhabhakat* and child *bhakats* become cordial like father and son. Young boys are recruited from the villages. They generally come from the families of the *sisyas* of a Sattrā.

6.3.1 Special characteristics of the *bhakats* of monastic Sattras

- i. *Bhakats* are unmarried.
- ii. *Bhakats* are of different age groups ranging from very young to old age.
- iii. They live within a *boha* like one family.
- iv. There may be a single *bhakat*, but generally more than one *bhakat* reside in a *boha*.
- v. The head of the *bhakat* is called *Burha bhakat* and younger ones are called *aldhora*.
- vi. Though there is no blood relation among the *bhakats*, their love and affection to each other and respect to the elders of the *boha* is remarkable.
- vii. All the responsibilities including education, medical, clothing and food expenditure are borne by the *burha bhakat* like father of a family.
- viii. The *bhakats* normally wear white *dhoti* and *cheleng* and when they go out of the Sattrā, they wear *dhoti*, *cheleng* and *kurta*.
- ix. They are not allowed to grow moustaches or beards.
- x. *Bhakats* perform household works of all kinds.
- xi. They have fixed routine for agricultural work, other works in the Sattrā and for learning Sattriya music.
- xii. Their life is devoted merely to promote Sattriya culture.
- xiii. They give up domestic or family life.
- xiv. *Bhakats* are experts in music, dance and drama, art and crafts.
- xv. *Bhakats* can leave the Sattrā, if they desire.

The *bhakats* have similarity with Buddhist monks. The *vikkhu* of a Buddhist monastery may be compared with the *bhakat* of the monastic Sattras. Like the *bhakat* of a monastic Sattrā, the *vikkhu* of a Buddhist monastery wears a special type of dress of specific colour. Like the monastic Sattras, villagers offer boys to the monastery.

Following table shows the decadal growth of *bhakats* population of monastic Sattras.

Table - 3 : Decadal Growth of *bhakats* of monastic Sattrā.

Sl. No.	Name of the Sattrā	(in 2000)	(in 2010)	Absolute population	Percentage
1	Auniati	400	330	-70	-54.79
2	Natun Kamalabari	200	165	-35	-54.79
3	Dakhinpat	83	80	-3	-50.92
4	Uttar Kamalabari	75	75	+0	±50.0
5	Bhogpur	82	63	-19	-56.55
6	Kamalabaris	51	45	-6	-53.12
7	Dhuahat Belaguri	21	20	-1	-51.2
8	Badula	10	15	+5	+40.00
9	Madhya Majuli	15	15	+0	±50.00
10	Jorabari	10	8	-2	-55.5
11	Iswar Hati	5	4	-1	-55.5
12	Jinkata Rajahua	3	2	-1	-60.0

Source : Field Study at respective Sattras (2010)

The *bhakat* population is decreasing year after year. Table 3 shows that in 2000 total *bhakat* of the Sattras was 975, but in 2010 it decreased to 822. If we see the percentage wise it will reveal that Jinkata rajahua Sattras has decreased -60.00% *bhakat* during the last 10 years, Bhogpur Sattras has gone down by -56.55%, Jarabari and Iswarhati Sattras by -55.50% each, Auniati and Natun Kamalabari Sattras by -54.79% each. Kamalabari Sattras by -53.12% *bhakat*, Dhuaht Belaguri by -51.20% and Dakhinpat Sattras by - 50.92% *bhakat* respectively. On the other hand, two Sattras—Uttar Kamalabari and Madhya Majuli Kamalabari Sattras have been able to retain their former number of *bhakat* (+50.00 %). It is very difficult to assess the trend of growth of the *bhakat* population because of the fact that the *bhakats* are not born in the Sattras, instead they are adopted from the nearby villages. Thus, it is very difficult to project the expected *bhakat* population in the future.

Impact of modernization on the society in general and on the Sattras in particular, is one of the factors leading to such a decrease in *bhakat* population. People who seek to become *bhakat* are declining day by day. This is more prominent in the areas outside Majuli and less in the island. The economic condition of the Sattras are also not strong to support the *bhakats*. There is a fear that if such a trend continues, the institution of monastic Sattras may become extinct one day.

6.3.2 *Bhakats* : Where have they come from?

A group of *bhakat* consists of members belonging to different families of a village in different districts. The process of bringing *bhakats* to a Sattras is interesting. Generally, the head of the *boha* (*burhabhakat*) asks his relatives or members of the *chahor* known to him to enquire about the people who are eager to offer their child to the Sattras. Parents generally offer their child to the Sattras under the following circumstances :

1. If a child falls seriously ill or suffers from a serious disease then, the parents generally

offer him to the Sattras. After his recovery, they believe that his life is saved so that he can serve the Sattras and thus forward him as a *bhakat* to the Sattras. This tradition is still continuing in some remote areas in Assam where sufficient medical facilities are not available. In case, the child is the only son, he can be brought back from the Sattras by offering a *sorai* at the Sattras (Borbayan, 2010).

2. If the parents have many sons, they offer one son to the Sattras so that he can attain general education and Sattriya education.
3. Parents having very low economic status cannot support their children and thus, send their sons to the Sattras for their better upbringing. Such child *bhakats* are found in the Uttar kamalabari Sattras and the Kamalabari Sattras.
4. If the parents of a child die during his childhood, the relatives of the child offer him to the Sattras, considering it to be an orphanage.
5. Relatives of the *burhabhakat* of a *boha* also offer their children to be the owner of that *boha*.
6. Generally, the child *bhakats* come from the villages and not from the urban areas.
7. Now a days, offering a child *bhakat* to a Sattras is decreasing, as family planning has become popular among the village folks resulting in decrease of birth rate. People now have less number of children.

The field study reveals that *bhakats* belong to the districts of Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Nagaon, Sivasagar, Golaghat, Dharmaji, Sonitpur, Kamrup, Morigaon, Goalpara, Tinsukia, Dhubri and Barpeta.

The following table clearly shows the *bhakat* community of monastic Sattras belonging to different districts of Assam.

Table - 4 : *Bhakat* population coming from the different district of Assam.

Sl. No.	Name of District	No. of <i>bhakat</i>
1	Jorhat	403
2	Lakhimpur	289
3	Nagaon	33
4	Sivasagar	23
5	Golaghat	19
6	Dhemaji	18
7	Sonitpur	15
8	Dibrugarh	8
9	Kamrup	6
10	Morigaon	4
11	Goalpara	1
12	Tinsukia	1
13	Dhubri	1
14	Barpeta	1
	Total	822

Source : Field Study at respective Sattras (2010).

From the table 4, it is observed that majority of the *bhakats* come from Jorhat district (mainly from Majuli). Lakhimpur is the district next to Jorhat from where *bhakats* mainly come to the Sattras. *Bhakats* are confined in 14 districts of the Brahmaputra valley. Seven districts of Assam have only one *bhakat* each.

Following figure shows the *bhakats* coming from different districts of Assam.

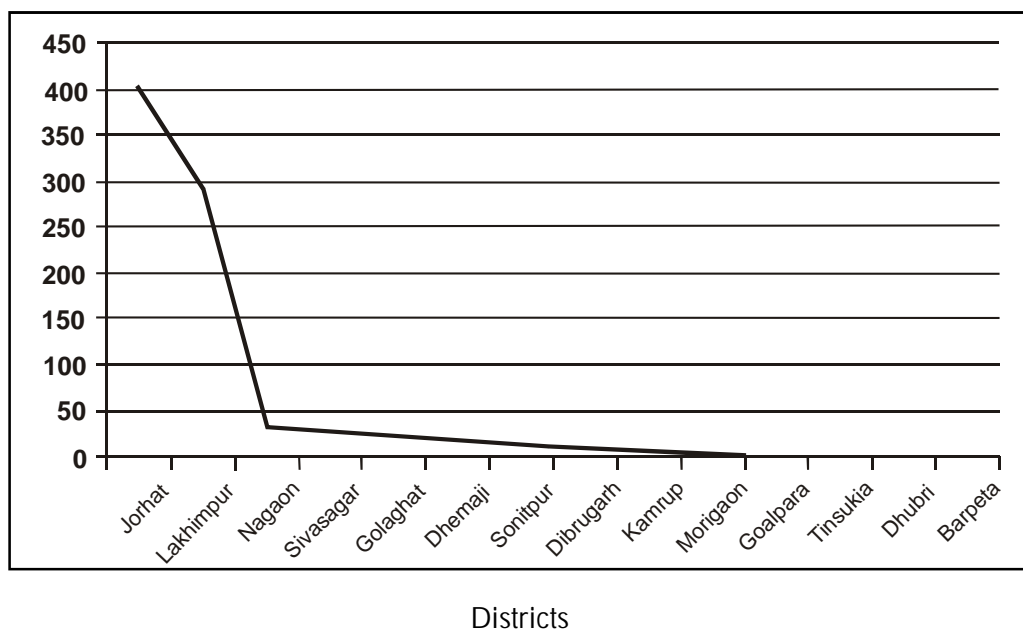


Fig. 3 : *Bhakats* coming from different districts of Assam

7. Contribution of Monastic Sattras to Assamese Society

The monastic Sattras has multifarious contribution to the Assamese society. It helped in the enrichment of social and moral values of the people, and contributed in the development of Assamese literature, music, art, painting and crafts. It also made significant contribution to the freedom movement of India. "But these cultural effects are not altogether independent of religion; rather these may be termed as the product of the same religious movement" (Sarma, 1966). "Till at least the first half of the last century, villagers in Assam hardly dared to do anything not approved by the Sattras. There is not much change in the outlook of the Assamese village folk towards the Sattras in such matters" (Nath, 2007). Broadly we can categorise the contribution as — moral and social, promotion of ethnic integration, educational contribution, literary contribution, contribution to music, contribution to India's freedom struggle, oral tradition and contribution to other social activities.

In the field of education, the Sattras have great contribution. Formerly, there was no system of formal education in Assam as we have at present. Alongwith the other institutions for propagating education, the institution of Sattras were also serving a lot for the said purpose. *Mati akhora* served as a place for physical exercises for Sattriya artists. The different activities and customs practised in the Sattras every day, from morning till night was some of the means of attaining education.

In the literary field also they contributed a lot. The second news magazine "The Assam Bilasini" published from Auniati Sattras which was printed at Sattras' printing machine named *Dharma prakash yantra* in 1871. It has immense contribution in Sattriya music for which the Sattriya dance had received the status of classical dance form of India in 15th November, 2000.

8. Findings and Suggestions

The detailed analysis made in the foregoing discussion is synthesized here as findings and suggestions.

1. Out of these 12 monastic Sattras 4 Sattras – Badula, Natun Kamalabari, Bhogpur, and Iswar Hati Sattras are still in their original place. The other 8 Sattras had to be shifted from their original place and re established either in Majuli or out side Majuli.
2. Monastic Sattras is a special type of settlement pattern in Assam where celibacy is the compulsory practice for both the head of the institution and devotees (*bhakats*). Though there are many monastic organizations in the world like the Roman Catholic Church, the Buddhist monasteries, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Bharat Sevashram Sangha, and Ram Krishna Mission, they don't resemble the monastic Sattras. The monastic Sattras of Assam are unique both from the structural as well as philosophical point of view. At present monastic Sattras are located in five districts of Assam – Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Kamrup and Dhubri.
3. Monastic Sattras have traditional plans. It has physical components such as *hati*, *boha*, *namghar*, *monikut*, *korapat* etc. and cultural components like *adhikara*, *bhakat* and *sisya* which are essential to constitute a monastic Sattras. It has been observed that there is variation regarding the constituting components of the Sattras. Though the *bhakat* population of the monastic Sattras is very negligible in comparison to total population of Assam, it has great impact in the cultural milieu of the Assamese society. At present there are only 822 *bhakats* in the monastic Sattras of Assam. In contrast to the increasing population in Assam year after year the *bhakat* population is gradually decreasing. *Adhikara*, *bhakat* and *sisya* — these three are the important components of a Sattras. Initiation (to give *saron*) is the main function of a Sattras by which they have bounded all the *sisyas* in one rope.
4. Auniati Sattras possesses highest number of *bhakat* than all the other Sattras. It has 40.1 % *bhakats* of total 822 number *bhakats*. Out

of these 12 monastic Sattras, 6 Sattras have less than required number of *bhakat* to perform Sattra's duty. 3 Sattras have single number *bhakat*. It has been seen that Sattras outside Majuli have less number of *bhakats*. Iswar Hati Sattra has 4, Jorabari Sattra has 8 and Jinkata Rajahua Sattra has only 1 *bhakat* each. Now a days problem arises in recruitment of *bhakat*.

5. Outgoing *bhakat* from Sattra is increasing year after year, as the child *bhakat* become younger and take college education. This situation arises as most of them had recruited in the childhood. But when they realize the difficulty of monk life, most of them become uninterested and come back to their original home. But this situation is never happening in case of Roman Catholic priests as they have come in mature age.
6. Permeability of an institution depends upon the strong economic base. All the Sattras are based on agrarian economy. For this purpose Ahom king also granted land to the Sattras for their survival. Except Auniati and Dakhinpat Sattra *bhakats* of other Sattras have individual agricultural land though agricultural land of the *bhakats* outside Majuli is insufficient.
7. As heritage tourism the monastic Sattras have been playing a great role in present days. Monastic Sattras have traditional life styles. Tourists come to these Sattras to study this life styles and cultural activities. It is interesting to note that few group of commercial Sattriya artist have been emerged in the Sattras especially in Uttar Kamalabari and Natun Kamalabari Sattra for showcasing the Sattriya culture to the tourist. Tourists come from almost all over the world. Every Sattra has traditional properties but they have no museum for which valuable properties have been lost in time of flood. *Palnam, ras lila, guru kirtton, bhaona* are the main festivals of the monastic Sattras which act as binding factor among the *sisyas* of the state.
8. *Namghar* is another important contribution of the neo Vaisnavite movement which has multidisciplinary activities among the village folk of the state especially in the Brahmaputra valley. *Bhaona* is also another important cultural item both in the Sattra and among the rural people of the state especially in upper Assam. Attempt has been taken to introduce or popularize the '*bhaona*' among the tribes of Assam like Mising, Bodo, Tea tribe, etc.
9. The Sattriya dance gained some status in France and other countries wherein Sattriya dancers had performed the Sattriya dance in France and neighboring countries in 2010. Obviously the declaration of Majuli as a site of the world heritage, will draw the attention of the world to Majuli. Auniati, Dakhinpat and Kamalabari Sattra gave emphasis on spreading modern education by establishing school or offering donation to establish school and college building including science education.
10. During the last 50 years Sattras have undergone noticeable changes in many aspects. In last two decades modernization has badly affected the Sattras of outside Majuli. It may be mentioned here that though there are changes, the monastic Sattras are still capable of retaining their basic essential features as far as their philosophy is concerned. The monastic Sattras have still retained old value in the Sattras especially in case of dress, dialect, sitting arrangement, ways of life, house types, celibacy, cultural activities etc. In case of non monastic Sattras one can say that they have been affected by rapid changes. Extensive use of modern gadgets and electronic media being two important factors responsible for these changes.
11. At present the Sattras face numerous problems. Problems of Sattras can be classified in to three groups- geographical, economical and sociological. The geographical

factor is related to the flood and erosion of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The Sattras which had been re established in a new region because of the erosion had to face many social problems. We can cite the example of Kamalabari Sattra which is now re established in Mohimabari, Titabar where the social environment of the region is different from Majuli. Therefore, the young *bhakat* of the Sattra have been found leaving the Sattra. Other problems faced by the Sattras are- encroachment and acquisition of Sattras land, problems of transport and communication, economic problems of Sattras *bhakats*, lack of accommodation facilities, modernization, dwindling of *bhakat* population, Challenges faced by the Sattradhikaras, theft in the Sattras, etc.

12. Majuli is the ideal place for monastic Sattra. As we go away from Majuli influence of the Sattra becomes less evident. That Majuli is the ideal centre of monastic Sattra has been established by the following observations –
 - *Bhakat* population coming to the Sattras of Majuli from different districts;
 - *Sisyas*(disciples) of the monastic Sattras of Majuli distributed in different parts of the state ;
 - Branch Sattras of the monastic Sattras of Majuli is distributed in the different districts and ;
 - *Chahor* of Auniati and Dakhinpat Sattra distributed in different districts of the state and abroad.

Majority of the *bhakat* comes from Jorhat district– 401 (49.0%) of which Majuli alone has 316 *bhakats* (38.4%). Next Lakhimpur district– 289 *bhakats* (35.15%) which is very near to Majuli. It has been seen that the nearest district has more *bhakats* than other district. It has been noticed that as we go away from Majuli the *bhakat* population decreases. As for example Nagaon possesses 33 number *bhakats*. As such Golaghat possesses 19, Dhemaji 18, Sonitpur 15, Dibrugarh 8, Kamrup 6, Morigaon 4, and Goalpara,

Tinsukia, Dhubri, Barpeta district possesses 1 *bhakat* each respectively.

Impact of the culture of the Sattras are noted in the life style of the inhabitants of the island - in their food as well as dress habits, in their speech and behavior, and about all, in their moral and spiritual life. Generally the aged man of the village of Majuli wear *dhoti*, *kamij* and keep no beard. Most of the people of Majuli do not use shoes, instead use chapple. Most of the old men keep long hair and twist it to form a *khopa* and put *chandon* on their forehead. In every village of Majuli there is *bayon* and *gayon*. In the evening, sound of the *doba*, (big drum) comes from the village *namghar*, giving warning to the people to worship God. This is not seen in any other part of the state. The Sattras still govern the society of the island to a large extent, and give shape to various customs.

13. Though the main purpose of the Sattra as a central institution of vaisnavism is to propagate the ideals and teachings of Sankaradeva, equal importance has been given to the teaching of Sattriya music and dance, moral values and various skills necessary for self-dependance and social adjustment.
14. Majuli can be declared as world Heritage site on the basis of the existence of monastic sattras which is a unique settlement pattern with special characteristics not found in any other monastic organization in the world.
15. It is often seen that the *adhikara* of monastic Sattra enjoys name, fame and reputation as well as social respect. But in comparison to their popularity, the common *bhakats* do not get anything – they are silent beings scarifying their lives. Judged from this point of view their sacrifice is greater than that of the Sattradhikaras.
16. While college or university education put more emphasis on theorizing, Sattra education lays its importance on the practical aspects of life to enhance the proper development of the

bhakats. As many as seven artist *bhakats* had received Sangeet Natak Academy Award in Sattriya dance. In a recent survey conducted by 'India Today' one *bhakat* of Uttar Kamalabari Sattras has been selected as one of the fifty talented artists in India.

17. *Bhakats* are recruited mainly from rural areas not from urban areas. Most of them have been recruited whose economic condition is not sound.
18. All the monastic and non monastic Sattras have great contribution to the Assamese society. But in case of cultural side monastic Sattras' contribution is in comparable. Sattriya dance has been well recognized and it has crossed the national boundary and is growing increasingly popular abroad. Some foreign students also have come to learn Sattriya dance in the Sattras of Majuli.
19. At present all the Sattras whether monastic or non monastic are facing instability and insecurity as incidents of thefts, large scale encroachment of Sattras' land etc. have become concern. We can say that these are a conspiracy by a section of society against the existence of the Sattras. The government of Assam has not yet taken these problems of the Sattras seriously till now.

9. Suggestions and Recommendations

Following suggestions are forwarded for consideration –

1. The development and survival of a Sattras is solely depending on the Sattradhikar. He must be broad-minded. He should look after the fellow *bhakat* with impartiality. Sattradhikar is the religious head and administrator. Therefore he must have certain qualities like strong personality, good health, and broad outlook. He must be a man with a knowledge of religion and religious book like *bhagawat*, *kirtton dosom geeta* etc. Again he must have knowledge of other religion of the world.
2. Economy of the Sattras is agrarian. Therefore attempt should be taken to do scientific

agriculture for maximum production from the one plot of land. Sattras from own sources like

- (i) *Guru-kor* from the *sisyas* to maintain the annual expenditure of the Sattras like *guru kirtton*, *tithi* of late Sattradhikara and other compulsory must have strong economic base. Therefore Sattras should try to generate fund for themselves.
- (ii) Donation from *sisyas*;
- (iii) Collection of revenue from *khat* and *mauja* of the Sattras;
- (iv) Regular ecclesial tour by *adhikara* ;
- (v) Compulsory annual *Chahor fura* by *rajmedhi* and *pachoni* of the Sattras etc.

For the development of heritage tourism Sattras can take several scheme like construction of museum, organizing commercial cultural programme, providing guest- house facility, tourist guide, craft show room etc. Of course for these activities local youth should be appointed on contract basis as *bhakats* cannot do all these works except being tourist guide.

3. *Sisyas* are the back bone of a Sattras. They have great role for the development of the Sattras. There should be a register for neophytes with phone number. Rich and able *sisyas* should help Sattras by constructing essential building of the Sattras.
4. Encroachment to the land area is another problem for the Sattras. Therefore government should recover this land to the Sattras. Same is the case of *khats* of Auniati Sattras. Revenue should be given to the Sattras as it maintains the Sattras.

Monastic sattras must give emphasis on economic development of the *bhaka*. Now a days a poor celibate *bhakat* cannot maintain two or three *aldhora* of the *boha* because of the financial crisis. Therefore *bhakat* population is decreasing year after year. *Sisyas* and well-wisher of the monastic sattras may take initiative to save these ancient sattras.

5. Gauhati University may open a center for the promotion of research activities regarding Sattriya culture including Sattriya dance and *ankiya bhaona* and can organize workshop on it. It can also open Post Graduate course in Sattriya dance. Dibrugarh University has already taken initiative in this regard and opened M.A. course in Performing Arts (Sattriya Dance) (The Assam Tribune, 9th June, 2012).

The Sattria is one of the most important cultural institutions of Assam. Assamese society has acquired its strength over the years from the immense contributions the Sattras have made to the cultural mosaic of the state. Once it had a glorious past. It was an important organ for the

society as it was engaged in spreading light through the means of culture. However, the present materialistic society may not be able to realize the importance of it precisely. The Sattras of course have not been able to keep pace with time.

It is a matter of great regret that most of the Sattras are ageing or in the process of decadence. We have to find out practical ways and implement them in action to save this institution before it is very late. Now a days there is a growing awareness in the world about the need of preserving animals as well as heritage sites that are facing extinction. The monastic Sattras are also in the process of extinction. Therefore, we have to shoulder the august duty of preserving it as a cultural heritage.

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