

# Origin and Development of Satra and its Relation to Neighbouring Village: A Sociological Study

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## **Abstract:**

Satras are the life line for the people of Assamese Society .It has distinctive religious, cultural pattern and way of life. The Satra institutions are the product of neo-vaishnavite movement propagated by great Saint Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam. The Satras are not just monasteries, but centre of traditional performing arts. In 15 century the first Satra was founded in Borduwa, Nagaon district of Assam. Majuli is considered as a hub of satra intuition. The Study was conducted in Auniati Satra of Majuli. Among the Satra institution of Assam, the Auniati Satra is one of the most Significant as per history and culture of the region is concerns. Any religious institution can't Survive without support of the local communities. The paper is attempt to examine the socio- economic and cultural relation of satra with neighboring villages .The methodology followed in the paper is both qualitative and quantitative. The study reveals that in monastic Satra, all the Bhakats and Satradhikars are celibacy in nature. So, monastic satra are closely interdependent with neighboring villages in the field of economic activity, religious and cultural celebration and some other social activity. The study of relation between Satra and its neighbouring villages is important for understanding influences and interdependent nature of any religious institution to its society.

**Keywords:** satra, neo-vaisnavite, monastic, religious, economic.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Satra are the integral part in the field of social, cultural and religious perspective for the people of Assamese society. Satra are the religious holy place especially corresponding with the ideology of Ekasaran tradition of vaishnavism. The neo-vaishnavite movement brought about an intellectual and religious transformation in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The Satra institution are the notable outcome of the neo-vaishnavite movement pioneered by great saint Mahapuresh Srimanta Sankardeva and his contemporaries. This institution are provides the principle and expansion the faith of bhakti in entire part of Assam. The word satra first appeared in the satopotha Brahmina (Sarma 1966). The word is also accessible in the Bhagawata Puran and Rigvedas whose literally meaning is a System of meditation .But after the initiated of neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam.

The satra are considered as a sacred place where decent and devoted people are gathered to discuss vaishnava related religious theme. When Sankar deva was born in 1449 A.D., the state Assam faced socio- political disturbance and religious imbalanced. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century the people of Assam

practice various contradictory cultures. The greater part of the people attached to non-Aryan tribes with their peculiar customs, religious beliefs and practices. The Shaktism was also closely practices in that period. Sankardeva neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam aims at direction the people in simple ways of living, equality of men despite of caste and community in the field of religious practices. This major ambition was however on the elimination of the complicated and elaborate system of ritual and practices associated with propitiation of multitudes of god and goddesses under which peasants and workers faced extremely exploitation from all the priestly class (Neog1965:80). There for Sankardeva used to assigned new simple way of congregation prayer naam-kirtan and devotion to one absolute god in the form of Vishnu or Krishna attempt to simplify this ritualism. (Nath 2012:7)

The satra are not just a religious place but centre of traditional performing arts. Various classical dance and devotional songs are practices in the Satra Campuses. The Satra institution and its prominence branch Namghar in every village brings the flash of vaishnavism to entire household in Assam. Satra institution does not attained its full fledge during the time of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva (Sarma 1996-24). After the demise of Sankardeva Satra were divided into four segments due to different ideology among the disciple of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Satras are guided the nature of human life through the philosophy of bhakti among the people of Assamese society. The main principle of the neo-vaishnavite movement was emancipation from various unnecessary practices in the name of god and creates an ideology of equivalent society based on fraternity, humanity, equality and democracy. The Satra institution is able to bring new changes in the society and emphasizes the message of universal brother hood among people of the society. This paper is attempted to examine the origin development and relation of satra with neighbouring village as well as society.

### **Objective of the Paper:**

The objective of the paper is as follows:

1. To understand the origin and development of the Satra.
2. To analyse the structure and function of the satra.
3. To examine the relation and interdependency among Satra and neighbouring villages.

### **Methodology:**

Auniati Satra was chosen for the present study because it is one of the most influential and affluent chari raj Satra of Assam recognized by the Ahom King. On the other hand three neighbouring villages of Auniati Satra namely Bortani, Jugundhar and Alimur gaon were selected for the study to understand the socio-cultural and interdependency relation between Satra and its neighbouring villagers. This paper is based on both quantitative and qualitative method. All the relevant data have been collected from primary and secondary sources. To understand the origin and development and structure of the Satra secondary sources were collected by different books article, internet etc. for primary data collection the respondent of the Auniati Satra and respondents of neighbouring villagers were selected through purposive sampling method. The respondents of the present study are two types- The Satradhikar including all the Bhakats and all the villagers of three neighbouring villages. For check opf convince 45 numbers of Bhakat including Satradhikar were selected from Auniati Satra and to understand the relation of Satra with its neighbouring villages 35 of respondents were selected from each three villages through purposive sampling method. The total numbers of respondents is 150. The minors are not including in this study. The primary data are collected through survey interview method and observation.

## Sample size:

No.	Sample	No. of sample
1	Auniati Satra	45
2	Jugundhari	35
3	Bortani	35
4	Alimur	35
Total		150

## Brief description about the field of study:

Sri Sri Auniati Satra located in Majuli district of Assam, India. It is situated in the western part of Majuli, around 5km from the kamalabari town. Auniati Satra was established in 1653 AD with patronage of Ahom king Jaidevas Singha, the first Satradhikar was Sri Sri Niranjan deva Goswami. The Auniati Satra was included Raj Satra among the four Raj Satra of Assam. The Auniati Satra adheres to Brahma Samhati of Ekasarana naam Dharma. All the Bhakats and Satradhikar remain celibacy and dedicated their life to focus entirely on Lord Krishna which the supreme deity in Ekasarana Dharama. At present there are more than 400 Bhakat reside at Auniati Satra. The Bhakats are brought to their Satra at age of childhood and trained them the ideology of Sankardeva as well as Satriya life and culture like spiritual theatrical performance, playing instrument like khul taal and Satriya dance. Many festivals like Rashleela Palnaam Janamstami Vauna Samaroo Tithis of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, Bihu are the major festival Auniati Satra.

## Origin and development of Satra:

The word Satra in Assamese derived from the Sanskrit word Satra. It means Sacrificial assembly. This spiritual institution established by vaishnava are generally called Satras and not math. This name seems to have been taken from the Bhagavata –Puran, where it occurs in numerous places (Neog-1955-311). During the time of Sankardeva, the religious elements of Assamese society were oppressed by the anti-religious principle enormous misinterpretation had overstepped in to the predominant shakti culture leading to fall in moral values in the Society. Srimanta Sankardeva established peace and harmony among the ethnic groups. He can put in the same league as Lord Buddha who redeemed the Indian people from the exploitation of the suffocating caste system (Borkakoti-2022, pp2). The Satra of neo – Vaishnavite religious institution of Assam is the Symbol of glory heritage and dignity for the people of Assamese society. The Satra institution is about almost five centuries old. Eka saran tradition of neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam was introduced by great saint Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and his contemporaries. Eka saran means belief in one god and reject Vedic ritualism and focuses on pure devotion to Lord Krishna and abide chiefly in congregational singing (Kirtan) and listening (Sravan) to his deeds and activities. The architect of neo-vaishnavite movement Sankardeva was a polymath, a saint scholar, a poet, play writer, dancer, actor, artist as well as great cultural and religious reformer. After his pilgrimage across India, Sankardeva introduced his Bhakti Movement from Borduwa in Assam. Sankardeva established satra as well as Monikut and kirtanghar at Borduwa about 1494 AD. with an onus on the philosophy of equality. After demise of Sankardeva in his disciple Madhavdeva, Damodardeva, Harideva and Gopaldeva enlarged the Satra institution across the every parts of Assam. During the times of Sankardeva the devotees were assembled in open space under trees. Although transitory prayer house were built the tradition of devotees living in the premises did not happen during

Sankardeva life line. Madhav deva and Damodardeva gave a definite shape to structural and organizational aspect of this institution. The most notable characteristics of the vaishnavism of Assam is the satra institution through which the faith was propagated and established. It may be monastic as well as semi monastic in form (sarma1966-7). In monastic satra the Satradhikar lives the life of a celibate along with bhakat and maintained strict rule and regulation in the sense of dress, food habit and lifestyle. The women are not permitted to enter in the satra campuses at night time .In semi monastic Satra, the Satradhika and bhakat lives as celibacy but maintain family relationship.

After the demises of Sankardeva the Satras are divided in to four sub sect which are called Samhati. The term Samhati is a Synonym of the term Sangha mean an association (sarma 1966-69). At the beginning, the Satra was spilt in to two sect but it is extended to four sect like Brahma Samhati, Nika Samhati, Purushasamhati and Kala Samhati. The brahma Samhati which is purely celibacy in nature in the time of origin but later Garamursatra of majuli was converted as a Semi monastic Satra by Pitamber deva Goswami .Second types of Satra Purusha samhati is fully follow grihasthi. Among the all members of Nika Samhati satras are Purely celibacy and follow rigid rules and regulation and discipline in various sides like dress pattern, manners and food habit .The fourth types of Satra, kala Samhati is basically concentrated with development of lower caste and tribal people (Nath 2014-353) represent the offshoots of 6 sudra Satra and 6 brahma satra formed by Gopalata and his followers.

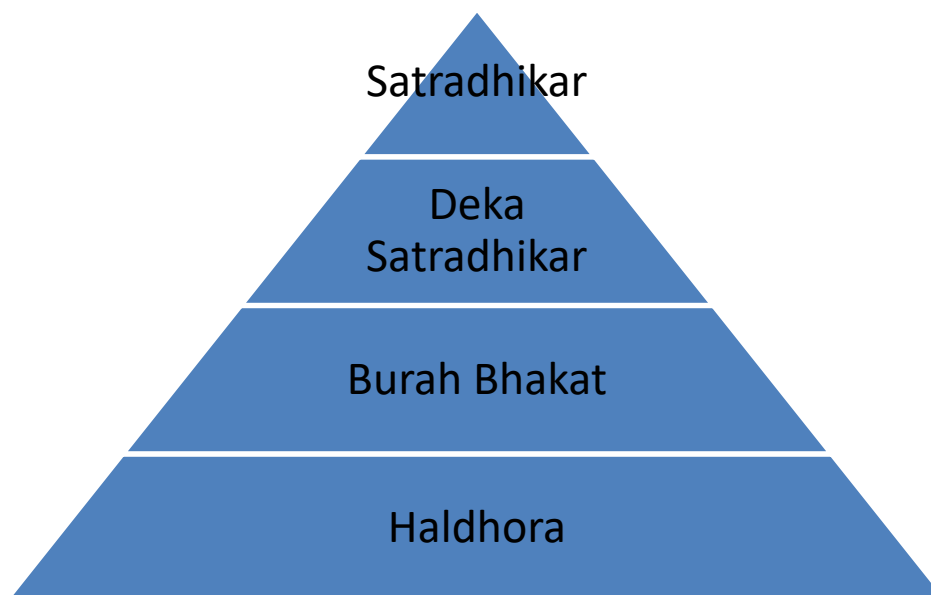
### **Structure of the Satra :**

The vaishnava Satra of Assam are Consists of a square courtyard wall ,different according to its toughness with four opening or entranceway called karapat and accommodate four rows of long houses every one cleft in to a numbers of room at the sides and the assembly hall and the temple located at the centre of the Satra. The fours row of long houses are called hati where all the vaishnava resides separately with their sishya. The central institute within a satra is the prayer –hall known as namghar. The end of the hall typically place to the east and the west direction. Manikut is also attached with namghar in the eastern end. Monikut is known as house of the jewel. The idols of lord Krishna and some spiritual book like Bhagavata Gita, Vedas are kept inside the manikut.

### **Administrative System of the Satra:**

There are generally two different from monastic (udhasin/kewaliya) and semi monastic (grihasthi) Satra found in Assam. In monastic satra all the Bhakats and Satradhikar are remaining celibacy and maintained strict rules regulation in the sense of dress, manners as well as in the food habit .The most of influential and affluent monastic satra are found in Majuli district of Assam. In grihasti Satra all the bhakat and satradhikar (pontiff) are house holding. The major component associated with Satra management and administrative systems are discussing bellow:

## Hierarchical structure of the Satra:



**Fig.1**

**Satradhikar:** The satradhikar is the religious and administrative head of the satra. The superiors whether married or celibate had to live a life of simplicity, regularity and continence. Above all, he had to perform and attend the religious duties and ceremonials with care and punctuality (Neog1955-334). From the financial matter to cultural development of the satra, Satradhikar took strong responsibility for affairs of the bhakats and development of the satra.

**Deka Adhikar:** Deka Adhikar is the substitute authority of the Satra. In the absence of Satradhikar deka Satradhikar look after the every matter of the Satra. The Satradhikar guided and provided Special teaching to deka satradhikar to perform ritual activities of the satra.

**Bhakat (Devotee):** The inmate called Bhakats are unmarried and reside in small house dwelling of one or two room called boha. Bhakats are playing important role in the socio cultural and religious development of the Satra. The Bhakats are maintained and promote the heritage and tradition of the Satriya culuture .The bhakat are bring to Satra at the age of childhood and teach them vaishnava related theme and philosophy by the elder bhakat known as burha bhakat. The younger bhakat are called haldhora. The burha bhakat adopt his aldhora at the age of childhood and took full responsibility in the matter of food, dress, education and medical expenditure like a guardian. The bhakats are maintaining strict disciplinary life and actively co-operate at every matter of the Satra.

**Sisyas or Disciples:** Every laymen of Assamese society sprinkled in the various parts of Assam fold under vaishnavism. Every youth of Assam take Sarana before marriage and after taking Sarana any individual can took parts in some activities of the Satras.

For preserving and expansion of Satriya culture and tradition, Satradhikars distributed various numbers of major portfolios among the bhakats according to their age, experience and quality for the smooth functioning of the Satra. The major portfolios distributed by satradhikar are discuss bellow –

## Managerial Structure of the Satra:



**Fig.2**

**Bhagavati:** The Bhagavata Puran is the fundamental scripture of Vaishnavim and it was found necessary that the work in its original form should be recited and delineate frequently in the Satra. Those who recite the Bhagavata in the Satra is called Bhagavati.

**Pathak:** The readers of the Sanskrit works, bhakti-ratnavali and Bhakti ratnakar are also called pathak. Sometime pathaks are also recite Bhagavata purans as well as chorus with the congregation.

**Gayana–Vayana:** The gayan and Vayana delivering musical performance during naamprasangas and dramatic representation of the Satra. Gayan –Vayan is formed by a numbers of drummer (vayana) and singer (gayana), who carried khul and cymbals in their hands.

**Natua and Sutradhar:** The Natuas are provided dance performance and took part in the dramatic performance of the Satra.

**Ojapali:** Some poems like those illustrated in Sankardeva Kirtan ghosa were occasionally performed by a small chorus known as ojapali. Ojapali performers are generally wear long-sleeved white gowns, silver jewellery and bunch of tiny metallic percussions played by body vibration.

**Deuri:** The duties of the Deuri are to distribute the Prasad (sacred food) among the bhakts during the naamprasanga.

**Bharali:** Bharalis were appointed in the satra to look after the store house and they were in charge of all materials that had to be stored for a time and then given for consumption.

**Likhak:** Likhak were appointed in the satra for writing manuscript as well as writing documentary about the satra.

**Hati Mota:** The duties of hati mata are to call for clerics in the hatis to prayer services or to inform to some meeting of the satra.

**Paldhariya:** Paldhariya is appointing for kept watch over the kirtanghar and other important building of the Satra.



## Socio-economic relation of Satra with its Neighboring village:

In monastic satra of Majuli all the Satradhikar and bhakats lead a life of celibacy. Due to celibacy in nature, the monastic satra are closely interdependent with their neighboring people in the field of agriculture production, household activities as well as various religious and cultural festivals. Agriculture is the major source of income for the people of rural society. Most of the Satra's are located in rural areas. Paddy is the most suitable crops for the land of Auniati satra. There are lots of land in the name of satra donated by the Ahom king. The members of satra are not directly involvement in the agricultural production but they give the land to neighboring people for cultivation and share the products after harvesting the Crops. Although, the bhakats of satra are not directly involvement in the agriculture production but they are also co-operate and perform some function related to agriculture.

**Table 1.1 Agricultural activities of the bhakat of the Satra**

SI No	Types of activities	No. of Respondent	%
1	Preparing the land	4	8.89
2	Selecting and sowing seeds	8	17.77
3	Maintaining field	2	4.44
4	Harvesting	7	15.55
5	Threshing	6	13.33
6	Not engage	18	40
	Total	45	100

From the above table it's reflect that most of the members of Satra are not involving in agricultural production. Most of them 18 (45%) are not involving in agricultural production. Cattle are considered as a sacred animal among the Vaishnavite Saint of the Satra. So, they are never use cattle for plugging. 8(17.77%) of respondents are involving in selecting and providing the seeds to the farmers. The bhakats are not cutting crops but 3(6.66%) are mentioned that after harvesting the crops they are bring the crops to home through tractor. After harvesting the crops 11(24.44%) respondents mentioned that they are threshing the crops by threshing machine or with the help of cattle.

## Neighbouring Villagers view on relationship in economic activities:

There are active co-operation amongst villagers and bhakats of the Satra. The villagers and bhakats are interdependent each other in terms of agriculture as well as household activities. Most of the villagers are cultivate in the land of Satra and Share their agricultural products

**Table: 1.2 Villagers view on economic interdependent**

SI No	Types of activities	No. of respondent	PC
1	Agricultural activities	18	40
2	Household Activates	7	15.55
3	Other Activities	6	13.33
4	Not engage	14	31.12
	Total	45	100

Form the table 1.2 it is clear that the highest numbers of respondents of villagers are dependent on land of Satra, which is 18 (40%). Some of them are involving household activities like wood cutting threshing etc. 7(15.55%) of respondent are help in household activities and 14(31.12%) of respondents

are not directly involving in such like this activities with the satra.

## Religious and cultural relation:

There is a close relationship and interdependence among members of Satra and its neighbouring villagers during the religious and festival occasion. During the festival time of the satra, the Satradhikar of satra call a meeting among the neighbouring villagers and handed them some duty among the villager to smooth functioning of the festival.

**Table: 1.3 Members of satra view on highest numbers of neighbouring villagers Co-operate festival**

Sl no	Occasion	No. of Respondent	%
1	Raas	10	22.22
2	Palnaam	15	33.33
3	Bhaona Samaruh	18	40
4	Tithi	2	4.45
5	Others	0	0
	Total	45	100

From the above table 1.3 reflects that most of the neighbouring villagers Participate and co-operate at bahona samaruh. Bahona Samaruh is the one of the largest festival of Auniati satra held after every two year. The number of participant is 18 (40%). Palnaam is also of the major annually celebrated festival of this satra .15(33.33%) respondent are mentioned that palnam is the Second highest Participant festival. 2 (4.45%) respondent mentioned that in tithi generally invited people are only participate and celebrated

**Table No: 1.4 Villager view on participation on various occasions**

Sl No	Participation rate	Nos	%
1	Every occasion	20	44.45
2	Some Occasion	15	33.33
3	Not participate	10	22.22
	Total	45	100

From the above table it's clear that 20 (44.45%).Of the respondents of villagers are participate in every occasion of the satra. 15 (33.33%) of respondents are mentioned that they are participate in the some occasion only and 10 (22.22%) of respondents are not participate in any occasion.

## Findings of the study:-

- The spiritual institution Satra was the outcome of neo-vaishnavite movement initiated by great saint Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and his contemporizes.
- The doctrine of the neo-vaishnavite movement was introduced eka saran namdharma. Eka Saran means belief in one god, where Lord Vishnu is worshipped by Naam Kirtana and tried to abolish the practices of animal sacrifice through this dharma.
- The Satra institution does not attained its full fledge during the time of Sankardeva. Srimanta Sankardeva established the first Satra in 1494 in Barduwa, his native village in nagaon district. In the initial stages onlyreligious discussion were performed in the Satra.



- Satra institution of Assam consists of a Kirtanghar (Namghar), a Manikut, Korpat and Hati (Two or four rows).
- After the demises of Sankardeva, Satra were divided into four segments namely Brahma Samhati, Purusha Samhati, Kala Samhati and Nika Samhati.
- There are generally two types of Satra monastic as well as semi-monastic Satra found in Assam.
- In monastic Satra all the Bhakats and Satradhikars lead a life of celibacy.
- Monastic Satra are more independent with neighbouring villagers in comparison to semi-monastic Satra.
- Most of the Bhakats 18(45%) of respondents are directly not involved in agricultural activities.
- The neighbouring villages are dependent on agricultural land of the Satra. 40% of respondents from villagers mentioned that they are dependent on agricultural land of the Satra.
- Most of the respondents from villagers 20(44.45%) are mentioned that they participate in every occasion of the Satra.

### Conclusion:

Satra are the heart and soul part for the people of Assamese society. Satras are not only a religious holy place but centre of traditional performing arts. The monastic Satra are more prestigious than semi-monastic Satra in terms of spirituality, ideology and uniqueness nature. In monastic Satra, all the Bhakats and Satradhikars lead a life of celibacy and follow strict disciplinary life in the sense of food habits and dress pattern. The members of Satra and its neighbouring villagers make strong co-ordination in the field of economy, culture and religion. The study of relation of Satra with neighbouring villages is important for understanding impact and influence of any religious institution with its society.

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