

History, Development and Contribution of The SATTRA

The Vaisnavite *Sattra* has been playing a very significant role over four and a half centuries in the religious and cultural field of Assam. Some of the *Sattra* have also influenced the political history stepping beyond religious and cultural arena. Although, over the decades, due to the influence of modernization, the unfathomed loyalty of people towards *Sattra* is diminishing, the centrifugal force of binding the society in Assam is still functional. The some of the *Sattra* established at the time of Mahapurush Sankardeva with sound financial strength still continue to command respect from the people. Till the last decade of 20th Century, almost every Assamese family used to maintain close contact with their *Sattra* and continued to take teachings from the preceptors and then lead their life as directed by them. However, due to impact of modern education and civilization, the religious bindings are weakening and the people are becoming more realistic and materialistic. The *Sattra* too are no longer capable of keeping pace with time and are unable to maintain their earlier strong bond with the masses. But the four and a half century old bond has not been completely snapped as yet.

Although, we find more than five hundred names of the *Sattra* in Assam, in reality, the number is not that large. Branches and sub-branches carved out from certain original *Sattra* have accounted for the increase of a few hundred of such *Sattra*. Establishment of new *Sattra* by off-springs after leaving their original *Sattra*, particularly belonging to non-celibate groups, has contributed to the growth in number spread over between Xadiya (The eastern most of part of the Brahmaputra Valley) and Koch-Bihar (In North Bengal) at present. The *Sattra* are not only the centre of propagating Vaisnavite faith but are also the places of cultivating art, culture and education at the same time. The *Sattra* have immense contributions towards growth and enlightenment of life in Assam. But prior to dwelling on that aspect it will be appropriate to take into account precisely as to how the *Sattra* institution and its origin took place.

Definition of the word Sattra

The word 'Sattra' was derived from the Sanskrit word 'Sallra' which means a sacrificial session of longer duration and also a centre for distribution of rice and water (*Anna Sallra and Jala sallra*). *Yajnas* (sacrifices) in a day are mentioned as *Ekaha-Yajnas* in Vedic literature, while those performed beyond one but on less than twelve days are termed as *Ahin Yajanas* and the ones beyond twelve days are referred as *Sallra Yajanas*. But how did the word *Sallra* denoting

sacrificial session find a place in the Vaisnavite religious centers having no relations with *Yajnas*, to identify the institution is a matter of worth introspection. Before the Buddhist era commenced, the Hindu monasteries were the residential centre of learning, meditation and religious discussions in India. During the rise of Buddhism and Jainism the *Bihars* or the *Sanghams* grew as the centers for *Sramans* to be used for residential and religious purposes. The *Bhikhyuis* or the *Sramans*, as they were known, used to live a simple life in such monasteries observing a well-defined path of living. After the fall of Buddhist and Jain *Bihars*, the *Maths* started to emerge. But the word *Sallra* meaning sacrificial session does not appear to be in use by any of those communities in performing their religions practices. Then how and in what context did the neo-Vaisnavite preceptors use the word *Sattra* to identify it as the centre of their religious services and preaching?

The *Bhagawata-Purana* is the supreme holy book for the Vaisnavite in Assam. For the first time, sage Suka had recited this book before king Parikshit who was counting his last days for death to occur. Subsequently, when sage Suta Ugrasaba arrived at Naimisha forest where sages like Sounak and others had been performing a *Sullra* (sacrificial session) over a thousand years, the sages requested him to recite the *Bhagawata* there which sage Suta obliged after the sacrificial session was over. Since the *Bhagawata* was recited on the occasion of performing a *Sallra* (sacrifice) and the greatness of the God had been discussed and glorified at length, the Assamese *Vaisnavs* in line of the sages at Naimisa Aranya (forest) performing a *Sullra*, began to apply the word *Sattra* to identify it as a centre of preaching and a place of interacting with the devotees. In course of time, *Sattra* emerged in its place.

The word '*Sattra*' despite its Vedic origin has become an integral part of the Neo-Vaisnavite religion and also in social life in Assam, where it has been adopted as an original Assamese word that assumes a special significance. More than that, joined with a secondary suffix (*a Taddhit Pratyay*), it is used as '*Sattriya*', that denotes a special cultural tradition in the Assamese Vaisnavite religion. It is mainly for this reason; it denotes a vastly different meaning in Assam from what it means in Sanskrit and in other modern Indian languages.

In the '*RigVeda*', the word '*Sattra*' is mentioned as below :

Sattrehajatariyata Namobhi Kumbheretah Siyichatuh Samanam.

Being pleased by the prayer offered in the *Sattra*, Gods Sun and Varun inserted their semen into a jar from which sage Basistha was born later. Here *Sattra* denotes a *Yajna*. Similarly, in the *Sukla Yadurveda*' we find :

'Sattrasya Ridhirasatganma. Jyotymittra Abhum'. Here also, *Sattra* has been used in the sense of a *'Yajna'*.

From the Vedic literatures and also in the footnotes mentioned there, it appears that *Yajnas* (Sacrifices) were classified into five categories- *Homa, Isty, Pasu, Soma* and *Sattra*. The nature of the *Sattra-Yajna* is *'govamayan Yajnas'* continued up to 361 days and included in the *'Soma-Yajna'*. But those *'Yajnas'* performed beyond twelve days at a stretch were named *Sattra*. Normally, the *'Gavamayan Yajnas'* were called the *'Sattra.'*

The same meaning is found in the *Brahmans* and the *Upanisads* too. In the *Sandogya Upanishad* it is mentioned "Atha yat Sattrayanam", i.e the *Sattras (Yajnas)* performed for a long time have been compared with *Brahmachrya* (celibacy). The *Sattra-yajnas* are performed over a long period at a stretch. By performing a *Sattra-yajna* one can attain *Brahmatwa* (divinity) as attained by observing celibacy. *'Sattrah Atmanam Tranam'* which means – *Sattra (yajna)* saves the soul.

*'Abhayasya he yo data sha pujoyah Satatang Nripah,
Sattranghe vardharte tasya Sadaiwabhya Dakshinam'.*

-Manu Sangheeta

The king, who protects his subjects from thieves, is always adored. Because, such a king performs a long-time *yajna*, gives donations to the priests and thus attains power and resources through the *yajna* to be able to protect his people.

In Indian literatures too *'Sattra'* has been denoting the same meaning constantly. In *'Sisupal Badh'* composed by Magha, there is mention about the *Rajasui yajna* performed by *Yudhisthira* and his offering of *Arghya* (items offered to the God) first to *Krishna* before the others. The names of the priests engaged in the *Yajna* are also mentioned there.

'Satrinang Narapateswa Sampadah', i.e whoever performs a *yajna* is called a *Sattrin*.

In *'Raghubansa'* of Kalidasa, the word *'Sattra'* has been used to denote a *yajna*.

*'Habishe Dirghasattrasya Sa Chedaning Pratyeshah,
Bhujyanga Pihitang Danang Patalamadhitisthati'.*

She, i.e. *Surabhi* (the holy cow) is now in *patala* the doors of which are well-guarded by snakes, so that she could provide milk to *Varuna* and thus enable him to make *ghee* (clarified butter) required for the *Sattra* (sacrifice).

In the *Mahabharata* and in some of the *Puranas* too, the word 'Sattra' has been used to denote the same meaning. But gradually, its meaning began to apply in wider sense and in Sanskrit language we could find several other words covered by the meaning of *Sattra*.

The application of the term *Sattra* gradually extended from the sacrificial activities to denote places and abodes of various activities of allied nature. The student English Dictionary by V. S. Apte (M. Banarasidas, Delhi- 1982 edition) the extended meaning of the *Sattra* has been provided thus :

- (i) A, sacrificial session from 13 days to 100 days;
- (ii) A sacrifice in general;
- (iii) An oblation, offering or gift;
- (iv) Liberality, munificence;
- (v) Virtue;
- (vi) House, residence;
- (vii) Covering;
- (viii) Wood, forest;
- (ix) Tank, pond;
- (x) Fraud, cheating;
- (xi) A place of refuge, asylum, covert;

Etymologically, 'Sattra' (Sad + tra) is where and who protects the virtuous ones (as mentioned in the Sanskrit-Assamese Dictionary-by Kiron Sarma).

In his book 'Sattriya Sanskritir Rup-rekha', Satradhikar Shri Narayan Chandra Goswami, quotes from 'Nilakantha Basna Dhritam', as below :

*'Bahubhyah Diyate Yatra Tripyanti praninans Bahu,
Kartaro Bahabo Yatra Tat Sattramabhidhiyate.'*

This means, a place where a lot of devotees reside, where donations are given and where life derives satisfaction is called a *Sattra*. He explained; *Sattra* is called anything which leads people to a divine place or protects the virtuous ones.

Thus, it appears that from denoting a specific work, the meaning of the word *Sattra* got extended to denote a specific place. In several dictionaries, this word, besides retaining its original meaning of *Yajna*, has been found to include words, such as, a shelter, a religious place, a residence, *sadadan* (serving food with donation) etc. as well. In languages, other than Assamese, but particularly in Bengali, *Sattra* denotes words like *Jalasartra*, *Anna-sattra* and eatery too.

But in the Bengali religious Books, such as the Mahabharata, *Sattra* still continues to carry the meaning of *yajna* even today.

*'Maharaja Janmejaya Parikshita Putra,
Sarpakula Binasharthe Kaila Sarpayajna.
Seyee Yajne Munisrestha Sri Baisanpayan,
Vyasa-birasita Katha Karana Sravan.*

(Kashidasi Mahabharata –Adi Parba)

The use of the word 'Sattra' in Assam :

Not much research has been done to determine how the word *Sattra* came into application in Assam. During the time of spread of Vedic cultural stream to Assam as well as subsequent to that during the Neo-Vaisnavite movement, Mahapurush Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, Bhattadeva and others began to use the word '*Sattra*', as a main and significant sheltering place for conducting religious practices. The logical inferences can be drawn from certain information mentioned in some of the *Tamrasasans* and stone-inscriptions of ancient Assam, such as :

(a) As per the 'Nidhanpur Tamrasasan' of king Bhaskar Varma in the seventh century (which in fact is the renewed form of the Tamrapattra given by king Bhuti Varma, in the sixth century), one-seventh of the produce obtained from the land is donated to the Brahmins of different dynasties (gotras) that had to be used in activities like worships, food items offered to the deities, and in entertaining the guests. Thus, it appears that during that time, the word '*Sattra*' did not mean *yajna* alone, but also included those words as stated above. Here, the use of '*Sattra*' is quite significant and is linked with practicing religious services.

(b) In the Umachal Stone-incription of Surendra Varma (fifth century AD) mention has been found about construction of the cave-temple of Lord Balabhadra Swami and also about using the word *Bhagawata* and the procedure of his worshipping. This worshipping procedure is identical to the system followed in worshipping Lord Krishna, Vasudeva. In the Bor-Ganga stone inscriptions of King Bhuti Varma (Sixth Century AD), '*Aswamedha Yajna*' (sacrifice of horse) and '*Param Devat*', or '*Param Bhagawata*', have been mentioned. Similarly, in the stone image of Lord Vishnu, recovered at Deopani, and known to have been carved in the eighth or ninth century, the four-lined words inscribed on the back side of the image reading. '*Bhagawata Narayansya Saili Pratima Bhaktanan*' is historically significant. In another stone-inscription of '*Sankar-Narayana*' carved in the contemporary era, it was mentioned- '*Adou Nama Sankar-Narayana Kirtan*' where the use of the word '*Kirtan*' deserves attention.

Thus, it appears that through various writings and inscriptions the words '*Sattra*', *Bhagawata* and *Nam-Kirtan* (reciting holy books in adoration of God) found their extended meanings much before the Neo-Vaisnavite movement began in Assam.

(c) A stone-inscription was recovered at Ambari (within Guwahati) in 1970 at the time of digging the land for constructing the Textile Institute building there. Although the scripts inscribed on the stone (now preserved in the State Museum) were found in illegible and dilapidated condition, yet Dr. Pratap Chandra Chowdhury could study them to find out their meanings. In '*Kamrupa Sasanawali*' edited by Dr. Dimbeswar Sarma, or in '*Prachya Sasanawali*' edited by Dr. Maheswar Neog, none of these two noted scholars opposed Dr. Chowdhury's findings. According to Dr. Chowdhury, the inscriptions read as below :

*'Adityasama Sri Samudra Pala Rajye Prabla Sabasika
Sattra Saguna Kriya Sanwasin Bole
Dan Punyan Saja. Yogihatti Saka Isha Bana Chakra.
Murha Bhanati*

The above scripts show that in the kingdom of monarch Samudra Pal, who was shining as the Sun, there was a residential *Sattra* where religion had been practiced in all the three forms, i.e. *Satta*, *Raja* and *Tama*. The sages used to say that donating was sacred act of virtue, the humble writer described (yogihatti, 1154 Sakabda).

During 1154 Saka (1232 AD) a *Sattra* was existing at Yogi Hatti where all the three formats of religious practicing were in prevalence. Opposite to the sense carried by the word '*Nirguna*' (un-defiled by passion) '*Saguna*' meant performance like *Yajnas* (sacrifice) as conducted in the *Sattra* at Yogi Hatti, mentioned in *Prachya Sasanawali* (edited by Dr. Maheswar Neog).

(d) A stone-inscription was found at Lanka in the district of Nagaon which has now been preserved in the State Museum. Dr. Pratap Chandra Chowdhury found out the meanings of those scripts and later published them in the 23rd chapter of the research paper of Kamrup Anusandhan Samitee in 1977-78. According to Dr. Chowdhury's findings, the word '*Sattra*' had been mentioned in the 9th, 10th and the 11th lines of the twelve-lined stone-inscriptions as below :

In line 9 : Tyaslesha Binyasta Vidyawat, Yatra *Sattrang* ba Asramang, Tasya Dharma Mandirang.

In line 10 : *Sattrang* Shilong swa, Attashilong swa Souhardang; Yasya Hatta Grihadi Ardha Dabakam.

In line 11 : (Yat *Sattre* Basate, shwah Vishnu), yah sada Tu *Sattre* Bicharantribhi.

The word *Sattra* here has been applied to denote the same meaning as in the words *Asrama* (hermitage) and *Dharma Mandir* (holy temple).

For instance :

'Yat *Sattre* Basate, shwah Vishnu', that means, that is the *sattra* where Visnu roams.

From these stone inscriptions it is gathered that king Mahamanikya of Barahi had donated a village named 'Bamdev' located inside a forest area, to a Brahmin called Dina. He established a hermitage there and erected a Vishnu temple and performed the religious services there. (The stone inscriptions were carved in Saka 1274; i.e. in 1352 A.D.) But, if the word 'Abdhi' was used to mean four in number, then Saka 1274 would be 1332 A.D. But this word denotes both seven and four at different times. In '*Prachy Sasanawali*'. Dr. Maheswar Neog while determining the time of the stone inscriptions mentions four for 'Abdhi' and in that case the time of the stone inscriptions could be taken as 1244 Saka.

Based on these two stone inscriptions some conclusions can be drawn as :

(1) There were *Sattra* in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, although those were not of the same model as the ones established in the neo-Vaisnavite era. But it can be confirmed that the word '*Sattra*' was used then to denote the same sense as carried by 'religious place' or 'religious temple'. Because, in the stone inscriptions of Tamrasasm and stone sculptures, only the actual events having impact on, and acceptance of the people were mentioned,.

(2) As per these two inscriptions, the *Sattra* were residential area where the priests and devotees practicing religious services could reside in.

(3) In the present days, instead of identifying it as the centre of performing *yajnas* (sacrifices) the word *Sattra* is used to denote a place where Vedic religious activities are practiced.

It is not certain as to how long the *Sattra* has been in use as the word to identify the Vaisnavite centre of devotional practices in Assam. Dr. Pratap Ch. Choudhury, after studying the stone inscriptions at Ambari had opined that the word '*Sattra*' had been in use since the thirteenth century A.D. and not coined in the Vaisnavite era. But the stone inscriptions at

Ambari are so illegible and dilapidated in condition that the veracity of Dr. Choudhury's assertions remain doubtful. Then, we find in *Britasur Badh Kabya*, a verse written by poet Ananta Kandali where the author had mentioned *Sattra* as a centre for religious discourses of the Vaisnavs in Assam. In that book, Ananta Kandali in giving his identity mentions that his father Ratna Pathak had founded a *Sattra* in Hajo and recited and explained the *Bhagawata* there. But this institution had not grown and developed as *Sattra* with its specific characteristics during Ratna Pathak's time. Ananta Kandali had mentioned '*Sattra*' as a place where the Vaisnavite devotees used to assemble to listen to the recitations from the *Bhagawata*. Neither did Mahapurush Sankardeva mention in his writings, nor in his self introductory note, about *Sattra*. We do not find its mention in Madhavdeva's writings either.

Sattra and the Srimad Bhagawata :

Since the activities in the *Sattra* could be inter-linked with those mentioned in the *Srimad Bhagawata*, we can easily assume that the word *Sattra* has undergone a change in its meaning in terms of neo-Vaisnavite culture in Assam. In the original *Srimad Bhagawata*, the word *Sattra* was used to denote '*yajna*' (sacrifice).

'Om Naimiseha Nimisha Khetre Risayah Sounakadayah,
Sattrang Sargaya Lokaya Sahasrasamamasata'.

In the ancient time, sages like Sounaka and others, keeping in mind to find the way to the abode of Vishnu, performed the thousand years-long *yajna* (sacrifice) in Namisaranya, a place, considered as sacred as the paradise of Vishnu. The interpreters mentioned '*Animish Khetra*' to denote the meaning of *Bishnu Khestra* (Vishnu's abode) here.

In the 21st *Sloka* of chapter one, part one, of *Srimad Bhagawata*, the word '*Dirgha Sattra*' has been used in the following context :

"Kalimagatamajnaya, Khetrahasmin Vaisnave Bayam,
Ashina Dirgha *sattrena* Kathayang Sakhayana Hareh."

"Sensing the approach of the *Kalikala* (age of sins) we have all assembled here to engage ourselves in performing a *yajna* (sacrifice) and thus spending time to listen to spiritual instructions and conversations in adoration of the God."

During intervals between the phases of the *Yajna*, sage Suta read out and explained the *Bhagawata* before the attentive sages gathered there.

While rendering the *Srimad Bhagawata* into Assamese, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva used 'Sattrā' in the same sense but perhaps to denote it as a centre for reciting the *Bhagawata*.

He Wrote :

'In Namisaranya, which is as sacred a place as the paradise of Vishnu, twenty eight thousand sages headed by sage Sounaka set up a *Sattrā* around sage *Suta* and listened to the *Bhagawata* and its sermons'.

'We started the thousand year-long *yajna* and the smoke coming from the burnt ghee (*Homa*) has made us smoke-like in complexion.'

-*Srimad Bhagawata*, edited by Dr. Kesabananda Goswami

It is mentioned in the *Srimad Bhagawata* (stanza 1, line 3), 'Showing respects to the sages, other sages started a *Sattrā* there around sage *Suta*'. In the second line of the second stanza it is stated. "We have commenced a thousand year-long *yajna* here."

But whatever it may be, we find the concept of *Sattrā* is evident in the sense of *yajna* because Sankardeva in the next stanza referred to the *yanja* performed over a thousand years. This goes counter to the indications of several writers who claim that Sankardeva mentioned about that thousand year-long *yanja* in the *Sattrā* in the same sense as carried in the Vaisnavite *Sattrā* in Assam.

In this context, the assertions made by *Satradhikar* Pitambar Dev Goswami about *Sattrā* and *yajna* mentioned in the *Bhagawata* are quite significant. He says, 'As two type of *yajnas* were performed in Namisaranya and in the same environment simultaneously, those two *yajnas* could be termed as *karma Sattrā* (sacrifice in a materialistic way) and *Brahma Sattrā* (sacrifice where divine power of the God and attaining a salvation of the soul were discussed). Thus, the sages headed by *Suta* showed that both the types of *Sattrā* had been performed there.

Eminent scholar, writer and historian, Kaliram Medhi, in his address as the president of the Asom Sahitya Sabha, had stated as below :

'Some words have declined from their origins and meanings. For instance, let us take the word 'Sattrā'. In the Rig Veda era, *yajna* performed for more than twelve consecutive days was called a *Sattrā*. In the *Bhagawata*, its meaning got extended, where it is mentioned that a

large number of sages led by Sounaka had assembled in Namisaranya and performed a *Sattra* there for one thousand years to meet the God. Then, its meaning has been expanded further. It now denotes a place to perform devotional practices with a desire to unite with the God.”

Thus, it can be assumed that the discourses on *Srimad Bhagawata* in Nimisharanya paved the way for expansion of meaning of *Sattra*, particularly to denote it as a centre of conducting religious discussions. Srimanta Sankardeva had rendered the first part of the *Srimad Bhawata* into Assamese. In the second line of its fourth stanza, we find *Sloka Sattrang* Sargaya Lokaya Sahasram Masata’(commenced a thousand year-long sacrifice to reach the abode of Vishnu) and “Kalimagatamajnya Khetrehismin Vaisnave Bayam” (The sinful age of Kali is approaching; and that is why we have gathered and are starting this thousand year-long sacrifice here. For this purpose, the most appropriate time has arrived for listening to the discourses on God). In Assamese version of *Srimad Bhagawata*, Mahapurush wrote:

“Manyakari (or Madhyakari) Sutaka Patila *Sattra* Tatha,
Sounaka Pramukhye Sune Bhagawata Katha,
Sounaka Badati suna Suta Mahamani,
Parama Patiki Kali Paile Henajani;
Arambhilo Yajna Ami Sahasra Batsar,
Home-Dhumre Dhumrabarna Bhaile Kalebor”.

Except in the above, nowhere in Sankardeva’s and Madhavadeva’s writings, including their self-introductory notes, the word *Sattra* has ever been mentioned. Yet, owing to its relations with the ‘*Bhagawata*’ or in the ‘*Harikatha*’ (meaning spiritual discussions) and identification as a centre of religious and spiritual activities during the neo-Vaisnavite movement launched by Mahapurush Sankardeva, Madhavadeva, Damodardeva, Harideva, Bhattadeva and others, the ‘*Sattra*’ denoted a place for reciting the *Bhagawata* and listening to its sermons. And thus, the word *Sattra* started to lose its original meaning in Assam. But, during the early stage of neo-Vaisnavite religious movement, the word ‘*Sattra*’ had not fully carried the same meaning as it began to denote subsequently.

The *Sattra* in Assam was first reflected in the *Namghar*, *Kirtan-ghar*, *Harigriha* etc. built during the time of Sankardeva. The *Maneri Sattra*, established by Sri Harideva, was initially known as *Haridevasram* or *Gurudevasram*. Similarly, it is not known whether the ‘*Bahari Sattra*’ too had or had not assumed the concrete shape of a *Sattra* at its formative stage.

But, we find the first clear picture of a fully developed institution in the form of *Patbausi Sattra*, established by Sri Damodardeva, having four rows of *Hatis* (quarters) for its disciples

(stated in the biography on Damodardeva). Mention has been found in the '*Guru Charitkatha*' about construction of a *Kirtanghar* or *Harigriha* at Bardowa. Dr. Maheswar Neog wrote :

“As per mention found in the biography, Sankardeva, after his marriage at the age of fifty four, began to live at Alipukhuri praying Lord Krishna and performing religious practices there. But facing some troubles there, he shifted to a field, a little away, owned by his father-Kusumbar, who had used, it to grow mustard seeds there. Sankardeva built the 'Harigriha' there with *Hatis* (rows of quarters) for his disciples on all four sides. This was the initial shape of a full-fledged structure as seen in subsequent times”

But, Srимanta Sankardeva had first constructed the Namghar only. The '*Guru Charit*' by Ram Charan Thakur says :

“Sankara Kirtan Ghar Sajibeka Laila,
Bhithi Bandhibeka Lagi Samaste Ashila.
Apuni Samkare Passe Koraka Dharila,
Prithibita Chaturbhuj Murtika Dekhila.”

The above excerpt means that Sankardeva started to construct the *Kirtanghar* and took the spade himself to lay the foundation. All the other people then came forward. Sankardeva saw an image of Lord Vishnu with four hands there.

Poet Anants Kandali, a contemporary to Sankardeva, in his self introductory note written in '*Madhya Dasam*' mentioned about the close link between the *Bhagawata* and the *Sattra*. From this point of view, it can assume that the *Bhagawata* had played a deciding role in the transformation of the meaning of *Sattra* in Assam. He wrote :

“Ratna Pathaka name, Dwijabara Anupama,
Ashilanta Krishnara Bhakata,
Tatha Maha Bhagawata Sastraro Ashila *Sattra*
Sadaye Sunila Sadhujana.”

The above stanza provides a clear indication about reciting and listening the *Bhagawata* at a place termed a '*Sattra*'.

It has been mentioned earlier about Sankardeva's construction of a *Namghar* or a *Kirtanghar* for the first time of Bardowa to lay the foundation of a centre to perform religious and devotional services. The biography composed by Dwijabhusan also confirms that

Sankardeva had built the *Sattra-griha* for practicing devotional activities on return from his first pilgrimage.

“Debagriha Patiboho, Taju Sange Basiboho,
Charchiboho Krishnara Kathaka.”

Again,

“Sankare Bolanta Bhai, Suniyoka Rama Rai,
Debagriha Sajiyoyatane;
Hena Katha Sunilanta, Sattra griha Sajilanta,
Rama Rai Maharanga Mane.”

This stanza is also found in the biography written by Ram Charan Thakur (in their editions published by ‘Chandra Prakash’ and ‘Dutta Baruah’).

Dwija Bhusan had added further that after departure of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva established a *Sattra* in Tattikuchi village :

“Tantikuchi Name grame, *Sattra* Patileka Range,
Devagriha Nirmila Tahite.”

But, whether he had also built an annex called ‘*Manikut*’ with the *Devagriha*, and whether the terms ‘*Sattragriha*’ and ‘*Devagriha*’ denoted the same meaning, are not clear. This requires a detailed study and analysis for confirmation. Dwija Bhusan lived in the first half of the Seventeenth Century AD.

The ‘*Gura Leela*’ written by Rama Rai states :

“*Sattra* Bandhibara Passe, Mati Dekhilanta,
Damodoro Sehi Sthane *Sattra* Bandhilanta.”

* * * * *

“Ehimate Damodara *Sattra* Bandhilanta,
Bhaktagana Sama Passe Tathaka Gailanta;
Barajana Bhakta Same Basi Anukshan,
Parama Anande Gaye Harigunagana”

After this, Damodardeva established his *Sattra* at a place called Tarua Dhaap or Baikunthapur in Coch-Bihar. About this, it has been mentioned in the *Guru Leela* as below :

“Passime Garaghata Nadi Anupam,
Sattra Nirmilanta Taite Tarua Dhaap Nam.
Chatuhspasse Garha Nirmilanta Bhala Kari
Garhar Bhitare Bhaila Baikuntha Nagari.”

* * * * *

‘Garhara Bahire Hati Aru Nirmileka
Bharya Putra thaka Bhakta Taite Bahibeka
Maroali Paduli Bandhila Sthane Sthana,
Baikuntha Sadrisya *Sattra* Karila Nirman.”

The above descriptions give a clear picture of the structural pattern of a new-vaishnavite *Sattra*. The act of establishing a *Sattra* with a *Namghar*, *Manikut*, four rows of quarters for the celibate disciples and separate residences for the married ones outside the *Sattra* campus, raised earthen boundaries around the *Sattra* complex and a gate at the entrance to the *Sattra*, etc. provides a complete picture of the *Sattra* existing in those days.

This biography was written about thirty years after the demise of Damodardeva, i.e. in the second or the third decade of the 17th century A.D.

It appears the complete structural growth of the *Sattra* and their expanded form took place from the time of writing the biographies only. But prior to that, both the internal and external structures of the *Sattra* taking their shape during Bhattadeva’s time are found in his writings, where he has given a clear description of an excellent *Sattra*, found in the ‘*Saran Malika*’ as below :

“Yatracharanti Saddharman Kewala Bhagawatpriyah;
Navadha Bhagawatbhaktih Pratyahang Yatra Vartaye;
Tadsattrauttamang Kshetrang Vaisnava-Surabanditam,
Tattrastha Vaisnava Sarbe Hari Nama Parayanah.”

[The place where the most honest and the Saints perform the jobs loved by God, and where the nine forms of devotion to God are practiced daily is called the excellent *Sattra*. All the *vaishnavas*, who stay there, are devoted to *Vishnu*.]

But the functions of the Vaisnavite *Sattra* were not confined only to performing the nine forms of devotional practices and or praying and reciting twelve or fourteen times a day. In these institutions, it was a part and parcel of their routine duties to organize literary, art works, music, dance, sculptures etc. and holding discussions (seminars) on such subjects as well. During the life time of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in particular, the *Sattra* became the centre for enacting their one-act plays and singing of *Borgeet* (classical songs). In course of time, these processes of inventions and techniques applied in the field of culture and religion that received all India recognition. Thus, in the sixteenth century AD, after a continuous evolution, the word '*Sattra*' lost its original meaning and instead became recognized as the centre of cultural activities and a place for conducting devotional and religious practices.

Noted scholar, Dr. Biswa Narayan Shastri had said that despite being Vedic in origin, the Assamese version of the word '*Sattra*' is originated from the word *Kshetra*. He has shown, *Khetra Khatra Sattra*, but has not given much of its philological explanation (Address as the President of the Reception Committee of the Guwahati Session of Asom Sattra Mahasabha held in 2001, page 4).

Baikuntha Nath Bhagawat Bhattacharya, a contemnor of Ananta Kandali, in his book *Saran-Sangrah* has given a Vaisnavite meaning of the word *Sattra* which is perhaps the oldest surviving definition of the word till date. His definition reads as follows :-

"*Sattra* is where worshipping of the God is performed always in nine forms of devotions and where the Vaisnavas dwell as well Singing the hymns in praise of the God"

From the above definition it can be assumed that '*Sattra*' mentioned by Bhattadeva was not only a centre for practicing the nine forms of devotion, but was also a dwelling place of the devotees. Dwijabhusan, a contemporary of Bhattadeva, had mentioned that Sankardeva set up the *Sattra-Griha* to conduct the devotional practices. Dwijabhusan, however did not define the *Sattra Griha*. May be, Dwijabhusan, Ramcharan and others named the prayer hall as *Deva-Griha* or *Sattra-Griha* built by Sankardeva for reciting the *Bhagawata* and conducting other religious services. The word '*Manikut*' where the idol or the deity was installed is found only in the books of the post-Sankardeva era. Assuming the existence of the idols from the beginning of Sankardeva's propagation of religious faith and the system of keeping the idol or the holy book on an altar in a separate house, we can easily ascertain the existence of the *Namghar* and the *Monikut* during Sankardeva's time. The *Hatis* (rows of houses for the disciples), various office-bearers, *guru-kar* (tax levied upon the disciples by the preceptors), officials to liaise with the masses in the villages and different office bearers for managing the *Sattra* administration, were not found in Sankardeva's time. In other words, development of various sides of *Sattra* management was yet to take a formal shape. Had these aspects taken formal shapes,

Madhavdeva, as heir-apparent of Sankardeva and the religious Head, would have been assigned the authority to exercise in Patbaushi *Sattrra* once Sankardeva passed away. But Madhavdeva started sitting behind the steering wheel first at Ganak-Kuchi and then from Sundaridiya to lead the Vaisnavite religious movement. Besides that, had there been a full-fledged *Sattrra* at Patbaushi, set up by Sankardeva, his wife and other family members would not have faced financial crunch and other hardships after the demise of Mahapurush.

It is, therefore, certain that save the *Kirtan Ghar* (prayer hall), other organs had not developed during Mahapurush Sankardev's life time. After his passing away, Madhavdeva established the Barpeta *Sattrra* and introduced the systematic procedure of conducting *Nam-Kirtan* etc. and also took steps necessary to maintain separate accommodation for the celibate disciples. Even, he had streamlined the system of keeping separate stores for firewood, food stuffs etc. and paved the way for having a stable source of earning for the *Sattrra*. He built anew the Barpeta *Kirtanghar* giving it a very attractive look. He then introduced democratic process of entrusting *Sattrra* functions upon his disciples and installed Mathuradas Burha Ata as the leader of the disciples of the *Sattrra*. Here, we can take the name of Damodardeva too for his notable contributions towards the development of the *Sattrra*, institution. Noted biographer Ram Rai had authored '*Guru Leela*' the biography of Damodardeva, about thirty years after his death. As per the descriptions of Baikunthapur *Sattrra* founded by Damodardeva, the *Sattrra* was complete with *Namghar*, *Manikut*, the four-row-residential quarters (*Hatis*) for the disciples besides raised earthen boundaries on all four sides of the *Sattrra*. Residential places outside the *Sattrra* complex were allotted for the non-celibate disciples to live in. A beautiful *Bat-Sora* (Gate) was erected at the entrance to the *Sattrra*. As mentioned in the '*Guru-Leela*', six scores of celibate disciples accompanied Damodardeva on his journey from Kamrupa to Koch-Bihar. While at Patbaushi, Damodardeva had built and maintained the *Namghar* and the *Hatis* in such a systematic and eye-catching style that huge number of people had to line up to visit his *Sattrra*. It was for this reason why Narayan Thakur had repeatedly reminded his disciples to re-build the Barpeta *Sattrra* to give a splendid look so that it could also attract the people to the *Sattrra*. Beside this, Damodardeva had introduced the system of paying *Guru Kar* (dues payable to the preceptor) by the disciples.

The second stage of development of the *Sattrra* institution took place in the fourth decade of the seventeen Century. Despite encountering innumerable inconveniences in the Ahom ruled State and facing fierce anger from the old king Pratap Singha, Bansigopaldeva, in compliance with his preceptor's wishes, set up several *Sattrra* in Upper Assam while he was there for propagating religion in that region. As per Ramananda, in Kalabari *Sattrra*, set up at first, Bansigopaldeva appointed Ratnakar Kandali as *Bhagawati*; Aniruddha Bhuyan as *Pathak*, Yaduimani as Master Singer (*Ozha*) with eight others as his assistants, Murari as chief initiator,

one chief priest with five *Srawanis* (listeners) and twelve helpers; besides three principal officials to conduct various rituals thrice a day. It is also mentioned that two other officials were appointed to manage the food store and offerings given by the disciples, and a third official to keep records of such stuffs taken out from the stores for use or consumption in the *Sattra*. The system of appointing separate officials as heads of different departments clearly shows Bansigopaldeva's skill in organization and management of the *Sattra* affairs. He had built the Kuruabahi *Sattra* with a capacity to accommodate as many as five hundred celibate disciples in the *Sattra* campus, Ramanand's book reveals.

Royal recognition and patronage can be said to be the third stage in *Sattra* development process. Though royal recognition and support in the form of rent free land and laborers, helped to improve their financial conditions, the same also motivated some of them to live in a majestic way. Thus, we find that at the formative stage, the *Sattra* institution had not assumed the present shape which has been the outcome of a long and gradual development process. But, Mahapurush Sankardeva sowed its seeds.

Classification of the Sattra:

Although, structural patterns, organizational and administrative systems vary from *Sattra* to *Sattra*, yet certain characteristics are common in their functioning. It is only natural that some sort of differences will exist among non-celibate, celibate, semi-celibate *Sattra* in respect of their dwellings, organizational and administrative systems. But in the matter of constructing the *Namghar* (Prayer Hall) and *Manikut* (Altar House) almost all the *Sattra* follow the same pattern. But, in accordance with their origin, the *Sattra* provide *Hatti* and residences to the *Sattradhikar* and the *Deka Sattradhikar* within the *Sattra* campuses. It can be noticed that not all the *Sattra* are of the same class. According to their characteristics the *Sattra* can be classified into three groups- (1) Monastic, (2) Semi-monastic and (3) Non-monastic, based on their *modus-operendi*. The *Sattra* which allow only the celibate disciples to stay inside the campus and bar their married life and do not allow woman's night-stay and where praying the God and his worshipping constitute the main religious agenda of the disciples, can be called the monastic or *Bihar* type *Sattra*. Those having separate houses for the married ones and celibates on opposite directions and where the principal office-bearers including the *Sattradhikar* and his deputy (*Deka Adhikar*) lead a monastic life are called the semi-monastic *Sattra*. But those *Sattra* which do not bar married life and non-celibate preceptors can lead a social life as any other person and yet propagate religious practices among the masses can be included in the third category. The first category includes *Sattra*, such as *Auniati* and *Dakshinpat*; the second category includes *Sattra* like *Barpeta* while almost all of the rest can be covered in the third category. Because of leading a celibate and fully devoted life, the first category can be compared with the Buddhist

or Jain monasteries, even though they do not practice the system of taking food from a common kitchen as found in the Buddhist and Jain monasteries. The monastic disciples in such *Sattra* manage their cooking individually. They do not practice the system of taking *Langar* like the Sikhs.

Some biographers have also classified the *Sattra* into three groups based on origin, authorization and lighting of sacred lamps. When a disciple or a votary sets up a separate *Sattra* with permission from his *Guru* (preceptor) then his *Sattra* is called an authorized *Sattra*. The other category includes those *Sattra* set up by the off-springs of the preceptor allowing to take out a piece of sacred items of the *Sattra* with them, and set up a different *Sattra* with the same or a separate name, then these are called *Xalabanti* or Branch *Sattra*.

Different categories of *Sattra* functionaries:

The officials operating in the *Sattra* can mainly be divided into three categories, viz (1) *Adhikar* or *Burha Sattria*, and the *Deka-Adhikar* or *Deka Sattriya*; (2) Other office-bearers, and (3) the disciples. The *Adhikar* is the chief office-bearer in a *Sattra*. He can be compared with the abbot of a Christian monastery or with the *Chief Priest* of a Hindu temple. He is the chief preceptor and principal office-bearer looking after all religious and administrative functions in the *Sattra*. He shows his disciples the right path of religion by administering initiation, the method of worshipping and imparting incantation to them. The *Deka Adhikar* (Deputy Chief) occupies the position next to that of the *Adhikar* and at times performs the same functions as assigned to the *Adhikar*. Normally, he succeeds the *Adhikar* after his death. The second group consists of the celibates who reside in their specified quarters inside the *Sattra* campus, some of them assuming responsibilities of office-bearers, and entirely devoting to religious practices. As per Ramananda, towards the fag-end of their life many married disciple too passes time like the celibates, after retiring from worldly affairs. In the monastic *Sattra* only the celibate disciples are made office-bearers and they assist the *Sattradhikar* and the *Deka-Sattradhikar* in *Sattra* managerial functions. The married disciples are included in the third category of the *Sattra* constituency. They normally do not closely involve in *Sattra* functioning. After their initiation by the preceptor or the *Adhikar*, these disciples spend a married life in villages or towns, yet practicing religious instructions as taught by the preceptors. Only on specific occasions they come into contact with the *Sattra-Adhikar* and the *Sattra* as well.

Sattra Administration:

The administrative or management system of the *Sattra* depends on their nature. A full-fledged administrative set-up is not found in the non-monastic *Sattra*. They have only a few officials to

Carry on religious services in the *Namghar* and the *Monikut* and to keep liaison with their disciples. Most of such *Sattra* do not have rows of quarters and so they do not have the problem of managing these things either. These *Sattra* celebrate one function or the other all throughout the year. Moreover, these *Sattra* perform rituals twelve or fourteen times a day on the death anniversaries of the Mahapurush or other Gurus and on during festive occasions only. In such *Sattra* the administrative powers are vested upon the *Sattradhikar* and other office-bearers perform their duties as per the direction of *Sattradhikar*. On the other hand, the administrative system in the monastic *Sattra* is different. Their daily prayers and rituals are clear and pervading. The administrative and management systems have their own peculiarities. It is only natural that they will differ from those followed in the non-monastic *Sattra*. Such Bihar-like *Sattra* keep some officials- such as the *chiefs*, lieutenant, and assistants to run the *Sattra* administration and departments in compliance with the instructions of *Sattradhikar* as below:

- (1) **Manikut Division** : All sorts of functions, such as, worshipping the deity, are entrusted on the officials of this division. The *Chief Deori* (Head Priest) is the Head of this Division and he is provided with a deputy and one or more assistants as may be required by him.
- (2) **Namghar Division** : There are two or a few more officials assigned with the responsibility of performing *Nam-Prasanga*, reciting sacred books, singing of hymns and religious songs, playing musical instruments like *Khols* and *Tals* in the *Namghar*. Besides the *Bor-Bhagawati* (Main Pathak) and *Bor-Nam Lagoa* (Chief Initiator) there are officials like *Deolia Bhagawati* (Deputy Recitor), *Pali Bhagawali* (Assistant Recitor), *Saru Namlagoa* (Junior Recitor), Reciting *Natua* (Singer-Dancer), Instrument-Players, Singers and *Sutradhar* (Preludor) etc. to conduct various functions in the *Namghar*.
- (3) **Treasury Division** : This division is run and headed by a treasurer. He is also known as as *Bor-Mazindar Baruah* or *Bor-Kakoty* and he maintain detailed account of money and materials received from the disciples; income from the *Sattra* landed property and donations given by devotees and others. In larger *Sattra* the treasurer has a few assistants also at his disposal.
- (4) **Food Store** : This division is looked after by the chief store-keeper (*Mukhya Bharali*). He is responsible for maintaining complete details of food-stuffs, such as rice and paddy received from those cultivating on *Sattra* rent-free land; and items like salt and oil bought from the market. He has a number of officials, such as *Bheti-dhara* (Receiver of offerings), *Mithoi Bharali* (store-keeper in charge of sweet items), *Gua Bharali* (keeper of betel-nuts and leaves), *Lon Bharali* (keeper of Salt) besides some more assistants for managing the stores.

The heads of different departments in the *Sattra* like Auniati, Dakshinpat and Kamalabari, command respect from one and all for which they are also known as *Bor-Manois* (Chief office-bearers of respect). The Auniati *Sattra* has seven such officials and that is why they are called *Sat-Manbhagias* too. The *Sattradhikar* often consults with them about *Sattra* administrative affairs. Allocation of fund for subsistence of the *Sattra* officials is made by the *Sattradhikar* himself but he consults his main office-bearers when a substantial expenditure has to be incurred on expensive occasions.

- (5) **Department of Public Relations :** Most of the *Sattra* disciples reside in places far and wide from the *Sattra*. In case of smaller *Sattra*, their disciples live within the *Sattra* vicinity. But those having a large number of their followers, spread over in distant places, appoint a *Bor-Medhi* or a *Raj-Medhi* (Chief or Head Liaison Officer) in different areas for keeping *Sattra*' contact with them. These Liaison officers have some subordinates called *Pakhi-Medhis* and *Pachanis* (messengers) to assist them in the matter. These officials make arrangements for accommodation of the *Sattradhikar* and their accompanying staffs when they visit the *sahar* (villages) to meet their disciples there. These officials are also entrusted with some duties like collecting dues and contributions from the disciples and then depositing the same in the *Sattra* exchequer.
- (6) **Relations with the Royal House :** Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the number of *Sattra* began to grow to several hundred by the seventeenth century. When many of the disciples started to seek exemption from performing State duties on the plea of their remaining pre-occupied with *Sattra* services and rituals, King Rudra Singha conducted a census of the *Sattra* to determine their exact numbers. The *Gosains* (preceptors) of the *Sattra* receiving king's recognition were termed *Etaka Mahantas* (one-Rupee Mahanta which meant full-fledge preceptors). But it is not known, however, how many *Sattra* had been covered by the term *Etaka Mahanta*. If such *Sattra* were counted in terms of *Karis* (small sea conch-shells used as coins at that time) the number would be 1280. But if a rupee was valued in terms of *pie* or *paisa*, then the number could not be so large. But the latter method was not prevalent at that time. Perhaps from that time onward royal sanction became a must before installation of a new *Sattradhikar* and commenced the practice of *Sattradhikar* attending the royal coronation ceremonies to bless the new king in order of their (*Sattradhikar*) rank or status. In order to maintain relations with the Royal House, the large *Sattra* had to appoint officials like *Khatoniar* (Pleader) and *Muktiar* (spokesman) etc and subsequently the king did a similar thing by appointing officials designated as *Deolia Barua* (Temple Officer) and *Sattriya Barua* (Officer to liaise with *Sattra*) to maintain contact with such institutions.

Sources of Income for Sattra: The rent-free land donated by the Ahom Kings happened to be the main source of *Sattra* income. Tenants cultivating on such land were required to give a portion of their produce to the *Sattra*. Based on evidence or proof, the British rulers also continued to allow rent-free land to the *Sattra*. The rich *Sattra* possessed large areas of such rent-free immovable property. As per data provided by the District Gazetteer, Aunuaati, Dakshinpat, Kamalabari and Bengenaati, *Sattra* had 21,000, 10,000, 5900 and 2500 acres of such rent-free land under their respective possession. Now, owing to acquisition of some part of such land by the government, and tenants discontinuing the system of giving a portion of the yields, the *Sattra* source of income is fast drying up. Most of the non-monastic *Sattra* did not possess rent-free land, and even if some of them had, it was very small in measure. The other sources of *Sattra* earning are (a) the dues paid by the disciples, (b) offerings given by the visiting devotees, (c) subscriptions levied upon the disciples on specific festive occasions and functions, (d) donations, and (e) money and materials given by the disciples, on the occasion of wedding of their sons and daughters or death of someone in their families. With the passing of time, the respect and devotion of the disciples for the *Sattra* are fast diminishing and so is the source of *Sattra* income. This has compelled the non-monastic *Sattra* to seek other means of earning.

Selection of Sattradhikar: Not all the *Sattra* follow the same procedure in selection of their *Adhikar*. In the monastic *Sattra* boys having auspicious mark or sign in their body are picked in their childhood from some non-monastic *Sattra* and they are taught all religious practices and groomed to qualify for holding the offices of the *Sattradhikar* and *Deka-Sattradhikar* in future. Each of such monastic *Sattra* has some link with one or more non-monastic *Sattra* from which boys considered suitable are picked. Normally, this responsibility is vested upon the *Sattradhikar* to select such would-be successor. It is the reason for which the monastic *Sattra* keep a number of such celibates on roll besides the *Adhikar* and his deputy. One from such youths occupies the position of the *Deka-Adhikar* when the *Sattradhikar* dies and the *Deka-Adhikar* usually succeeds him, unless of course, there are factors against his succession. The *Deka-Adhikar* is selected and adorned while the *Adhikar* remain alive. In certain *Sattra*, particularly in the non-monastic ones, the *Sattradhikar* and *Deka-Adhikar* are selected on the basis of their quality and learning. In certain *Sattra*, as in Barpeta, the disciples select a person through ballots for the office of *Deka-Adhikar*, a system which has been prevailing there for a long time.

Ownership of Sattra Properties: The *Sattra* possess both movable and immovable properties. In most of the non-monastic *Sattra* the eldest in the dynasty becomes the owner of such properties. In several *Sattra* such properties are kept in the name of their deities with the *Sattradhikar* and the *Deka-Sattradhikar* as their trustees. For instance, in Auniati *Sattra* the

rent-free land and laborer obtained from the Ahom Kings remain in the name of *Govinda* (the *Sattra* deity) and the *Adhikar* runs the *Sattra* management in the name of the deity. In few other *Sattra*, to name Barpeta *Sattra* in particular, all the disciples of the *Sattra* are the collective owners of such properties. The *Adhikar* is not empowered to handle or transfer their ownership to anyone on his own accord.

Sattra Customary & Religious Services: The customary and religious functions and practices can normally be divided into two parts, i.e. daily and occasional. The daily activities include *Nam-Prasanga*, number of which is fourteen in the *Mahapurushian Sattra* and *twelve* in the *Damodarian Sattra*. The number may vary depending on groups they belong to. Prayers are offered in the morning, afternoon and evening and collectively they are called the fourteen or twelve *Prasangas*. The *Prasangas* include agendas like *Nam-Prasanga*, recitation of the *Bhagawata*, the *Ghosa*; singing of *Borgeets* and other religious songs; adoration of the God with *Bhatima* (hymns) etc. Not all the *Sattra* follow the same system or routine. Significant variation is found in the *Sattra* depending upon the groups to which they belong. Even in the same group, some *Sattra* differ from the others. Some *Sattra* lay emphasis on their self-composed songs which they include in their routine. Again, not all the *Sattra*, specifically the non-monastic ones, perform the full agenda daily but do so on specific occasions only.

The occasional programs are conducted on festivals like *Janmastami*, *Raas-Yatra*, *Holi* and in some *Sattra* *Jhulan-Yatra* and *Rath-Yatra* are also included in this list. In the *Sattra* belonging to the Damodardeva group or those included in the *Brahma Sanghati*, (Brahmin group) festivals like *Narayan Sayan* (sleeping of Lord Narayan), *Parswa-Parivartan* and *Utthan* (change of sides and rising) are also found in this list. The *Doul-Utsav* (Holi festival) of the Barpeta *Sattra* and *Pal-nam* of the Auniati *Sattra* are famous all over Assam. Besides these functions, the *Sattra* celebrate the death anniversaries of the Mahapurush and also their founders. In Barpeta, the death anniversary of Mahapurush Sankardeva is observed with a ten day program and that of Madhavdeva with a twelve day agenda.

The worshipping of the idol of Vishnu or Narayan in the Brahmin group of *Sattra* is a part of their day-to-day program. This is not a part of their twelve or fourteen time agenda. *Puzari*, *Deori*, helpers, flower-suppliers etc. are borne on their roll. Normally, *Xaran* and *Bhajan* (two stages of introduction to religion) are performed in front of the deity. In other groups of *Sattra* the importance of the idols is not that significant, even though they may have such idols. One of the sacred-most *books* (*Sastra*), such as the *Kirtana*, *Dasama*, *Ghosa* and *Ratnawali* authored by the two Mahapurush is placed on the *Asana* (throne) in front of which these acts of initiation are performed in the *Sattra* belonging to the other groups. The act of initiation of the disciples is performed by a preceptor or by the *Sattradhikar* himself. Taking refuge at the

feet of the God, *Nam* (sacred prayer), *Guru* (preceptor) and *Bhakats* (devotees) are the main objects behind the act of initiation. After initiation, the preceptor bestows rosaries upon the highly devoted followers and utters *mantras* (sacred formula) to them. In the *Sattras* adhering to the Damodarian path, both the systems of worshipping i.e. (1) *Tantrik* and (2) Offering *devotion* in Vaisnavite way, are in practice. These *Sattras* maintain the system of giving *astakshari* (eight-lettered), *dwadakshari* (twelve lettered) or other *Vishnu-mantras* to their disciples. In the *Sattras* following the Mahapurushian line, the four names of the deity and their significance are explained to the disciples at the time of their initiation (*Xaran*).

Social contributions of the Sattras: The *Sattras* have been contributing significantly to the Assamese society for over four hundred years. They have been strengthening the bond of unity among the people living in all nooks and corners of Assam. As per figures available from the District Gazetteer, 90, 98, 72, 90, 68 and 62 percent of the inhabitants of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sivasagar and Lakhimpur districts respectively belonged to the Vaisnavite community. In the medieval era, and even today, the religious bond helped a lot in bringing unity among the people. By setting up the *Sattras* in the entire Brahmaputra valley, the Mahapurush and other Vaisnavite gurus played a commendable role in firmly establishing the Assamese language and literature through their holy books. The *Sattras* were the centers from which the Vaisnavite literature found wide circulation. The *Sattras* educated the people by imparting moral and spiritual knowledge so that they could find a better way of living. People learnt how to practice cleanliness, good usages, good conduct, control over bad habits, refined manners, devotion to God, theism, physiology and finally the beatitude of the soul. Thus, the *Sattras* had played a very significant role on the moral and spiritual uplift markedly evident in the society as a whole in the past. By initiating to the religion many people belonging to so-called lower castes and downtrodden communities and also the tribal, the Vaisnavite preachers opened for them the path of leading a regulated and pious life. Such acts of the *Sattras* not only nourished the Hindu society but also immensely contributed to the formation and development of the Assamese society as a whole. In this context, the role played by the *Sattras* of the *Kal-Sanghati* group (one of the four groups of the *Sattras*) in uplifting the long neglected downtrodden people and the tribal folks, deserves special mentioning.

The evil effect of caste discrimination and untouchability is less in Assam compared to other States in India. Only at the time of marriage, the caste factor is generally observed, but not in other social practices. This relatively liberal outlook can be attributed to *Sattras* equal treatment to all. The *Sattras* practiced some traditions without any reservation, which had been prevalent in the society for pretty long time. For instance, fish and meat are not forbidden by the *vaisnavas* in Assam though the *vaisnavas* prohibit them in other States. Similarly, the

Mahanta and saints, while preaching *Vaisnavite* faith, liberally practiced the manners and customs which were traditionally observed by the tribal in their life.

The preceptors of the *Sattra* helped a lot to maintain discipline in the villages by deciding all social disputes such as religious controversies, illicit sexual acts and violation of social traditions etc. The *Sattra* were the final place where all such matters found solutions. All such disputes that could not be solved by the leading persons of the village in their *Namghars*, were referred to the *Sattra* for settlement. The *gurus* (preceptors) solved all such problems either giving verdicts from the *Sattra* or during their visits to such villages. However, when the British government set up the law courts, many of such disputes started to be filed there. Subsequently after the village Panchayats were formed, most of such cases are decided there not requiring their reference to the *Sattra* or to the courts. Yet religious controversies and inter-caste marriage issues are referred to the *Sattra* as done in the past.

Sattra academic contributions: Before the spread of modern education ie till the time of independence of India, the *Sattra* happened to be the centre of education. In the well-established *Sattra* there were provisions for teaching young boys brought from villages as novices. The senior and experienced ones took care of the novices besides those youths staying as celibates in the *Sattra*. Similarly, they took care of the young lads who used to visit the *Sattra* for initiation. They were taught about the manners, customs and traditions practiced in the *Sattra* by way of narrating mythological stories and explaining the process of worshipping and adoring the deities, besides the *Sattriya* norms and religious services. There was provision of *Tols* (schools) in most of the *Sattra* where the teachers taught grammar, astrology, holy books, epics etc. to the pupils. Although such *Tols* were meant for the pupils residing in the *Sattra* campus, outside students were also admitted to those schools. All the *Sattra*, big or small, maintained a library. The large *Sattra* used to keep books on various subjects besides the religious ones in their libraries. For instance, the Auniati *Sattra* had books, such as, *Hasta Muktawali* (book on dance and hand gestures) and *Hastividyarnava* (a pictorial book on elephant) in their library. Writing of sacred books (*Sastras*) on the barks of Agar trees and preservation of such books with due care, was considered a sacred duty. Occasionally, the books were placed in sunshine, cleaned and then kept in the libraries for record. Most of the books collected by Scholar Hem Chandra Goswami belonged to the *Sattra*. This is for such reasons; the *Sattra* could be called village libraries too.

Contributions of the *Sattra* in audio-visual education are quite significant. In every *Sattra*, the reciting from the *Bhagawata* and other holy books and their explaining formed a part of the daily routine of *Sattra*. Through such programme, the illiterate masses used to get a scope to learn about the mythological stories, moral ideals and substances of the religious

practices. Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, the great historian of Assam had mentioned that the Assamese Society could be illiterate, but never an ignorant one. This is possible due to the natural way of spiritual teaching provided by the Vaisnavite movement. Moreover, the *Sattras* made the masses familiar with the Indian ideologies, customs, religious faith and traditions by staging *Ankiya Bhawnas* (one-act plays) where the triumph of virtue over evil forces by overcoming many a hindrance, struggles faced in life are depicted for the audience to learn. Remaining true to his words by king Harichandra; sacrifice by sage Dadhichi; affability of Karna; honouring his father's wishes by Rama; the chastity of Sita and Savitri; brotherly affection shown by Bharata and Lakshmana to Rama; excessive pride of King Ravana and arrogance of Duryodhana etc. were highlighted in the *Bhawnas* (plays) from which the audience could learn a lot. Moreover, the people became interested in learning the fine arts, such as acting, dancing, playing musical instruments and singing as presented in such shows.

Contribution of Sattras in the field of art and craft: The celibate disciples living in the *Sattras* complex, in their spare time, engaged themselves in creating various art-works to earn their livelihood, and also to beautify the *Namghar*, *Manikut* and their residences. They used to make *Sinhasan* (throne based on lions) to keep the idols and sacred books, wooden images of various gods and goddesses, wooden *Xarais* (trays with stands), ivory items, costumes for players to wear in *Bhaonas* (plays), masks, and many ornamental items from bamboo and cane etc. The ivory works and multi-lamp stands of Barpeta *Sattras* and cane fans of Auniati *Sattras* still bear testimony of the skill of such artists. This practice is still prevalent in the *Sattras* so that the celibates can make their required items themselves. Of course, some of such disciples set their eyes on earning more than what they actually need.

Ample evidence is found in some *Sattras* where the art of picturing the holy books is duly practiced. It appears, in the olden days and particularly in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this art became highly popular in Assam. Basically, though this small-scale industry remained confined amongst a few groups of artists, two different designs or models were evident in their making process. One was based and developed in royal environment. The *Chitra Bhagawata* of Bali *Sattras* and several other pictorial books found so far elsewhere followed the *Sattriya* model. Those based on the royal model are more sophisticated where the impact of Moghul art is noticeably evident. On the other hand, pictorial designs are much more simple in those based on *Sattriya* models and religious subject-materials. Fine application of line and colour is noticed in those pictorial books where both movable and immovable subjects are beautifully portrayed.

The contributions of the *Sattras* in the field of dance and music deserve special mention. *Borgeets*, and *geets* composed by the *Sattriya* saints and presented in the *Bhaona*

performances, and songs presented on the wedding occasions have been compiled and preserved. Proper application of *Ragas* (modes) and *Talas* (beats) of classical music are apparent in the *Sattriya geets* and music. Singing of *geets* accompanied by musical instruments (*Gayan-Bayan*) has significance of their own. Specific mention about *Talas* is found in the *Borgeets*. Before the advent of notation (*swarlipi*) the expert musicians of the *Sattria* tried their best to maintain the *ragas* and the *talas* in their original forms through their traditionally colloquial method. But, how far they succeeded to retain them in original forms is a subject of separate discussion. Besides, several *Sattria* have been the study centers of semi-classical music and folk songs to the different usages of classical music, as found in *Bairagi Nam*, *Thiya Nam*, *Ghos-Dhura*, *Bona*, *Tokari Geet*, *Kakuti* and *Hira Nam* etc. which are presented well in the *Sattras*. These folk songs and music still enliven the villages.

Apart from music, usages of classical dances are rare properties of the *Sattria* not found elsewhere. Although the usage of *Ozha-Pali* dance has been in force since pre-Sankardeva era, it has received a special status in the *Sattria* where this dance is nourished very carefully. The *Sattriya* dances, developed under the influence Vaisnavite tradition, include *Sutradhari Nritya*, *Chali Nas*, *Jhumura Nas*, *Dasawavatar Nritya* etc. The dances performed by the characters or the players in *Bhaonas* while entering and fighting on the stage are equally noteworthy. Except in the last named dances, hand gestures and footwork have been retaining their classical traditions intact. These dances and music accompanied with instruments- such as *khols* and *Tals* may be slightly different in different *Sattria* as influenced by local environment. But in general, and by and large, all the *Sattria* follow the same pattern. However, it cannot be said that all the *Sattria* have maintained these dance traditions; but those well-established *Sattria* having historic past, have done it with constant and careful exercise under the guidance of their expert officials, such as, *Gayan*, *Bayan*, *Ozha* and *Sutradhar* etc. Such *Sattria* duly observe all the traditions while performing the one-act plays as well.

Literary Contribution of the Sattria: Contributions of the *Sattria* towards ancient Assamese literature are by no means less than the ones receiving royal patronage. In certain cases, they are much bigger than the latter. The royal houses and the *Sattria* were the inspiring sources behind the ancient literary works. Not that, no such work was ever composed on individual efforts, but those were comparatively less in number. There is no doubt that the works of Mahapurush Sankardeva and Madhavdeva is pure *Sattriya* literature (there is justifications in favour of their recognition). The religious books written by successor of Mahapurush also had both direct and indirect influences of the *Sattria*. The *Sattria* played an enviable role in all literary works like biography, drama, lyrics etc. composed by later generations of writers, more than hundred in number, including Ramacharan, Daityari, Ram Rai, Nilakantha, Dwijabhusan, Ramananda etc. who had composed the biographies mostly based on the life and works of the

spiritual leaders. Since such books had been written keeping in mind a devotional aim and angle, the authors naturally ignored the human weakness, details of family life of the preceptors and did not include them in the biographies. But the religious aspects are fully depicted. Moreover, these books contain sufficient information about social and political conditions prevailing at that time. The number of such biographies is more than a hundred.

The second most important literary contribution of the *Sattras* happens to be their one-act plays (*Ankiya-Nats*). Following the same method as used by the two Mahapurush in their twelve one-act plays, the subsequent preceptors too in the *Sattras* wrote and staged numerous such plays. But, many of such plays lack novelty, and were based on usual style. Yet, some deviations are also noted in them. Use of Brajawali language and Sanskrit *Slokas* gradually declined but the play-wrights started to focus more on aspects like rendering many sacred books into dramas, using prose in place of verse in dialogue, more number of songs, *bilaps* (crying loudly and deeply) and adding more scenes of war in their plays. Over the period, the staging of the one-act plays did not remain confined within the *Sattras*. It found a place in the royal houses as well, where these were staged on special or festive occasions. The royal houses hired the artists from the *Sattras* to perform such shows in order to entertain foreign royal dignitaries and ambassadors. Later on, almost in every *Sattras*, the *Sattradhikar* started writing and staging such one-act plays to show their ability and command on this faculty which in course of time became a tradition in the *Sattras*. Besides this, the disciples staying in the *Sattras* campuses used to make all essential items, such as, costumes for the players, paints, weapons, masks, dance and musical instruments etc. within the *Sattras* itself.

Following the instance of the two Mahapurush, the subsequent preceptors also composed a lot of songs and hymns numbering over a thousand. Besides the *ragas* (modes) applied by the two Mahapurush, some of such composers appear to have used other *ragas* as well. As done by the two Mahapurush in the *Borgeets*, these composers too mentioned about the transitory nature of life, the divine power of *Bhakti* (devotion), the illusion of worldly avarice and Lord Krishna's super-natural acts of his childhood in their illustrated lyrics. Their descriptions also followed the same pattern as used in the *Borgeets*. But their techniques and subjects are devoid of novel ideas. Most of such lyrics are Krishna-oriented, though Rama, Sita, Radha and Rukmini etc. also figure in those compositions. In a few lyrics, composed in the eighteenth century, the influence of the *Brahmabaibarta Purana* and the *Geetgovinda* is noticed wherein Radha as a heroine and her separation from Krishna and re-union with him have been depicted. In the field of composing lyrics, Anirudhadeva of Mayamariya *Sattras*, Bor Yadumoni and his descendants of the Dihing Branch *Sattras*, Sriram Ramananda of Ahatguri *Sattras* etc, and Purusuttam Thakur and a few others belonging to the *Purus-Sanghati* (*Sattras* established by Purusuttam Thakur and by his authorized disciples) had also composed quite a

large number of such lyrical songs. The preceptors of some other *Sattra* too composed some lyrics as per reference found in the biographical writings.

The contributions of the *Sattriya* preceptors in matters like rendering the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranas and other sacred verses into Assamese language can never be ignored either. A large number of writers starting from Bhattadeva, Gopalcharan Dwija, Ramcharan Thakur, Daityari Thakur, Govinda Misra, Gopal Misra, Kesav Kayastha, Bor-Yadumoni, Ananta Das or Hridayananda, Ratnakar Kandali, Raghunath Mahanta, Gopal Ata and Kangsari etc. who had composed the Bhagawata and the Puranas in Assamese, were either the *Sattradhikar* or ones who lived in *Sattriya* atmosphere. More than half the number of ancient literary works of Assam was written or composed under the influence of the *Sattra*.

Conclusion: The past dignity and glory of the *Sattra* or their hold on the masses are diminishing. The decline in study of sacred literatures, reduction in revenue earning capacity of the *Sattra* due to encroachment and illegal occupation of land by the illegal migrants and some local people, decline in the number of followers due to migration of new generation in search of jobs and education and influence of western culture due to uncontrolled publicity through electronic channels are some of the factors for which the basic unit of Assamese society, the *Sattra* is losing its power of centrifugal force. The decline in the glory of the *Sattra* in these days and environment is just natural. It is necessary to revitalize the role of *Sattra* in social and economic development of Assam by adopting spiritual teaching and humanitarian service as a combined goal to achieve. The services provided needs to be dynamic and easily available for the interested person to accommodate minimum available time of modern day world. This website is aiming to provide a platform for highlighting the role and contribution of the *Sattra* in one hand and to bring the persons seeking spiritual progress closer to this institute on the other. *(The content of this write up is largely based on the commendable writings of Dr. Satendra Nath Sarma and Sh. Kanak Chandra Sarma. The translation work is greatly done by Sh. Tulashi Narayan Mahanta.)*