



THE SATRA INSTITUTION AND SAMHATIS:  
A CORNERSTONE OF ASSAMESE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS LIFE



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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the Satra institution, a cornerstone of Assamese socio-religious life. It delves into the historical development of Satras, their evolution from neo-Vaishnavism, and the emergence of distinct sub-sects known as Samhatis. The paper draws upon established scholarship to analyze the founders, characteristics, and geographical distribution of each Samhati. This exploration reveals the rich tapestry of beliefs, practices, and social structures that define these unique institutions.*

**KEY WORDS:** Satra Instution, Socio- Religous life, Neo- Vaishnavism, Samhatis

**Introduction:-**

The satra is a distinctive socio-religious institution integral to the cultural fabric of Assam. Emerging as a product of the Neo-Vaishnavism movement, the satra represents a unique blend of residential, religious, and educational functions. While sharing certain superficial similarities with Buddhist monasteries or ancient Indian maths, it possesses a distinct character shaped by the egalitarian principles of its founding. Founded by the influential Srimanta Sankaradeva in the 15th century, the Neo-Vaishnavism movement espoused the doctrine of ekasarana nama dharma, a monotheistic faith centered on the worship of Krishna through the chanting of His name. The satra served as a crucial vehicle for propagating these beliefs. Over centuries, it evolved into a multifaceted institution deeply embedded in the lives of the Assamese people, exerting a profound influence on their socio-cultural and religious landscape.

**Aims and Objectives of Study:-**

1. To trace the historical evolution of the Satra institution from its inception to its

institutionalization, analyzing the roles of key figures and the socio-religious context of its emergence.

2. To examine the formation and development of the four primary Samhatis within the Satra tradition, exploring their distinct theological, ritualistic, and organizational characteristics.

3. To analyze the socio-cultural and religious impact of the Satra institution on Assamese society, including its contributions to literature, art, music, and education.

**Methodology**

A multifaceted approach will be employed for this study:-

**Archival Research:** Extensive examination of primary sources such as religious treatises, charit puthis, and historical documents pertaining to the Satra institution.

**Ethnographic Research:** In-depth fieldwork involving site visits to significant Satra institutions and interviews with active bearers of the neo-Vaishnava tradition to gather oral histories and contemporary perspectives.

**Comparative Analysis:** Comparative study of different Samhatis to identify similarities, differences, and underlying patterns in their development and practices.

**Analytical Framework:** The application of theoretical frameworks from history, sociology, and religious studies to interpret the collected data and draw meaningful conclusions.

### **Terminology :-**

The term "satra" as applied to Vaishnava institutions in Assam represents a relatively recent development within the broader context of Indian religious history. This paper examines the evolution of the satra from its origins as a simple religious gathering to its subsequent establishment as a complex institutional framework.

### **Etymology and Development:-**

Derived from the Sanskrit term with the same spelling, "satra" originally denoted either an almshouse or a prolonged sacrificial ritual. However, its application to Assamese Vaishnavism is linked to the latter meaning, symbolizing sustained devotional engagement. Early textual references, including those by Ananta Kandali and Bhattadeva, describe the satra as a primarily devotional assembly centered around Bhagavata recitation. Over time, these devotional gatherings underwent a transformative process, evolving into formalized institutions characterized by distinct structural features and elaborate religious practices. This institutionalization, as highlighted by scholars such as Neog, was significantly influenced by the Bhagavata-Purana.

### **The Satra as a Residential Community:-**

Satra institutions functioned as residential communities, accommodating both married (grihi) and celibate (kevaliya) devotees. The latter group, comparable to the kevalins of Ramanuja's tradition, played a pivotal role in the spiritual life of the satra. The satra emerged as a cornerstone of Vaishnavism's propagation in Assam. Its trajectory from informal devotional gatherings to a structured institutional framework offers valuable insights into the dynamics of religious evolution. While other

terms like "than" and "dham" are also employed for similar institutions, the satra remains the predominant designation in the Assamese context.

### **Evolution of the Satra Institution:-**

The satra institution, central to Vaishnavism in Assam, underwent a gradual evolution from its inception to its institutionalized form. While its origins can be traced to the era of Srimanta Sankaradeva, it was during the subsequent period, under the stewardship of Madhavadeva and Damodardeva, that the satra acquired its definitive structure and character. Sankaradeva laid the foundation for the satra concept through his teachings and practices, but the institution did not attain its institutionalized shape until approximately fifty years after his demise. Early manifestations were primarily devotional assemblies rather than formalized structures. A pivotal role in the institutionalization process is attributed to Madhavadeva and Damodardeva. Through their efforts, the satra evolved from a loose assembly into a structured entity with defined characteristics. A prime example of this transition is the establishment of the Patbausi satra by Damodardeva in 1560 CE. Subsequent centuries witnessed a proliferation of satras across the Assam region. These institutions rapidly became the epicenter of socio-cultural and economic life. Their influence was so pervasive that an overwhelming majority of the Assamese Hindu population was affiliated with one or another satra.

### **Types of Satras:-**

Satra institutions in Assam can be classified into four distinct categories based on the lifestyle and roles of their leadership and members.

### **Categorization of Satras:-**

**Monastic Satras:** These institutions adhere to a strict monastic code, mandating celibacy for all members, including the satradhikari (head of the satra). Female members are entirely prohibited from residing within the satra premises.

**Grihastha Satras:** In contrast, grihastha satras permit married life for both the satradhikari and other members, allowing for the reconciliation of religious and domestic responsibilities.

**Semi-Monastic Satras:** This category represents a hybrid model wherein the satradhikari and deka-adhikara (assistant head) maintain celibacy while other members are permitted to have families.

**Mixed Satras:** These satras exhibit a combination of monastic and grihastha elements, accommodating both celibate and married members, including the satradhikari and deka-adhikara. These classifications illuminate the diverse nature of satra institutions and the spectrum of religious and social practices observed within them.

### **The Samhatis of Assamese Vaishnavism: Diversification within a Unified Tradition:-**

The emergence of distinct sub-sects, known as samhatis, within Assamese Vaishnavism presents a fascinating case study of religious evolution and internal dynamics. This splintering, which occurred following the demise of the movement's founder, Srimanta Sankaradeva, offers valuable insights into the interplay of leadership, theological interpretations, and social practices within a burgeoning religious tradition.

### **Fractured Legacy: Contested Roles and Divergent Paths:-**

A central figure in the samhatis' origin is Madhavadeva, Sankaradeva's closest associate. However, the narrative surrounding his role remains somewhat contested. Some accounts portray him as opposing Damodardeva, another influential figure, leading to a schism. Conversely, other sources refute this claim. Further research is necessary to unravel the motivations behind this divergence and the specific theological points of contention that fueled the splintering.

### **The Four Samhatis: A Spectrum of Beliefs and Practices:-**

**1. Brahma Samhati:** Founded by Damodardeva and Harideva, this samhati emphasizes adherence to Brahmanical rituals and Vedic practices. It prioritizes devotion to the personal form of Vishnu and readily embraces idol worship. Auniati Satra, with its rich cultural heritage and royal patronage, exemplifies this sub-sect's characteristics. Here, we see a clear lineage traced back to the ancient Vedic

tradition, highlighting the continuity and adaptation of indigenous belief systems within Vaishnavism.

**2. Purusa Samhati:** Attributed to Purusottama Thakur, Sankaradeva's grandson, this samhati venerates Sankaradeva himself as the ultimate guru and emphasizes nama dharma, the path of devotion through chanting the holy names of God. Patbausi Satra, where Sankaradeva spent a significant period composing his literary works, exemplifies this sub-sect's focus on his legacy. The Purusa Samhati's emphasis on Sankaradeva as the ultimate guru reveals the importance of lineage and spiritual inheritance within Assamese Vaishnavism.

**3. Kala Samhati:** Founded by Gopala Ata, this samhati presents a more egalitarian and guru-centric model. It de-emphasizes idol worship, favoring a more internalized form of devotion. The designation "Kala Samhati" has been a source of controversy, with other sub-sects interpreting it negatively as "extreme" or "black." Mayamara Satra, with its unique practice of designating the religious head as "Murti" (image), exemplifies this sub-sect's distinct characteristics. The Kala Samhati's divergence from idol worship and its focus on the guru suggest a reformist current within Vaishnavism, emphasizing a more personalized spiritual connection.

**4. Nika Samhati:** Established by Mathuradasa and Padma Ata, this samhati prioritizes the purity of Madhavadeva's teachings. Strict adherence to rules and regulations governing daily life, dietary restrictions, and social interactions is a hallmark of this sub-sect. Barpeta Satra, known for its historical significance, exemplifies the Nika Samhati's emphasis on "sat-sanga" (holy association) and the centrality of Madhavadeva's legacy. The Nika Samhati's focus on purity and Madhavadeva's teachings reflects a desire to preserve the original tenets of the faith as established by Sankaradeva and his immediate disciples.

### **Unity in Diversity: A Shared Foundation:-**

The emergence of samhatis did not diminish the core tenets of Assamese Vaishnavism – devotion to Vishnu, the Bhagavata Purana as scripture, and the importance of Bhakti (devotional love). However,

each samhati developed its own distinctive rituals, social codes, and leadership structures. Examining the evolution of these practices within each sub-sect and their impact on the daily lives of adherents could be a valuable area for further investigation.

### **Beyond the Religious Sphere: A Force Shaping Society:-**

The samhatis transcended the realm of the purely religious, leaving an indelible mark on Assamese society. They functioned as centers of education, cultural preservation, and social reform. Investigating the social impact of each samhati, including their contributions to literacy, art forms, and community organization, would provide a richer understanding of their multifaceted role in shaping Assamese identity. In short, the samhatis of Assamese Vaishnavism offer a compelling narrative of diversification within a unified tradition. By delving deeper into the historical context, theological nuances, and social implications of this phenomenon, we gain a richer appreciation for the dynamism and resilience of religious movements.

**Conclusion:-**The satra institution is an indispensable component of Assam's socio-religious landscape. Its historical trajectory, deeply intertwined with the lives of seminal figures such as Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, has significantly shaped the region's cultural and spiritual contours. Central to the satra's ethos is the Bhagavata Purana, which serves as its foundational scripture, eclipsing the importance of idol worship. As a cornerstone of Assamese society, the satra has played a pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage, fostering community cohesion, and promoting social welfare. Despite the challenges posed by rapid societal changes, the institution continues to hold a significant place in the hearts and minds of the Assamese people. Future research endeavors could delve deeper into the satra's multifaceted roles, including its contributions to education, economics, and social reform. By examining the institution's adaptive strategies in response to globalization and

modernization, scholars can gain valuable insights into its enduring relevance. Ultimately, the satra stands as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Assamese culture, offering a rich tapestry for both scholarly exploration and contemporary reflection.

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