



Barpeta Satra and its Role in the Social Life of Barpeta Town

¹**Author** Mridusmita Goswami

ARTICLE INFO

RECEIVED 02 MAY 2026

ACCEPTED 05 SEPTEMBER 2026

PUBLISHED 16 SEPTEMBER 2026

ABSTRACT

The satra institution in Assam has produced deep impact on the socio-religious life and also the socio-cultural and socio-economic life of the people of Assam. Barpeta satra is situated at Barpeta town which is the head quarter of Barpeta, a district of the province of Assam. Like other satras of Assam Barpeta satra has also lots of impact in the religious, social, cultural and economic life of the people. So, this paper is an attempt to discuss about Barpeta Satra and its role in the social life of Barpeta town.

Keywords:

Words: impact, Barpeta satra, social life, vaisnavite.

¹ Corresponding Author : Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Madhya Kamrup College, Chenga, Assam.

Email – mridusmita.goswami50@gmail.com



INTRODUCTION

The satra institution was established during the last part of the 15th century or first part of the 16th century by Sankardeva. The first satra was established by him in the field of mustard crops of Kusumbara (father of Sankardeva) at Bordoa under Nagaon district of Assam around 1503-1504 A.D. It was the initial form of satra Institution' (Kakati, 1921 cited in Neog 1980: 12). It is worth mentioning that the satras have continued to be established in different places of Assam till today. Satra is a unique socio-religious and cultural institution of Assam. It is a heritage institution of neo-vaisnavite movement of the state. Almost eight hundred satras are scattered all over Assam. The satra institution in Assam has produced deep impact on the socio-religious life and also the socio-cultural and socio-economic life of the people of Assam. People from different walks of life-scholars, businessmen and traders, peasants and different craftsmen who form the common mass and are linked with the process of production not only listen to the liberal and universal appeal of the neo-vaisnavite religion of Sankardeva, but also come in large number to embrace this religion and become its astute devotees. The appeal of the religion is simple which can be understood even by unlettered people. If one wants salvation from this mundane existence, it is only through bhakti or devotion that he or she can attain it through naam-kirtana. Satras have become the centers where the devotees congregation in large number and join in the prayer to God. This has imparted a sense of unity or oneness among the people (Rajguru, 1988: 54)

Barpeta satra is the earliest and most influential satra of the mahapurusiya sect (Sarma, 1999: 177) as well as the chief monastery of Assam (Neog, 1965 reprint 2008: 137), which was established by Madhavdeva the chief disciple and apostle of Sankardeva with proper help of Mathuradas Burha Aata¹ in 1504 sakabda (1582-1583 of Christian era). According to some biographies of the medieval age, after passing away of Sankardeva,



Madhavdeva took the responsibility of the spiritual instructor of vaisnava religion in Assam and later on he established some satras including Barpeta satra (Das, 2005 cited in Barthakur 2005: 36-37). Barpeta satra is situated at Barpeta town which is the head quarter of Barpeta, a district of the province of Assam. Like other satras of Assam Barpeta satra has also lots of impact in the religious, social, cultural and economic life of the people. So, this paper is an attempt to discuss about the impact on social life of the people of Barpeta town.

AREA OF THE STUDY

Barpeta Satra is one of the chief monasteries of Assam, which was established by Madhavadeva the chief apostle of Sankaradeva in the later part of the sixteenth century. Barpeta Satra is situated at a distance of about 100 km. to the north-west of Guwahati city. Barpeta is the head quarter town of the district of the same name.

OBJECTIVES

The objective that has been formulated for the study is to know about the role of Barpeta satra in the social Life of Barpeta town.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of information. For the collection of primary data, the investigator had applied field study method on a self-prepared questionnaire, personal interview and observation as well as participant observation method to collect information on the studied problem. Secondary data consisted of relevant books and articles etc.

ESTABLISHMENT OF BARPETA SATRA

It was 1504 sakabda (1582-83 AD) when Madhavadeva was at Sundaridiya continuing his mission most earnestly. One day two of his disciples come to him with the message that they had been severely humiliated by a farmer as they came crossing his paddy



field Madhavadev was utterly moved by this news and soon he made preparation to leave the place to go to Bhawanipur satra of Gopal Aata, Gopal Tanti (later on known as Mathuradas Burha Ata), however came to Madhavdeva at that time. He soon knew all about Madhava's plan and requested him to go to Tantikuchi (old name of Barpeta) instead of Bhawanipur. Madhavadeva found it hard to go against the wishes of his favorite disciple and therefore started for Tantikuchi. At Tantikuchi his disciple Gopal Tanti made a hut of three rooms for his master, one of these rooms was to be used for daily prasanga (worshipping). But when Madhava found the room very narrow and therefore unsuitable for that purpose, he called Gopal and said- 'I found it very narrow here, Gopal we will have to make a harigriha for the purpose'. Gopal responded immediately – 'But it will be very hard to find out open spaces. But I know my uncle and aunt. They had no children of their own but possess a very wide, large home garden. I will introduce you to them and you may ask them for land', Madhava did accordingly. At first Gopal's uncle Ram Laruwa Burha was not ready to provide land, but he agreed at last. Soon the land which was actually a jungle was cleared under the leadership of Gopal himself. Gopal enacted the Katora Yatra (drama written by Sankaradeva) there in the open space beneath a tent. People came in groups. They were deeply attracted by Sankaradeva's doctrines. Madhava got more inspiration than before. They arranged for more land from Ram Laruwa Burha and decided to build a large kirtanghar. The first kirtanghar was placed just at the place where Katora Yatra was enacted and at that very place lightening for worshipping was also done, the charita says" (Pathak, 1959: 5-10). After completion of the construction of the kirtanghar, Madhavadeva on specified date prescribed by the astrologer opened its door by lightening the akkhay banti (everburning sacred lamp) and by installing the sacred Bhagavata at the altar. Within a very short time span, this satra became the centre place for spiritual upliftment on the one hand and also a unique institution for practicing art and culture on the other hand. Sessions of prasanga (prayer services), patha (text from religious books), byakhya (explanation of devotional verses) etc. were arranged for spiritual uplifting, while training session in varied satriya dances songs and instruments etc were arranged for



cultural or artistic uplifting. Gopal Tanti under special favour of Madhavadeva learnt all these things attentively and soon he became the learned person of the Satriya Culture itself. Many people were christened in vaisnava doctrine and Madhavdeva's popularity spread far and wide (Raychoudhry, 2012: 109)

In 1594, Barpeta satra house was reduced to ashes by the forest fire suddenly. At that time Gopal Tanti was at Bhawanipur. When he came back and learnt what had happened, he went almost dumb because of grief and sorrow at the loss of his dearest satra at Barpeta. At last on the advice of his wife, Gopal went to Madhavdeva at Bhela Doba. Madhavdeva inspired Gopal and Changed his name as Mathura Das made him the first adhikara of Barpeta satra providing him two nageri-takas (Sri Sri Sankara Charita Puthi, 223). Gopal alias Mathuradas Burha Ata returned to Barpeta and revived the satra on its burnt foundation again. In 1595 A.D. he was coronated as the adhikara of Barpeta satra on the tithi (death anniversary) of Sankardeva. Mathuradas Burha Aata's attention was also directed towards social organization. He was the man who introduced the hati system (Pathak, 1959: 71). It was a unique system suited to the conditions of the medieval time. The main objectives of introduction of the hati system were –

1. To bring unity and cohesion.
2. To create a sense of attachment to the kirtanghar.
3. To bring economic viability.

There are all together 22 hatis. In each hati a haitarghar (community hall) was established. The haitarghar is still being used as the venue for disposal of petty disputes and for decision making in connection with all matters both temporal and religious. Moreover, a treasury in each hati was established so that people could take loans at nominal rate of interest. He also introduced the religious tax. Every resident of the satra has to pay the tax; in return he receives a share of the offerings made in the kirtanghar by the devotees at the time of the death anniversary of the gurus (Pathak, 1959: 72-77). This system still prevails. Barpeta satra received favour from the royal house for two



times. When Mathuradas Burha Aata was still alive Koch King Naranarayana (1627-1632 AD) sent many people from his own state to serve the satra (Khan Choudhury, 1936: 123). On the other hand the Ahom King Sivasingha (1735 AD) donated land to the satra inscribing the act on copper plate (Gait, 2008: 183). Accordingly, there is no myadi land in the hatis around Barpeta satra. The land owner is the satra itself and hence this land under the satra cannot be sold out to anybody (Adhikary, 2010: 49). The kirtanghar reconstructed by Mathuradas Burha Aata was again burnt by fire and it was built again in 1828 AD. During the earthquake in 1897 AD it was again destroyed. In 1908-09 AD, it was rebuilt and the present construction was completed in 1962 AD. The akhay banti has been lightening till date for 427 years (Das, 1996: 04).

Barpeta Satra and its Role in the Social Life of Barpeta Town:

The satra institution has produced deep impact on the socio-cultural and economic life of the people of Assam in general and the people of Barpeta in particular. People from different castes who form the common mass and are linked with the process of production not only listen to the liberal and universal appeal of the neo-vaisnavite religion of Sankardeva, but also come in large number to embrace this religion and become its astute devotees. The appeal of the religion is simple which can be understood even by unlettered people. Satras became not only centers of spiritual activities but also centers of socio-cultural and economic activities. In the earlier period, most of the people of Assam lived almost a nomadic life moving from one place to another place when they were disturbed by natural calamities like flood or epidemics like cholera, small pox etc or due to depredations of wild animals like tiger or elephants, because during those days the forests were infested with wild animals. Often people fled to deep forests to protect themselves from royal wrath or depredations of neighbouring community like Bhutiyas, the kacharies etc. Even Sankardeva and his community had to move from one place to another place before finally coming to Barpeta (Lekharu, 1952: 256). Formation of satras helped in creating permanent settlements of the toiling masses in different places of Assam and Barpeta also. Once people began to live within a satra, they did not generally try to move to other places,



they formed a new satra owing allegiance to the original satra. Thus, the satras helped in creating permanent settlements, which was very much necessary to carry on economic activities on a continuing basis. The satras contributed in a big way in boosting the agricultural economy of Assam, which would have been impossible without a permanent population sitting at a particular place. Side by side with agriculture, other occupations also developed like carpentry, weaving, making of different agricultural economy thrived under the fostering care of the satras like Barpeta and others (Rajguru, 1988: 67). The neo-vaisnavite religion had to face royal wrath of the Ahom kings initially since they thought that the particular religious movement might to be directed against the royalty. The new religion was also maligned by the priests who approached king Suhungmung Dihingiya (1497-1539) and alleged that the religion propagated by Sankardeva did not believe in the Hindu rites of worship (Neog, 1965: 121). The royal attitude which was initially belligerent against the new religion got mellowed down in course of time, as the rulers found that the intention of the new religion was not to spread disaffection against monarchy, but one of help and co-operation. In fact, from time of the Ahom King Siva Singha onwards the royalty began to patronize the new religion as it did in the case of other religion also by offering land grants were made either in the name of the presiding deity in the name of the priests (Sarmadaloi, 2003: 76). This provided an economic footing to Barpeta satra to carry on their religious activities. Barpeta satra was organised on the basis of division of labour. The sewaits were allotted pattas of land to carry on cultivation. Apart from peasant families in the satra, there were artisans carrying on different productive activities like carpentry, blacksmithy, goldsmithy, coppersmithy, weaving etc. All were considered as devotees owing allegiance to the presiding deity of the satra. Thus, Barpeta satra offers unity and cohesion among different castes and communities as never before people in Assam who had been semi-nomad shifting from one area to another, none become permanently settled under the satra. The monarchy needed a permanent population clutching to the earth for economic prosperity and political cohesion. The satra provide this platform. Vaisnavite satras of Assam are the social facts



and cultural realities. Assamese society cannot be represented without referring to the satra institutions. Most of the performing art forms of India including Assam are evolved out of religious institutions. The satra has been working as a centre of various art forms such as bhaona, thiya naam, ojahpali, ghosa kirtan etc. At Barpeta satra also such programs are held. The social context of these art forms cannot be ignored as the performing arts certainly emerged out of men and society. The bhaonas and the dramatic shows with mythological themes that are enacted in the satra compound depict stories showing the success of goodness over the evil. In the other art forms such as ojah-pali and ghosa-kirtan the names of God are sung in chorus. Barpeta satra also serves as centre of learning and play an important role in imparting informal education. At Barpeta satra various episodes of Ramayana, Mahabharata and Purana are recited in every evening. Thousands of people come here for listening to such type of epics. The educative role of Barpeta satra may also be seen in its day to day activities. Barpeta satra besides being a religious institution also serves as center of recreation and amusement. Sankaradeva introduced bhaona performance as it can serve as the medium of religious propaganda but also came to be a source of pleasure, and recreation. Barpeta satra has its own administrative and economic structure. It is administered by the assembly of the inmates called samuha. Barpeta satra influences the economic life of the people. In this context the formation of the hati fund bears great significance. Gokul Pathak wrote in this context thus "Shrewd Burha Ata (Mathura Das Burha Ata) not only divided the whole satra in to 22 hatis but also established a treasury in every hati for improvement of economic condition. People began to take advantage of the treasury established in each hati. Burha Ata formulated certain laws and regulation for smooth running of these treasuries, which are still in vogue. Even today the poor people living in the hatis get benefit from the hati fund. These treasuries enlivened the economy of Barpeta helping the traders and craftsmen."(Pathak, 1959: 75). The performing art forms of Barpeta satra comprising ojah-pali, bhaona etc. are important and powerful propaganda media to direct the attention of the people towards a particular program. Barpeta satra with the



performance of these art forms contributes immensely in enriching the social cohesion and social integration. The two epics and the Purana have been serving as instruments for national cohesion. Bhaona and ojha-pali are performed by the local people at Barpeta. Barpeta satra takes part in national integration. During the time of national distress due to Chinese aggression in 1962 the satra donated 1 Kg of gold from the satra, treasury for the defense of the country (Nath, 2001: 188). From time to time, devotees of Barpeta satra including the aaisakal (women devotee in collective) have expressed solidarity with the general people. They joined in various protest rallies and processions during the time of Assam movement for the deportation of illegal foreign nations (Nath, 2001: 186).

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Though Barpeta satra is a religious institution but it has great importance in socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political life of the people of adjoining areas. The impact of satra in the socio cultural life of the people of Barpeta town through formal and informal activities is an important aspect. Barpeta satra is a platform for spreading vaisnavite movement in Assam. This satra is an institution patronizing unique satra based culture of devotion to Lord Vishnu. Barpeta satra has much significance and the hati system of Barpeta paved the way for promotion of socio-cultural and spiritual life of the people. One unique feature of Barpeta satra is that it is democratically managed. A number of functionaries also had been created for smooth running of the satra and it is continuing till date.

REFERENCES

1. Adhikary, P. (2010), Barpeta Zilar Janasamajat Satrar Prabhav, Ninad Gosti: Guwahati.
2. Das, B. (2005), Barpeta Dhaam Suni Jowa Hari Guna Naam in M Barthakur (ed) Pratyay, vol. xii.2nd year, 36-37, Rekha publications: Guwahati.
3. Kakati, B.K. (1921), Guru-carita-katha in M, Neog (ed) 1980 Guru-carita-katha, Gauhati



University: Guwahati.

4. Lekharu, U.C. ed (1952 reprint 1964), Katha Guru Carita, Nalbari
5. Nath, U. (2001), Barpetar Sanskritik Buranji, Bina Library: Guwahati.
6. Neog, M. (1965, reprint 2008), Early History of The Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankaradeva and His Times, Lawyer's Book Stall: Guwahati.
7. Pathak, G. (1959, reprint 2006), Barpeta Satrar Itihas, Amar Desh prakashan: Barpeta.
8. Raychoudhury, B. (2012), Barpeta Satrar Itibritta, Rekha Prakashan: Guwahati.
9. Sarma, S.N. (1999), The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and Satra Institution in Assam, Lawyer's Book Stall: Guwahati