

Evolution of Sattras and its impact on society

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Abstract: *Sattras, monastic institutions established in Assam during the 15th and 16th centuries by the Vaishnavite saint and reformer Srimanta Sankardeva, have played a pivotal role in shaping the religious, cultural and social fabric of Assamese society. Initially founded as centers for the propagation of the Ekasarana Dharma, a monotheistic form of Vaishnavism, Sattras evolved over centuries into multifunctional institutions that integrated spiritual devotion with artistic expression, education, social reform and community cohesion. This paper traces the historical evolution of Sattras from their origins as secluded hermitages to becoming powerful socio-religious institutions with significant influence over both rural and urban communities. It examines the changing roles of Sattras in response to political shifts, colonial interventions and modern socio-economic transformations. Special attention is given to their contributions in promoting classical and folk arts such as Sattriya dance, Bhaona (religious theatre), manuscript painting and traditional music. Furthermore, the study explores how Sattras have functioned as agents of social change, promoting egalitarian values, education and moral order, while also negotiating with challenges related to caste, gender roles and modernization. In contemporary times, Sattras continue to be vital custodians of cultural heritage and spiritual identity, although their relevance and roles are constantly being redefined in a rapidly globalizing society. Through a multidisciplinary approach, this research highlights the dynamic evolution of Sattras and their enduring impact on the collective consciousness and cultural landscape of Assam.*

Key Words: *Sattra, Sattriya dance, Sankardev, Vaishnavite, Ekasarana Dharma.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Sattras are traditional monastic institutions established in Assam by the Srimanta Sankardeva as part of the Bhakti movement is one the major contributions of Srimanta Sankardeva in the religio-cultural arena. (Kandali Dr. Malika. 2014. 18) Originally conceived as centers for religious practice and spiritual guidance within the Vaishnavite tradition, Sattras have evolved over centuries to become vital hubs of Assamese cultural, social and educational life. These institutions have played a pivotal role in preserving and propagating unique art forms such as Sattriya dance, bhaona theatre and devotional music, thereby shaping the cultural identity of the region. Beyond their religious functions, Sattras have historically served as community centers that promote social cohesion and ethical values, fostering a collective identity among diverse Assamese populations. In contemporary society, they continue to influence social norms and cultural practices while facing new challenges posed by modernization, urbanization and changing socio-economic dynamics. This study seeks to evaluate the multifaceted impact of Sattras on Assamese society, with a focus on their socio-cultural contributions and the challenges they encounter in the modern era. By exploring their evolving role, the research aims to highlight the significance of Sattras in sustaining the socio-cultural fabric of Assam and to provide insights for preserving these institutions for future generations.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

This research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of Vaishnavism and the pivotal role of Srimanta Sankardeva in shaping its cultural and spiritual dimensions. It critically examines the historical trajectory of Sattriya dance, tracing its origins within the monastic institutions (Sattras) and its subsequent emergence on the proscenium stage as a recognized classical dance form. The study is intended to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and serve as a valuable reference for scholars pursuing advanced research in this domain.

3. OBJECTIVES :

The primary objective of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of the multifaceted nature of Sattras and to critically assess their social and cultural impact on society.

4. METHODOLOGY:

In accordance with the study's objectives, historical, and descriptive approaches have been adopted. The research draws upon both primary and secondary sources for data collection.

5. ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF SATTRA:

Sattras are institutional centers of the Ekasarana tradition of Vaishnavism, primarily located in the Indian state of Assam and nearby regions. The name Sattra originates from the Bhagavata Purana, where the Sanskrit term Sattra refers to an assembly of devotees. During the lifetime of Sankaradev, devotees gathered in the open, often under trees. Although temporary prayer houses were constructed, the tradition of devotees residing within the premises did not begin during his time. The Sattras split into four distinct sects, known as Samhatis: Brahma Samhati, Purusa Samhati, Nika Samhati and Kala Samhati. These four sects became firmly established by the early 17th century. (Neog, Maheshwar, 2018,153) Brahma Samhati is one of the four major sects that emerged within the Ekasarana Dharma tradition during the late 16th and early 17th centuries, following the decline of centralized authority after the death of its founder, Sankardev. The sect was founded by Damodaradeva, a Brahmin disciple of Sankardev. Unlike some of the other sects, leadership within the Brahma Samhati specifically the position of Sattradhikar (head of the Sattra) was reserved for Brahmins, reinforcing traditional caste hierarchies. The Brahma Samhati reintroduced Brahmanical rituals, scriptural authority and caste distinctions, elements that Sankardev had originally downplayed or rejected. However, it continued to uphold the core principle of Nama-dharma, which emphasizes devotion to Lord Krishna through chanting and prayer. The sect reinstated the varna system, placing a strong emphasis on ritual purity and Brahminical authority in religious matters. It legitimized caste-based distinctions in both religious and social life, making it more acceptable to orthodox Brahmin and upper-caste communities. Brahma Samhati received significant support from the ruling elites. Notably, Koch king Nara Narayan was initiated into the Vaishnava order by Damodaradeva, enhancing the sect's political influence and prestige. Prominent Sattras associated with the Brahma Samhati include Auniati Sattra, Dakhinpat Sattra, Garmur Sattra and Kuruwabahi Sattra. These institutions enjoyed royal patronage from the Ahom kings, which contributed to the widespread dissemination and institutional consolidation of the sect. The Brahma Samhati represents a more orthodox and Sanskritized form of the Ekasarana tradition. While it diverged in certain respects from Sankardev's original egalitarian and anti-ritualistic vision, it played a crucial role in the institutionalization and sustenance of the movement within Assamese society particularly among the upper castes and political elite. Among its institutions, Auniati Sattra, Dakhinpat Sattra and Garmur Sattra emerged as the most influential centers of the Brahma Samhati, largely due to continued royal support from the Ahom dynasty. Chaturbhuj Thakur, a grandson of Sankardev, served as the leader of the Purusa Samhati sect. This Samhati adhered closely to the original doctrines and practices propagated by Sankardev and was therefore regarded as the principal or orthodox branch of the Ekasarana tradition. Leadership within the sect, particularly the position of head priest, was typically drawn from either Kayastha or Brahmin families. The term purusha is thought to have originated from the honorific title Mahapurusha, a designation commonly attributed to Sankardev. Among the Sattras associated with this sect, Bardowa Sattra established by Sankardev himself remained the most prominent and influential. The subsequent *Samhati*, known as the Nika Samhati, was founded by Mathura Das and Padma Ata, both of whom were direct disciples of Madhavdeva. This sect strictly adhered to Madhavdeva's doctrinal principles and as a purist movement, emphasized asceticism and spiritual discipline. Prominent centers associated with the Nika Samhati include the Kamalabari Sattra, Barpeta Sattra, and Madhupur Sattra. The final and most socially inclusive *Samhati*, the Kala Samhati, was oriented toward the integration of tribal and lower-caste communities. Emerging in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, it comprised offshoots from six *Sudra Sattras* and six *Brahmana Sattras* established by Gopala Ata and his followers. Among these, the Mayamara Sattra and Dihing Sattra were the most prominent *Sudra Sattras*, noted for their inclusive approach in admitting various indigenous and marginalized groups such as the Kacharis, Kaibartas, Chutiyas, Morans and Ahoms. The Mayamara Sattra, founded by Aniruddhadev, a disciple of Gopala Ata, emerged as the most influential among the *Sudra Sattras* of the Kala Samhati. In the latter half of the 18th century, it played a pivotal role in organizing a significant socio-religious revolt against the Ahom monarchy, marking a critical moment in Assam's religious and political history. The first three Samhatis- Brahma Samhati, Purusa Samhati and Nika Samhati reinstated caste hierarchies and Brahmanical rituals, whereas the Kala Samhati completely rejected both caste distinctions and idol worship.

6. INFLUENCE OF SATTRAS IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE OF ASSAM:

The Sattra institution occupies a pivotal role in the socio-cultural fabric of society. The cultivation of human capital is indispensable for the comprehensive advancement of any community. When individuals are nurtured through adherence to customs, regulations and value-oriented education, they transform into invaluable assets for societal development. It is widely acknowledged that an ethical consciousness is fundamentally rooted in spirituality, which is further refined and sustained by religious principles. In Assam, the Sattras have functioned as vigilant custodians of the philosophical and ethical tenets promulgated by the Neo-Vaishnavite gurus and their followers. Central to this legacy is the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva, which continue to serve as the primary impetus for embedding moral values within the collective consciousness. Namghars, dispersed throughout rural settlements and operating under the auspices of the Sattras, act as vital conduits for propagating ideals of communal harmony, integrity, and justice, all deeply entrenched in Neo-Vaishnavite cultural ethos. The influence of the Sattra institution on society is multifaceted, encompassing ethical, educational, cultural and judicial spheres.

6.1 CULTURAL

Sattras have significantly enriched Assamese culture through their vibrant cultural activities and events. The dramas, dance forms and musical compositions developed by Srimanta Sankardeva and his followers continue to thrive and inspire audiences today. Among these contributions, *Bhaona* a distinctive form of drama stands out as a unique cultural heritage gifted by Sankardeva to Assamese society. *Bhaona* brings to life mythological tales and devotional stories, emphasizing virtues such as truthfulness, magnanimity, empathy and righteousness. By portraying these moral ideals, *bhaona* encourages viewers to embrace and embody these values in their own lives. The narrative technique employed in *bhaona* is deliberately straightforward, enabling even the lay audience to easily comprehend both the story and its underlying moral lessons. While the fundamental themes of *bhaonas* are religious, they also provide intrinsic aesthetic pleasure to spectators. It is customary to stage *bhaonas* in Sattras or Namghars on special occasions. Additionally, *bhaonas* give rise to a community of artisans skilled in crafting costumes, masks and decorative items essential to the performances, these craftsmen are highly regarded within society for their artistry. Beyond drama, classical dance and vocal music accompanied by indigenous musical instruments are among the other art forms nurtured by the Sattras. Notably, *Sattriya Nritya*, a distinctive dance form originating from the Sattra tradition, has received national recognition. Through these multifaceted contributions, the Sattras have profoundly enriched Assam's cultural landscape, spanning literature, music, dance, architecture, and sculpture.

6.2 EDUCATIONAL

Sattras have played a vital role in the expansion of education and the eradication of illiteracy within society. During the era of Srimanta Sankardeva, the majority of the Assamese population was predominantly illiterate; however, they were culturally refined and possessed extensive oral knowledge. Despite the inability to read, they could memorize sacred texts through attentive listening to recitations by others. Within the Sattras, formal educational institutions were established where Sanskrit was taught systematically. Furthermore, illiterate individuals acquired basic literacy skills through informal instruction from literate members of the community. The education imparted in Sattras encompasses physical, intellectual and moral dimensions in a holistic and practical manner. Physical activities such as dance foster bodily discipline, while mythological dramas serve as a medium for imparting ethical and moral education. It was customary for Sattras to maintain libraries, which preserved sacred scriptures and provided the community with access to reading materials, thereby facilitating literacy development. Significantly, Sattras have made substantial literary contributions to Assamese society. In the formative stages of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, numerous texts were translated from Sanskrit into Assamese under the patronage of the Sattras. This enabled the Assamese populace to engage directly with mythological and classical literature, broadening their cultural and religious horizons.

6.3 JUDICIAL

The Sattras employ a straightforward yet highly effective judicial system. Disputes within the Sattra community are resolved openly in the Namghar, where hearings take place in the presence of all concerned parties. This transparent and impartial process ensures that the verdict is accepted by everyone involved, including the losing party. The system emphasizes retribution balanced with the opportunity for the offender to acknowledge their wrongdoing and rehabilitate, enabling them to reintegrate into society with virtuous intent. Offenders seeking absolution follow a simple ritual: they present a betel nut as a gesture of respect to the assembly and solemnly swear in the name of God to refrain from repeating the misconduct. Experience shows that those who undergo this process tend to lead reformed and righteous lives. By contrast, punishments meted out by the formal constitutional judiciary often provide fewer opportunities for such personal transformation. In many rural villages, a similar system is practiced, with disputes commonly settled in

the Namghar using the same principles as those of the Sattras. When complex or unresolved issues arise, they may be referred to the affiliated Sattras, whose decisions are typically accepted and upheld by all parties involved.

7. RESULTS AND FINDINGS:

The research reveals that Sattras continue to hold a significant position in Assamese society, both as religious centers and as custodians of cultural heritage. The key findings are categorized under three main themes: cultural preservation, social cohesion, and contemporary challenges.

7.1 CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Sattras play a vital role in preserving traditional art forms, most notably Sattriya dance and Ankiya bhaona. These performances are not only religious rituals but also serve as mediums for educating younger generations about Assamese history and spiritual values. Interviewees emphasized the importance of Sattras in sustaining these unique cultural expressions, which are recognized nationally and internationally.

7.2 SOCIAL COHESION

Beyond their cultural role, Sattras act as community hubs that foster social unity and collective identity. They organize festivals, educational programmes and community welfare activities that bring together diverse groups within the region. Many respondents noted that the Sattras institution promotes ethical values and social harmony, strengthening bonds among local populations.

7.3 CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Despite their enduring influence, Sattras face multiple challenges in the modern context. Declining interest among youth, migration to urban areas, and limited financial and institutional support threaten the sustainability of these institutions. Furthermore, modernization pressures have led to changing social dynamics, requiring Sattras to adapt their roles to remain relevant.

These findings suggest that while Sattras continue to be pillars of Assamese cultural and social life, proactive measures are necessary to address emerging challenges and ensure their longevity.

8. DISCUSSION:

The findings of this study underscore the enduring significance of the Sattras as multifaceted institutions that profoundly shape Assam's socio-cultural landscape. Beyond their religious functions, Sattras serve as vital custodians of traditional art forms such as Sattriya dance and Bhaona. These cultural expressions, deeply intertwined with Assamese identity, fulfil both spiritual and educational roles, ensuring the transmission of heritage across generations. Furthermore, Sattras play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion. As centers for communal gathering and moral guidance, they promote social harmony and nurture a shared collective identity among diverse communities. This reinforces the critical role religious institutions can play in sustaining social stability, particularly within culturally pluralistic contexts. Nonetheless, the study identifies pressing challenges, including waning youth participation, migration and insufficient institutional support, which necessitate urgent and adaptive responses. The forces of modernization and urbanization threaten to undermine the traditional structures and functions of the Sattras, posing a risk of cultural dilution if left unaddressed. Addressing these challenges requires concerted collaboration among Sattras custodians, government bodies and civil society to devise sustainable frameworks that reconcile tradition with contemporary relevance.

9. CONCLUSION:

The institution of the Sattras is far more than a purely religious entity; it plays a vital role in the broader socio-cultural life of Assamese society. The ethical values promoted by the Sattras have had a profound and lasting impact, fostering inclusivity, community engagement and spiritual growth. As democratic institutions, Sattras have historically remained accessible to people of all castes and creeds, reinforcing their relevance in both religious and social spheres. This study reaffirms that Sattras continue to be central to the cultural and social fabric of Assam. Their invaluable contributions to the preservation of art, literature, music, Sattriya dance, Ankiya Naat, and manuscript traditions have sustained a vibrant cultural legacy. By institutionalizing these art forms within a spiritual framework, Sattras not only nurtured creative expression but also ensured intergenerational cultural continuity. Rooted in the teachings of Srimanta Sankardeva and the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, Sattras emphasized bhakti (devotion) over ritualism, thereby democratizing religious practices and providing a spiritual refuge beyond the confines of caste and class. Their evolution reflects a deep engagement with moral instruction, spiritual discipline and ethical living. Moreover, Sattras have historically functioned as influential socio-political institutions. Through democratic self-governance, social reform and active community involvement, they have shaped social norms, challenged inequities and even resisted colonial

pressures. Their ability to serve as stabilizing forces during periods of socio-political upheaval attests to the trust and respect they command within society. As centers of indigenous education and philosophical inquiry, Sattras have also significantly shaped the intellectual landscape of Assam. Grounded in Ekasarana Dharma, they emphasized holistic education, promoting moral values, critical thinking and a sense of collective responsibility. However, the sustainability of these institutions faces growing challenges from contemporary socio-economic changes, including urbanization, shifting cultural priorities, and declining youth engagement. Preserving the legacy of the Sattras requires intentional and sustained interventions, fostering youth participation, ensuring financial and institutional support, and integrating these traditional institutions into broader developmental and cultural policy frameworks. In conclusion, recognizing and supporting the evolving role of Sattras is essential to safeguarding Assam's rich cultural heritage, fostering social cohesion, and sustaining the spiritual and ethical foundations of Assamese society for generations to come.

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