



THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE SATRA INSTITUTION: A CASE STUDY OF THE AUNIATI SATRA OF MAJULI ISLAND, ASSAM, INDIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The establishment of the Satra institution of Assam is the outcome of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by religious reformer Srimanta Sankardeva during the 16th century CE. Majuli Island, due to its geographical isolation, became the leading centre for Neo-Vaishnavism after the foundation of monasteries through Satras, resulting in the preservation of culture propagated by Sankardeva in its original form, further transforming the island into the Vatican of Assam Vaishnavism. More than thirty Satras are situated in Majuli, with Auniati Satra being one of the largest Satra. The Auniati Satra, established in 1653 CE by Ahom King Jayadhwaj Singha, has played a major role in Assamese society by spreading spirituality and devotion among the people. The Satra is purely a monastic institution, and its resident devotees adopt celibacy throughout their life. This research attempts to understand the organisational structure of the Satra institution along with its impact on society. It further focuses on the administrative system of the Satra together with the recruitment of the monks. The paper explores the transition in the guidelines and directives for women followed in the Satra. The adopted methodology in this article represents both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, with the data sets being both primary and secondary. The cultural and religious landscape of Majuli is another significant feature for tourist attraction, making it a hub for tourism.

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Introduction

The word *Satra* literally means the centre of Vaishnavism in Assam; a place of worship and residence for devotees and Vaishnavas. A *Satra* is a place where daily religious practices take place, and Vaishnava saints live in search of life and liberation (Neog, 1998). The *Satra*, as an institution, has continued from the medieval period, carrying the doctrines of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568 CE). It is the community prayer hall of the Neo-Vaishnavites. The religious nature of the *Satra* is responsible for the formation and balance of Assamese society, both spiritually and culturally, for over 500 years (Borah, 2012).

Among the significant events in Assam's history of the medieval period, the reign of the Ahoms and the Neo-Vaishnavite movement are the most important. The emergence of a greater territory called Assam is the ultimate culmination of the political unity developed in the Brahmaputra Valley, centring on the migration of the Ahoms and alongside the development of the *Satra* Culture (Acharya 2018). The *Satra* institutions being formed under the leadership of Sankardeva transformed the political Assam into a cultural Assam. The word *Satra* is used for the first time in the *Satapatha Brahmana* (Goswami, 2013). Sankardeva, in order to propagate the religion of *Bhakti*, established this unique and novel type of organization with manifold activities in different aspects of life, besides religious. He adopted many attractive ways, like dramatic performances, dance, and music, to attract the commoners towards neo-Vaishnavism in Assam (Sarma, 1966). A temple was constructed by his brother Ramraya at Borduwa for this purpose. This was the core institution for the Vaishnavites, which later spread to the Ahom kingdom (upper Assam), Kamrupa, and Koch kingdom (Cooch Behar) in the form of religious institutions called *Satras* and numerous *Namghars* (prayer halls) or *kritanghar* in the rural areas. In that sense, the *kritanghar* at Borduwa *Than* was the first community prayer hall of the Neo Vaishnavite movement of Assam (Borah, 2012). The idea of an ideal *Satra* as of today may not have been present in Sankardeva's vision when he first started the congregational gatherings for the aim of cultivating devotion along with cultural activities. It is also mentioned in the *Charit Puthis* that during the days of Sankardeva, the daily gatherings of the monks and the disciples were held under tree shade or in the open space (Cantlie, 1984). This perhaps formed the core of the *Satra*, i.e.,

kritanghar, but the idea of the other structures came much later. The full-fledged development of the *Satra* as an institution occurred after the death of Sankardeva, by his disciples Madhavdeva and Damodardeva, at Barpeta and Patbausi, with the complete infrastructure (Nath 2009).

This paper attempts to understand the organisational structure of the *Satra* institution of Assam with a focus on *Sri Sri Aunaiti Satra* of Majuli Island. It further explores the socio-religious aspect of the *Satra* and its impact on society. To obtain a comprehensive understanding, the authors have attempted to gain a deeper insight into the functions of the *Satra* by focusing on the administrative system (religious, civil, and socio-cultural) and the recruitment of the *Bhakats* (monks), along with the nature of their caste. Additionally, the article aims to examine the transition of the rules enforced on the entry of women in the *Satra*. The cultural and religious landscape of Majuli is another significant feature for tourist attraction, making it a hub for spiritual tourism. The methodology adopted in this article presents both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, with the data sets being both primary and secondary. The methods applied for primary data collection included observation, survey schedule, and interview method, whereas the secondary sources comprised books, journals, articles, brochures, and so on. Extensive fieldwork has been done around the periphery of Aunaiti *Satra* to acquire an in-depth understanding of the nature of the *Satra* institution towards Assamese society.

Study area

The present study is conducted at *Sri Sri Aunaiti Satra* of Majuli Island, Assam. Majuli is situated between $26^{\circ} 45'$ to $27^{\circ} 12'$ North latitude and $93^{\circ} 39'$ to $94^{\circ} 35'$ longitude, being the largest river island in the world (Borkakoti, 2017). The *Aunaiti Satra* played a vital role in Assamese society by being one of the leading *Satras* for the spread of the *Bhakti* movement in Assam. According to historical records, the *Satra* was established by Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha in 1653 CE (Nath, 2009). The name of the *Satra* Aunaiti is divided into two parts, where '*Auni*' means *pan* (betel leaf) and '*ati*' means a higher place, which meant that the *Satra* was established in a higher place where there was an abundance of betel leaf (Kalita, 2018). It is said that once, when the state was attacked by natural calamities, the astrologers of the state reported to the king that this misfortune was because of some past misdeeds on the part of his predecessors, indicating thereby the death of Misraddev Gossain of Kuruwabahi *Satra* in the custody of the state before his time. Therefore, in order to make some amends for the past misdeeds of his forefather, decided to establish a grand monastery for the son of Kuruwabahi Gossain with all sorts of royal grants, including land and servitors, and him becoming its disciple. With this intention of the king was forwarded to Gossain's widowed wife; it is stated, she refused to send her minor son to the king on suspicion that her son too may be killed like his father. On persistent request on the part of the king's men, however, she finally gave way and sent Niranjandev, the *Bhagavati* (of the *Satra*, instead of her son), to the king. Presuming him to be the son of the Gossain, the king became his disciple and made him a *Satradhikara* by establishing him a grand new *Satra* at Aunaiti in the Majuli Island. According to the official records preserved in the Ahom chronicles, this was in the year 1653-1654 CE (Nath, 2004; Sarma, 1975). This record further says that King Jayadhwaj Singha himself (formally) laid the foundation pillar of the *manikut* (the sanctum sanctorum where the *Bhagavata* is placed) after a year or two, in the *Saka* year 1578, in the month of *Chaitra*, it being a Wednesday. King Jayadhwaj Singh thereafter established two other *Satras* of the same school on the island; they were Dakshinpat and Garamur *Satra* (Nath, 2012)

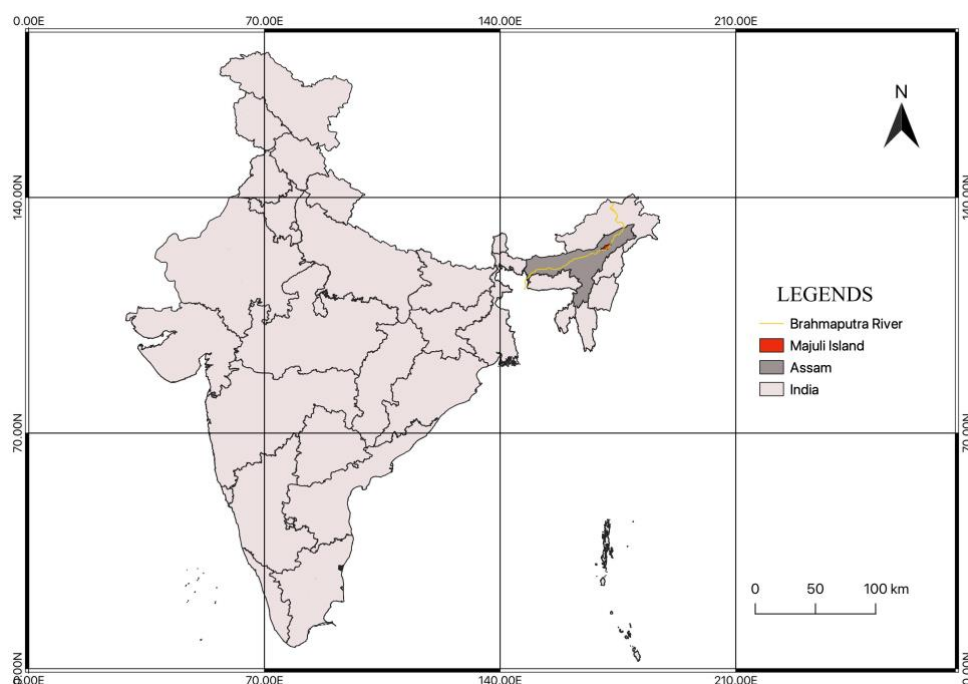


Figure 1: Map of study area

An advantage of Aunaiti *Satra* is that it maintains contact with its followers through various branch *Satras*. In the past,

when the transport system was not suitable, the *Satradhikari* had to stay at a particular place for a longer duration where the number of followers was high. Gradually, these places became permanent and were given the status of branch *Satras* (Kalita, 2018). During the period of Niranjandeva, there was a place called 'Kadigoan' that was recognized as a branch *Satra*. Later, other *Satras* at Govindapura, Deverapara and Pahumara got the status of branch *Satras*. The branch *Satras* were previously known as *pakhi* (wing) *Satras* (Kalita, 2018). The above-mentioned branches have their own 'khat pamai' (land and property) for the smooth functioning of the financial aspects from the income through the land and other properties. The officials of these branches are given the responsibility of using the land and property of the *Satra* on rent, either fully or half, by their ranks. The North Guwahati branch *Satra* has a different administrative process than the other branches. This branch was reconstructed by Sri Sri Hemchandradeva Goswami for plans of reorganizing the *Satra* into a larger one (Nath, 2009). This branch is considered an independent *Satra*.

Findings and discussion

There are three categories of people attached to the *Satra*, viz.: (i) *Satradhikar* and *Deka-Satradhikar*, (ii) *Bhakat*, (iii) *Sisyas* or disciples. They reside within the four walls of the *Satra* campus

Satradhikar (The head of the institution) and Deka-Satradhikar: The supreme head of the *Satra* is known as *Satradhikar*. He is the religious head and spiritual guide of the disciples living inside and outside of the *Satra*. The *Satradhikar* is a person who attains knowledge and wisdom of aesthetic qualities. He is an expert in various forms of performing arts and possesses higher spiritual knowledge and wisdom. The *Satradhikari* may be *udasin* (celibate) or *grihasti* (married) according to the status of the *Satra*. He commences and oversees all the religious and other activities of the *Satra*. He should be able to bring together and coordinate with his devotees. He has to look after the *Satra* as an institution, along with the *bhakats* (monks) and the devotees as well. Every morning, the *Bhakats* have to take his blessing, followed by prayer at the altar of the *namghar*. The *Satradhikari* is given the title of *Satradhikari probhu Ishwar* by the devotees. The act of proselytisation through a formal initiation ceremony known as *Sarana* is conducted by him. It is he who is in charge of the properties of the *Satra*. The *Gosain* (head) who is next to be *Satradhikari* is called *Deka-Satradhikari*. He is known by many names in different *Satras*, such as *Dekajon*, *Bapa*, and in Auniati *Satra* as *Dekajon*. He is selected and appointed by the *Satradhikari* through his knowledge and observation. His duty is to assist the *Satradhikari* in all aspects, whether religious or administrative, and with due course of time he may be the next *Satradhikari*. In other words, he can be considered the deputy of the *Satradhikari*, and the *Bhakats* must take his blessings as well. When the *Satradhikar* is absent from the *Satra* or goes on a tour, the *Deka-Satradhikar* performs the duties of the head and supervises all administrative work.

Bhakat: Through the term *bhakat* means any devotee, yet it is popularly used to mean those devotees who either hold ecclesiastical office of the *Satra* or lead the life of a celibate (*Kavalia-bhakat*) within the *Satra* campus. The devotees lead the life of celibacy and reside in the huts allotted to them. The devotees are normally recruited from among the upper-caste Hindu families based on certain backgrounds, such as offering the newborn child (boy) to the *Satra* by the parents for the services of the *Satra* or because of a request made to the parents by a *bhakat* who is a relative of the family. In any case, such parents believe that the child is a gift of lord Govinda, the worship god of the *Satra*. The *Satradhikari* appoints different office bearers for the management of the *Satra* from among these residents disciples. The *Bhakats* play a crucial role in the socio-cultural and religious development of the *Satra*, and they also maintain the tradition of the *Satriya* culture.

Sisyas or disciples: Lay devotees or disciples of a *Satra* are called *Sisyas*.

Recruitment, training and lifestyle of the Bhakats (monks): The initiation of *Eka Sarama Nam Dharma* by Sankardeva attracted a lot of people to the religion. The religion was a simplified form of Vaishnavism, which is mainly based on faith. The people were inspired by the personality of Sankardeva. Some of the devotees, after imitation, started living with the preacher of the new religion for their service at the holy gatherings. Gradually, the recruitment of the *Bhakat* was initiated in the *Satras* (Borah, 2012). The *Bhakats* are recruited at a very young age (5-10 years), usually by the elder *Bhakats* and under their supervision. These young *Bhakats* are guided and given the training to spend their life as a *Bhakat*. The *Bhakats*, as the inmates, are recruited to the *Satra* in their childhood to bring them up in the celibate lifestyle and create a mental make-up in them throughout their youth. Not only mentally but also physically, they were to create a class of people quite distinguished from others in their dress and behaviour, with long hair which they used to keep twisted at the back of their head, a simple dress consisting of long white *churiya*, a cotton wrapper called *chadara*, and a *gamusa* (Assamese traditional scarf), and with moderate and passive words. Their food habits are also modified from what they had developed at home. Meat and drink are totally prohibited in the *Satra* (Goswami, 2004). The young *Bhakats* are given necessary training in general education and taught to recite Sanskrit and Assamese scriptures in the *tuls* (institutions) run by the *Satra* in order to continue the tradition ahead. In earlier days, it was a privilege for families to dedicate their child to the *Satra*, but nowadays that thought process has shifted, and families who are not economically stable give their child to the *Satra*; here the child gets necessary education and a religious environment. At present, most of the *Bhakats* of Auniati *Satra* have come from poor families. Apart from the educational and religious training, the young *Bhakts* are also introduced to various performing arts of *Satriya* culture such as *Bhaona*, drama, singing, dancing, acting, and others. The relationship between the young *bhakat* and the *burha bhakat* becomes like the father and son (Sarma, 2016). The graph below shows the distribution of district names:

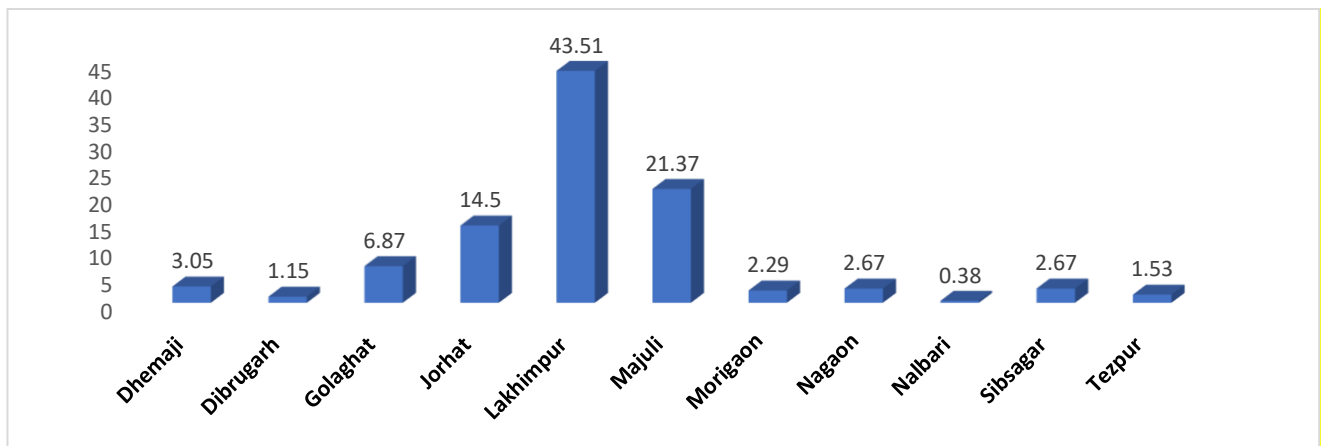


Figure 2: Geographical distribution of *Bhakat* according to District
(Source: Fieldwork)

Figure 2 depicts the district-wise distribution of *Bhakats* of Auniati *Satra*. The *Bhakats* of Auniati *Satra* come from different districts of Assam, reflecting the wider geographical reach of the *satra* and its religious and cultural influence beyond its immediate locality. Lakhimpur accounts for the highest proportion of *Bhakats*, constituting 43.51% of the total, followed by Majuli 21.37% and Jorhat 14.50%. Golaghat represents 6.87%, while Dhemaji accounts for 3.05%. The remaining areas – Nagaon 2.67%, Morigaon 2.29%, Tezpur 1.91%, Sibsagar 2.67 %, Golaghat 1.15%, Dibrugarh 1.14 %, and Nalbari (0.38%) show comparatively lower levels of representation. This representation of the *Bhakats* from these districts also reflects the continued role of Auniati *Satra* in attracting individuals from varied regional backgrounds and facilitating the transmission and preservation of its religious traditions and cultural practices.

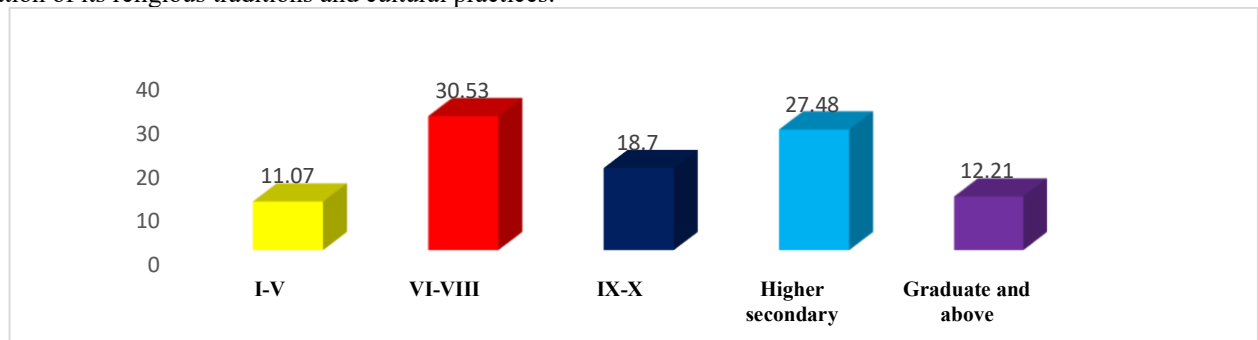


Figure 3: Educational status of the *Bhakat*
(Source: Fieldwork)

Figure 3 shows the educational status of the *Bhakat*. The highest proportion (30.53%) had completed education up to classes VI- VIII, followed by higher secondary 27.48% and classes IX-X 18.70%; *Bhakat* with graduation or higher qualifications constituted 12.21%, while 11.07% had received education up to Class I-V. Thus, the above figure indicates that the education profile of the *Bhakat* was concentrated primarily in the middle and secondary stages of formal education, with relatively few *Bhakat* at the primary and higher education levels. The educational profile of the *Bhakat* therefore reflects not merely their level of formal education but also the distinctive educational environment of the *Satra*, where formal education intersects with traditional guru-disciple apprenticeship, embodied religious practices, and the intergenerational continuity of *Satriya* knowledge.

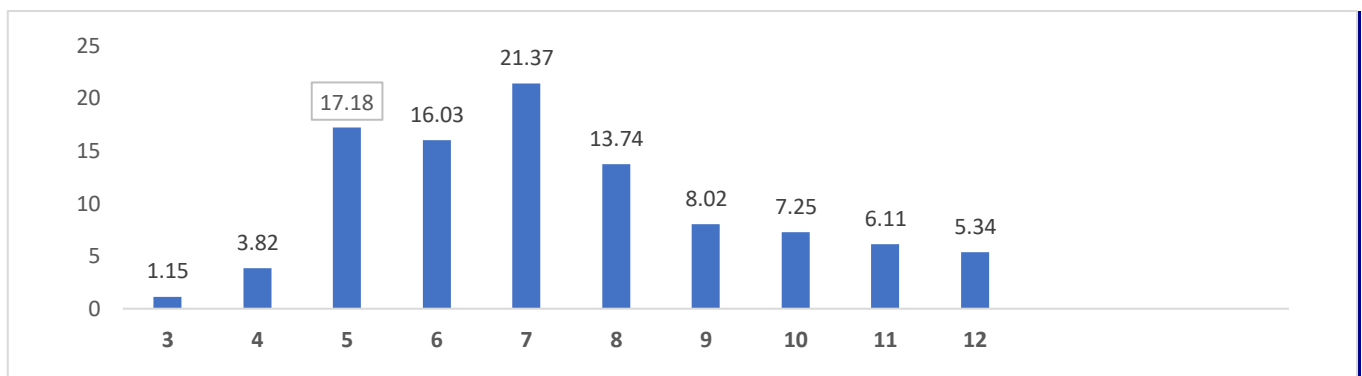


Figure 4: Age of the *Bhakta*'s entry to the *satra*
(Source: Fieldwork)

Figure 4 presents the age distribution of the *Bhakats* at the time of their entry into the *Satra*, ranging from 3 to 12 years. The distribution indicates that entry into the *Satra* predominantly occurred during childhood. The highest number of *Bhakats* 21.27% entered the *Satra* at the age of 7 years, followed by those who entered at 5 years 17.18% and 6 years 16.03%. An additional 13.74% entered at age 8. Thus, *Bhakats* entering between 5 and 8 years constituted 68.32% of the total, demonstrating a marked concentration of entry during this age range. Entry at the very early ages was comparatively less frequent, with 3.82% entering at 4 years and only 1.15% at 3 years. Beyond the age of 8, the proportion gradually declined. 8.02% entered at 9 years 7.25% at 10 years, 6.11% at 11 years, and 5.34% at 12 years. Overall, 95.03% of the *Bhakat* entered the *Satra* at the age of five years and above, while only 4.97% entered at ages three or four. The predominance of entry between 5 and 8 years of age indicates that childhood constitutes a significant stage of *Bhakat* recruitment and socialization in the *Satra*. Early and prolonged exposure to the *Satra* environment may provide an extended period for acquiring and transmitting religious practices, cultural values, and institutional discipline through apprenticeship and everyday participation.

According to the custom, boys are offered from the families to the *Satra* for various reasons. A chief *Bhakat* of a *Satra* brings a child from a family belonging to the same caste to serve as a foster son and to fulfill the ranks of fellow *Bhakats*. Generally, people from various communities, such as Brahmins, Kalitas, Keots, and Konch, are observed joining the *Satras* as *Bhakats*. If a *Bhakat* is in the *Satra*, the family members offer a boy to help him, by lineage, to perform his duties as a son during his older years. The main reason being the compassion for the family member and the tradition of placing someone as spiritual and honest as a *Bhakat* of the *Satra*. If a devotee couple is unable to bear children, they come to the *Satra* to seek blessings and make a vow that if they give birth to a boy, then they will offer the boy to the *Satra* to serve as a devotee under a *Bhakat*. Similarly, if a boy is suffering from severe illness, he is offered to the *Satra* by the parents in the belief that their child will recover from the illness by serving in the *Satra*. The devotees offer their child to the *Satra* in the hope that the boy will receive spirituality, morality, and formal education by following a *Sattriya* lifestyle.

Structure of the *Satra*

The initiation of the *Satra* institution was initiated with its establishment at Bordowa as the first of its kind in the form of *harigriha/satragriha/devagriha* by Srimanta Sankardeva (Neog, 1998). In the beginning, it had three parts, i.e., *Namghar*, *Manikut*, and *Cari hati*. Gradually, there were additions to the main structure of the *satra*. Later, many cultural activities were introduced in the process of the development of Neo-Vaishnavism, which resulted in the transformation of the *Satra* into a fully institutionalized form with the introduction of branch *Satras* and departments throughout the Brahmaputra valley. The structure of Auniati *Satra* is described below:

Namghar (prayer hall): The *namghar*, which is also known as the *Satrahridaya*, is considered the heart or the centre of the *Satra*. The performances of *Nama-kritana*, *Gayana-bayana*, *Bhaona*, and others take place regularly in the *namghar*. The importance of the *namghar* of Auniati *Satra* is supreme, as the *Bhagavat* is explained regularly to the devotees. The devotees gather for sessions of recitation to personify Lord Krishna. So, the importance of this practice is that, in order to take shelter under Lord Krishna, a devotee must surrender himself to the recitations in the *nama* sessions.



Figure 5: The entrance of the *Namghar* of Sri Sri Auniati *Satra*

The structural feature of the *Namghar* is a rectangular hall with a roof having apsidal elevation. The *Carit Puthis* mention the *namghar* by various names such as *hari-mandira*, *deva mandira*, *deva griha*, *kritana ghar*, and others. The size of the *namghar* of Auniati *Satra* is relatively bigger than other *Satras*, as the number of devotees of this *Satra* is larger than other *Satras*. In earlier days, the *namghar* is also mentioned as a kind of court in the religious texts where people come to solve their problems.

Manikut: The *Manikut* is an additional structure of the *namghar* which is constructed perpendicularly at the eastern end. It is the altar or holiest place in the *Satra* where the idol and manuscript are worshipped. The devotees believe that the activities of Auniati *Satra* are controlled by Lord Krishna, abiding in the *manikuta* of the *Satra*. The various rituals for the idol of Lord Krishna and the other four idols are regularly carried out as scheduled. Every morning the idols are given a bath by the *Bardeuri* and his assistants. The door is kept closed until the activities are completed; then the door is opened for the devotees to receive

the blessings of the lord. Following that, devotees come out of the *manikut* and move to the *Gosainghar* (residence of the *Satradhikari*) to receive his blessing, as it is a part of his daily service towards the devotees (Sarma, 1975).

Korapat: The gateway constructed at the entrance of the *Satra* is known as *korapat*. There are two gateways present in Auniati *Satra*, *bahi* and *anta korapat*. Therefore, one is situated at the entrance, and the other is just before entering the premises of the *Satra*. The *korapat* is constructed using religious symbols that remind any person about the purity and holiness of the place. The symbols constructed at the *korapat* are usually of an elephant, lion, and peacock.



Figure 6: The inner *Korapat* of the *Satra*.

Boha: A *boha* is a small house in the *hati* of the *Satra* where *bhakats* live. According to the Hemkosh dictionary, the meaning of *boha* is *prabasau ghor*- living for some time. The term *boha* is used in *Satras* only.

Cari Hati: The *Hati* is the dwelling row of the *bhakats* of the *Satra*. Usually, there are four *hatis* in a *Satra*, each facing the *namghar* and the *manikut*. The four *hatis* are in the east, west, north, and south directions, respectively. Each *hati* is a set of residences of the *bhakats*, which is known as *boha*. When Srimanta Sankardeva established the *namghar* at Bordowa, the devotees came and stayed around the *namghar* on the four sides, respectively (Neog 1998). It is also noteworthy to mention that the *dakhin* (South) *hati* of Auniati *Satra* is comparatively smaller than the other three *hatis*. The *Bhakats* living in the *bohas* of each *hati* have to construct, repair, and renovate their individual *hati* with their own expenses and effort. This system has been practiced since the early days. The *Boha* of the *Deka Satradhikari* is in the middle of the *uttar* (north) *hati*, and the *Govindapuriya* is in the middle of the *pub* (east) *hati*, which is mandatory. Each of the four *hatis* has a superior who is given the title of 'Bora', whose duty is to look after the activities of their respective *hatis* and to inform the *bhakats* about the events in the *Satra*.

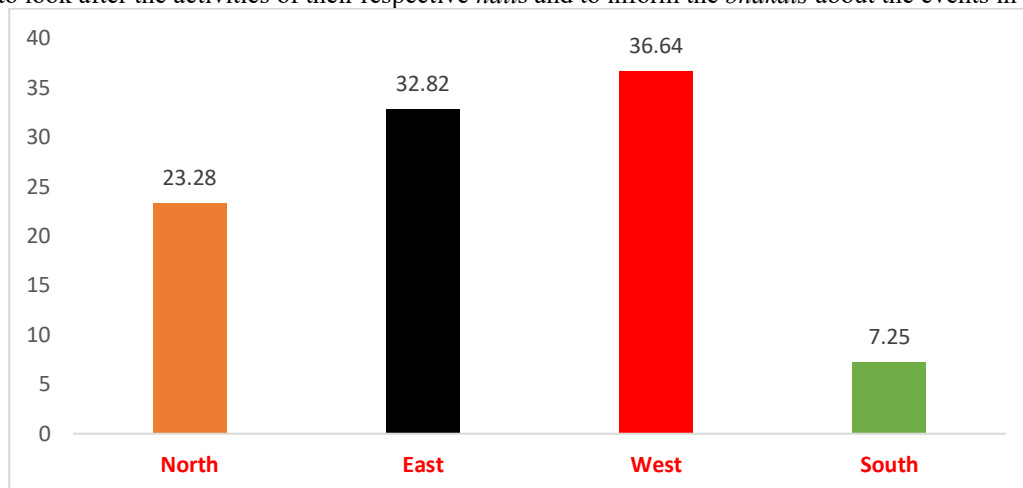


Figure 7: Distribution of *Boha*
(Source: Fieldwork)

The total number of *Bhakats* (inmates) residing in the *Cari hatis* of Auniati *Satra* is 262, out of which 23.28% reside in the north *hati*, 32.82% in the east *hati*, 36.64% in the west *hati*, and 7.25% in the south *hati*, respectively (Figure 7).

Residence of Satradhikar: The residence of the *Satradhikar* is located at the centre of the *Satra* adjacent to the *namghar*. There is a porch (*chara*) towards the direction of the *namghar* where the devotees assemble to meet the *Satradhikar*. Religious discussions and the events of the *Satra* are discussed in the porch. There is a prayer hall inside the residence that is known as *Gosain Ghar*. It is also used for the initiation (*saran*) ceremony for the disciples.

Bhoral (Granary): The store house used for keeping the basic necessities of the *Satra*, which is usually situated beside the

namghar. Generally, a *Satra* has two types of storehouses- *caul bhoral* (granary) and *dhon bhoral* (treasury). The rice and grains that are collected by the *Satra* in the form of gifts, tax, or donations are kept in the granary. Whereas the treasury acts as the storage for ornaments, clothes, and utensils made of gold, silver, brass, and bell metal.

Library: The library or *Puthi bhoral* of the *Satra* is located in the northwest direction near the residence of the *Satradhikar*. It also houses a printing press which is used for various publications of the *Satra*. Apart from that, the manuscripts made of *sancipat* and *tulapat* are preserved and kept in the library, which is declared as a centre of preservation and conservation of manuscripts by the State Archaeology Department of Assam (Nath, 2004). Moreover, it is also used as the repository of the museum, since the objects which are not displayed in the museum are stored in the library.

Sanghralhalaya (Museum): The museum of Auniati *Satra* treasures a good collection of antiquities, among which some are displayed in the museum, and the others are kept either in the treasury or the repository. The initiative of constructing the museum in the *Satra* was taken by the State Archaeology Department. The museum houses various antiquities made of ivory, gold, silver, brass, iron, bell metal, wooden objects, utensils used by the Ahom king, textiles, manuscripts, copper plates, important documents, and others.

Administrative system of *Satra*

The role and significance of the other office bearers of the *Satra* can be divided into three parts, namely religious, civil, and socio-cultural administration.

1. Religious Administration: These organizational representatives are directly responsible for the *Nitya caidhya prasanga* (regular fourteen prayer sessions) performed every day and other religious activities as well. The various religious activities and festivals observed in the *Satra* are overlooked by the following officials:

- 1.1 Pathak:** The person who recites the *Bhagwata path* from the manuscripts and the scriptures is called a *Pathak*. The reciting of scripture in Assamese verse is a regular exercise attached to the daily prayer services. The scripts recited by the *Pathak* are usually in Kaithili, Maithili, Sanskrit, and Brajavali. The *Bar-pathak* is the head of the *pathaks*. In Auniati *Satra*, seven *pathaks* are appointed, and each one of them has to do their duty on a particular day of the week. Each *pathak* is given the responsibility of reciting the religious text in the morning after the door of the *manikut* is opened and in the evening prior to the closing of the door. The *Pathak* is known by some other names like *pathaka*, *pathakai*, *pathakani* (female counterpart) in some *Satras*. The other ranks under *Pathak* are: *Duboliya Pathak*: Assistant reciter or the person who acts as a reader in the absence of the *Pathak*. *Duhoriya Pathak*: Learner *Pathak*.
- 1.2 Deuri:** The person who distributes the *prakhad* (fruits and pulses) after the daily worship and other occasions is known as *Deuri*. The *Ghai-deuri* is the head of the *deuris*. In some *Satras*, he is also known as *Pradhan* and *Bar-deuri*. *Pali-deuri* is the assistant of the *Ghai-deuri*. The female counterpart of this official, who is present in some *Satras* is known as *Deurani*. There is another official among the *deuris* known as *Pani-deuri*, whose duty is to supply water to the *Satradhikari* for his daily requirements and rituals. This official is present in very few *Satras* of Assam. There is no class boundary in the selection of *deuri*. The *deuri* also looks after the requirements during the prayer services.
- 1.3 Namlogua:** *Namlogua* is the chief person who leads the principal prayer service. The word *Namlogua* means 'the one who initiates invocation'. The main duty of this official is the commencement of *Nitya prasanga* (invocation) every day. This official is also known as *Namdhari* and *Namacharya* in some *Satras*. *Deka-namlogua* is an official whose duty is to assist the *Namlogua* in various activities. This post is present in very few *Satras*.
- 1.4 Pujari (priest):** An official who is engaged in prayer services of the *Satra*. He has to perform *nitya puja* (daily worship) of the *Mahaprabhu*. In Auniati *Satra*, his duty is to worship the idol of Lord Govinda. The head of the *pujaris* is called *Borpujari*. He is the chief priest among the *pujaris* and has an assistant who is known as *Palipujari*.
- 1.5 Hatimota:** *Hatimota* is the person who invites the dwellers of the *Hatis* for congregation or prayers. His role is to invite the *bhakats* of the four *hatis* (residence of *bhakats*) as well as the devotees of the *Satra* on various occasions. This functionary is available in the *Satras* where the four *hatis* are present, irrespective of a few *Satras* where *hatimota* is present even if the four *hatis* are not available. The *hatimota* of Auniati *Satra* is known as *Bora*.
- 1.6 Bhagwati:** The person who performs the duty of reading and explaining the *Bhagavata*. The role of the *Bhagwati* is to recite, describe, and explain the teachings of the *Bhagavata* in Sanskrit and in Assamese as well. The duty of the *Bhagwati* is required to be performed every day.
- 1.7 Satola:** This official is in charge of making the arrangements for various festivals in the *Satra* and rituals of the *namghar*.
- 1.8 Barika:** *Barika*, who is also known as *Patkatiya* in some *Satras* is responsible for the gathering of the bark and leaves of the banana plant, which is used in the various rituals performed in the *Satra*.
- 1.9 Tamuli:** The role of *tamuli* is to supply betel nut and leaves, i.e., *tamul* and *pan* to the *bhakats* and devotees who gather during religious or other occasions. The *tamuli* is also known as *Guwa-Kota*, where 'guwa' means *tamul* and *pan* and 'kota' means the one who cuts the betel nuts. The title of *Guwakota* is used in Auniati *Satra*.
- 1.10 Xara:** The role of this functionary is to keep the *namghar* and its premises clean. This functionary is also known as *Posotia* and *Thaimosa* in some *Satras*.
- 1.11 Sroboni:** The responsibility of this functionary is to listen to the recitations of the religious scriptures and manuscripts recited by the *Pathak*. The *Bar-sroboni* is the head of the *Srobonis*.

2. Civil administration: These officials are responsible for the civil and social administration of the *Satra*. They play a significant role in interacting with the public as they perform their duties.

- 2.1 Bhorali:** This official is responsible for looking after the *bhorals* (granary) of the *Satra*. All the material belongings and precious items are kept in the *bhoral*. There are usually two *bhoralis* in a *Satra* namely *caul bhorali* and *dhon bhorali* where the former looks after the granary and the latter look after the treasury.
- 2.2 Muktiyar:** The public relations of a *Satra* are maintained by this official. He informs about the news and various other matters to the public and communicates with them. He is also responsible for land related issues and revenue matters of the *Satra*.
- 2.3 Bora:** The duty of this functionary is to bring the *bhaktas* of the *Satra*. He also initiates the *bhaktas* for the congregation.
- 2.4 Khatoniar:** The role of *Khatoniar* is to remind and call the officials of the *Satra* to do their respective duties. There is an official called *Bar-khatoniar* whose role is to present or discuss about important topics and subject in front of the *Satradhikari*. During the time of the Ahom kings the *khatoniar* was the messenger of the king who communicated with the *Satra*.
- 2.5 Majindar:** The duty of this official is to look for the administration and maintain the records of the *Satra*. This position was first initiated by Mathuradas Burha Ata in Barpeta *Satra*. In the *Satras* of Upper Assam this official has the responsibility to look after all kinds of accounts and affairs of the *Satra*. In lower Assam, this position is termed as *Majumdar*. Since the administrative system of the *Satra* is a large one, so one official cannot look after all accounts.
- 2.6 Medhi:** *Medhi* is responsible for the civil administration sector of the *Satra*. The properties and estate of the *Satra* are looked after and administered by the *Medhi* under *Satradhikari*'s guidance. His duty is related to revenue collection from the various *cahar* (villages) which are under religious guidance of Auniati *Satra*. The position is such a key position that if the *Satradhikari* or *Deka-satradhikari* is absent, then the *Medhi* has to initiate the religious activities. Since the Auniati *Satra* is the biggest *Satra* in Assam, more than one *Medhi* is required to look after the affairs of the *Satra*.
- 2.7 Al-Dhora or Pasoni:** This duty is fulfilled by more than one functionary. He is the personal assistant of the *Satradhikari* and has to do other functions as well. In Auniati *Satra*, the person is responsible for the distribution of *Nirmali* (flowers and flowery leaves offered to the devotee) and collection of *Gurukar* (a yearly contribution payable to the *Satradhikar*) amongst the devotees, besides attending to the *Satradhikar*. The position of *Al-dhora* is present in a few *Satras* and *Pasoni* in some, whereas both positions are present in Aunaiti *Satra*.
- 3. Socio-cultural administration:** These representatives are accountable for the cultural activities of the *Satra*. The main officials under this direction are:
- 3.1 Gayan (singer):** This official is responsible for imparting knowledge about vocal aspects in the performing arts of the *Satra*. He is well versed in the religious compositions and the *Borgeets* composed by Neo-Vaishnavite *gurus* like Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and others. The ranks under this *Gayan* are: *Borgayan* (Chief *gayan* who leads in the chorus), *Duhoriya Gayan* (main associate of the *Borgayan*), and *Hikaru Gayan* (One who learns *gayan*).
- 3.2 Bayan (drummer):** The person whose role is imparting knowledge about musical instruments, especially *khul*, which is played during *geet* and *nritya* in performing arts, is known as *Bayan*. In the larger *Satras* where there is more than one *bayan*, a *Bor-bayan* is appointed as the head of the *Bayans*. The *Bayan* should be well-versed in *Cari-capori* and *Soitris-puli* (musical rhythm). The *Bor-bayan* is considered an expert in performing arts and has a respectable status in the society. The other positions under *bayan* are: *Duhoriya Bayan* (Assistant drummer) and *Hikaru Bayan* (One who is learning *bayan*).
- 3.3 Oja:** The person who is well-versed in *Satriya* drama and songs is known as *Oja*. He is the chief performer in the *prasangas* (rituals/ceremonies). The *Bor-oja* is the head of the *ojas*. The persons under the *Bor-oja* are: *Duhoriya oja*: Associate of *Bor-oja* during *prasangas*. *Hikaru oja*: The one who is learning *oja*.

Satra and caste

Sankardeva, since the beginning of his spiritual journey, led a crusade against caste exclusiveness and untouchability for a recognized society. He believed in equality for everyone irrespective of caste, creed, or character in the eyes of God and exhibited a deep sympathy for the lower caste and downtrodden classes. This was the main social and ethical outlook of Sankardeva's faith and so utterly disregarded the old-age tradition of the caste system in his new religion. He himself gave initiation and included amongst his favourite disciples from the so-called degraded castes. Among them were Candsai (Muslim), Gobinda (Garo), Jayanta Hari (Bhutia), Sriram (Kaibarta) and Madhava, a potter (Neog, 2004; Bhuyan, 2014). The *Satra* institution is the result and an implement of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement to preach equality among castes through a religious approach, and it opposed untouchability. The society of Majuli was a virgin place for the Vaishnavite *gurus* to spread their tenets.

Field surveys have revealed that caste was, and still is, an aspect of consideration for the *Satras*, of course, in varied degrees according to their affiliations. Cantlie (1984), who visited Majuli several times for the purpose of studying the *Satra* systems, mentions "the degree of Brahmanisation is the greatest among the *Satras* of the *Brahma-samhati*," which contain the largest proportion of Brahmin disciples. The *adhikaras* are also, with a few exceptions, Brahmin. Caste distinctions among the disciples in respect of seating and commensality are carefully maintained in the *Satra*. The concern of caste is engrossing; from the outer view the *Satriya* society seems casteless, classless and egalitarian. But from the inner view, this is not the case. But not the vicious kind of caste discrimination and untouchability, as practised in some other parts of India (Nath, 2009). Rather, the difference in the *Satra* was deep-rooted and tenuous.

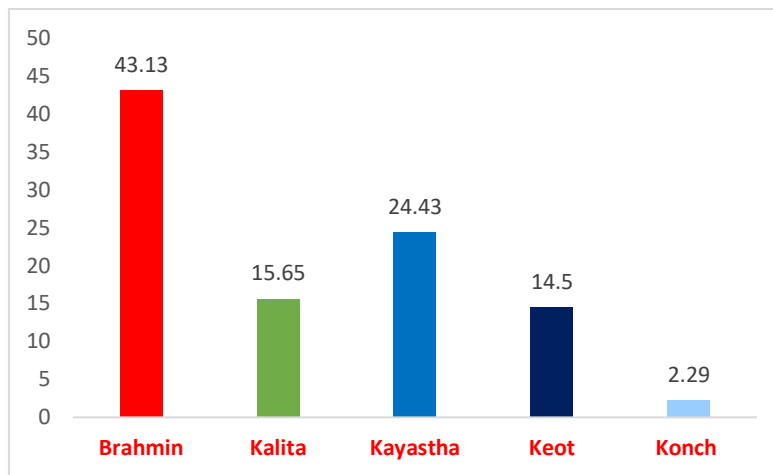


Figure 8: community-wise distribution of the *Bhakat*
(Source: Fieldwork)

The recruitment of the *bhakats* is done from families of a precise caste who enjoy upper positions in the caste hierarchy. While conducting the fieldwork, there were 262 *bhakats* who resided in Auniati *Satra* of Majuli, out of which 43.13% are Brahmin, 24.43% are Kayastha, and 15.65% are Kalita, 14.5% Keot and 2.29% Konch. Dr Pritambardeva Goswami, the present *Satradhikara* of Auniati *Satra*, writes that since the head of a *boha* normally selects a boy of his choice to bring him to his *boha* and bestows on him the responsibility of performing his mortuary rites after his death, he normally selects a relation of his; and this fact leads to the concentration of *bhakats* in the *Satra* of certain caste only (Nath, 2009).

Auniati *Satra* as a socio-religious institution: The Neo-Vaisnavite movement and its establishment of the form-*Satra* were regional expressions of the *Bhakti* movement throughout the country during the medieval period. Although the characteristics of reform movement and protest movement are clearly manifested in the Neo-Vaisnavite movement, it is, in fact, a social movement based on religious ideologies. While *Satra* is mainly a religious institution, it also represents a cultural tradition (Goswami, 2013). Auniati *Satra* of Majuli is considered among the chief bearers of *bhaktism* in Assam. Due to its religious origin, the *Satra* is responsible for stabilizing and framing Assamese society along with administering the spiritual and cultural requirements of the people for more than 350 years from the time of its establishment in 1653 CE (Neog, 1998). Since this religion had no differentiations among caste, creed, or colour, people of all classes could equally receive the status of God in the form of a human being (Borah, 2012). The functions of the *Satra* have been classified into two categories: primarily, they are to propagate the *Vaishnava* faith to initiate disciples, to provide ethical-devotional codes and rules of conduct for neophytes, and to hold daily as well as occasional divisional services. The secondary function of the *Satra* is to see that good social relations are maintained among the fraternity, to develop the spirit of co-operation, and to provide adequate facilities for the dissemination of ancient and traditional learning, including the cultivation of art and craft. Educational and cultural activities fall within the second category and, apart from religion, this aspect is the most important, having direct bearing on Assamese society (Goswami, 2013).

Auniati *Satra* as a hub for tourism: The *Vaishnava* monasteries in Assam, more particularly the monastic *Satras* located in Majuli Island, are by their own right distinguished sites of tourist interest throughout the country. The monastic *Satras* of Assam, which are a unique socio-religious institution of the world, have traditional lifestyles. It has special characteristics like wearing *dhuti-panjabi*, sitting on the *dhari* and *koth*, and a distinct compound with *korapat*, *namghor*, *manikut*, *hati* and *boha*. Both *adhikar* and *bhakats* are unmarried and not allowed to keep beards. (Sarma, 2016). The Auniati *Satra* is visited by hundreds of tourists every day who come from various parts of the country, and it is visited by foreigners as well, mainly from European countries. The tourists are attracted by the traditional lifestyle, performing arts, fine arts, *Satriya* structure, and the cultural traditions of the *Satra*. Tourists usually come during the annual festivals of the *Satra*. The festival of *Paalnaam* is celebrated grandly in Auniati *Satra*. Thousands of tourists gather in the *Satra* during this festival, celebrated for five days. Other festivals like *Janmashtami*, *raslila*, *gurutithis*, etc. also attract a lot of tourists (Goswami, 2004). Tourists come to the *Satra* to worship the idol of Lord Krishna, present in very few *Satras* of Assam. The Government of Assam has made necessary provisions for the accommodation of the tourists. The museum of Auniati *Satra* treasures some rare artifacts and objects which particularly attract the tourists.

Status of women

The emplacement of women in Hinduism, a contentious issue, and positions range from quite fair to extremely intolerant. Hinduism rests on numerous texts, some dating to 2000 BCE or earlier. They are carried in authority, authenticity, content, and theme, with the most authoritative being the *Vedas*. Texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata refer to the ideal woman, while texts such as the Manusmriti advocate restricting women's rights. Sankardeva and early reformers like Purushottam Thakur of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement gave considerable respect to the womenfolk; the Neo-Vaishnavism movement produced women leaders, scholars, and poets who contributed to the culture and civilization of Assam. There was much evidence to show that Sankardeva accorded honour to women (Kakoti & Mahanta, 2012; Sonowal, 2019).

In Majuli, *Satras* like Aunati, Dakshinpat, Kamalabari (both), and Garamur are all *udasin Satras*. Pritambardeva Goswami, the reformer *Satradhikar* of Garamur *Satra*, was the first one to abolish complete monasticism and convert the *Satra* into a semi-monastic *Satra*. According to him, Sankardeva did not make any rule for the *bhaktas* to live a celibate life. Moreover, the impact of the British on society changed his view. He gave equal status to women in socio-religious matters along with men. He also encouraged women to take part in the dramas and other cultural activities (Nath, 2012). Women were given equal status in society until the demise of Sankardeva. It was Madhavdeva who advised his followers to live a celibate life in order to render *bhakti* of the Lord. There are two types of *Satras*, i.e., *udasin Satra* and *grihasti Satras*, where the former is more in number and given much importance. In Auniati *Satra*, women were not allowed to visit and reside in the *Satra* until recent years. Nowadays, women are allowed to visit the *Satra*, and in the period of crisis, they can reside as well in the *Satra* premises. The present *Satradhikar*, Dr. Sri Sri Pitambar Deva Goswami, gave some relaxation to the entry of women in the *Satra* as he agrees to some of the ideologies of Pitambar Deva Goswami (reformer *Satradhikar* of Garamur *Satra*) towards emplacement of women in the *Satra*.

Impact of *Satra* on society

Sattriya culture evolved alongside folk culture as a consequence of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. The *Satra* institution, formed under the leadership of *Mahapurush* Sankardeva during the mid-part of Ahom rule, transformed political Assam into a cultural Assam (Sarma, 1966). The culture was used as a means of spreading religious ideologies among the people in the form of music, dance, and drama, devotional preaching of the religion, and brought significant change in Assamese society (Barpujari, 1992). Apart from the cultural activities, the *Satra* also contributed to the field of educational institutions and has established many educational institutions and donated land for other institutions (Bhuyan, 2007). The Auniati *Satra* has contributed immensely in the field of education by establishing schools and *tols* for formal education. The *Mati akhora* within the *Satra* served as a place for physical activity for the artists (Sarma, 2016). In the field of literature, the *Satra* contributed tremendously by publishing many books and articles in the printing press of the *Satra* (Nath, 2009). The impact of the *Satra* on society was such that, up to the last century, people did not dare to do anything that was not approved by the *Satra* (Cantlie, 1984). In addition, *Satra*-oriented collective participation has contributed to strengthening social relationships, cooperation, and a sense of collective identity within the community. Therefore, the findings of this research indicate that the influence of *Satra* institutions is not limited to the religious sphere, encompassing significant organizational, social, and cultural functions that contribute to the continuity and conservation of Assamese society.

Conclusion

Majuli is widely considered as the soul of *Sattriya* culture because of its historical association with the *Satra* institution. The *Satras* serve not only as centres of Vaishnavite religious activity, but also as essential institutions for the transmission of cultural knowledge, performing arts, literature, music, crafts, and communal customs through generations. Throughout their organizational structure and daily activities, the *Satras* have contributed to the preservation of *Sattriya* cultural identity while also maintaining strong connections and communal life.

Although Vaishnavism flourished in Assam, the condition of the *Satras* was in distress until the arrival of the British (Barpujari, 1992). The years under the reign of King Pratap Singha (1603-1649) to Sulikpha (1679-1681) are considered the golden times for the *Satras*, as the members of the royal families cum elite class of the administration were initiated into Vaishnavism (Nath, 2009). Gradually, the *Satras* became more conservative, and a series of norms were incorporated into their administration; however, these were modified with the succession of the *Satradhikars*. The social rules and regulations were established and were strictly followed by Vaishnavites. The *Satras* broadened their horizon and are still working benevolently for it (Borah, 2012).

The Auniati *Satra* is considered one of the largest *Satra* of Assam, with more than 20 branches across the state. It serves as a traditional hub for the preservation and conservation of both tangible and intangible heritage of Neo-Vaishnavite culture, popularised by Srimanta Sankardeva. The architectural structure of the *Satra* comprises a *Namghar*, *Maniakut*, *Cari Hati*, *Bhoral*, and *Korapat*. The *Satra* is headed by a *Satradhikar*, serving as the central figure of the institution, followed by the devotees identified as *Bhakats*. The administrative system of the *Satra* is categorised into three parts, viz. religious, civil, and socio-cultural, with each part being supervised by the office bearers appointed by the *Satradhikari*. The religious representatives are directly responsible for the *Nitya caidhya prasanga* (regular fourteen prayer sessions) performed every day. The sessions are held throughout the day by the *Bhakats* of the *Satra* in the name of the Lord to indulge themselves in the path of spirituality and devotion. The representatives of the civil administration are responsible for maintaining the social relations of the members of the *Satra* with society, whereas the cultural representatives account for the cultural activities of the *Satra*. The *Bhakats* are recruited from families of a precise upper position in the caste hierarchy. While conducting the fieldwork, it is found that the majority of the *Bhakats* belonged to the Brahmin, Kalita, Keot, and Konch communities, respectively. They play an important role in maintaining the regular functioning of the *Satra*.

The transition of the rules and regulations regarding women have gradually changed over time, as the present *Satradhikari* has given much relaxation for the entry of women due to his modernized ideology. The impact of the *Satra* on society was such that till the 20th century, people did not dare to do anything that was not approved by the *Satra*, which served as the principal religious authority of the society. Apart from religious activities, the *Satra* contributes vastly towards the field of culture, arts, and literature. The organisational structure of Auniati *Satra* can be seen as a combination of religious authority, residential

organisation, division of institutional responsibilities, and active involvement of *Bhakats* for the preservation of *Sattriya* culture. The institution continually maintains its traditional and spiritual practices despite adjusting to the modernisation of society. The present *Satradhikar* has worked tremendously in various endeavours to develop and promote the *Sattriya* culture along with the associated institutional activities. This research illustrates Auniati *Satra* as an institution where religious observance, organisational framework, cultural transmission, and community life are closely related.

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