

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a combination of spiritual faiths and beliefs that developed in the process of human Cultural Revolution. Belief and practice are prevalent in contemporary societies. The first religious belief probably came into existence with the origin of man in Palaeolithic times. Religion is based on supernaturalism that consists of a set of belief, thought and action. It is embedded in all primitive and civilized cultures. It acts as an internal controlling force for the society and provides its member morality and moral value of life as well. A particular religion is governed by a set of faith in relation to an existing form of God. Basic value system in a society is finally expressed in terms of the particular religion, both superior and inferior and binds all the members of the society and familial relationships as per its economic and political structure.

“An important function of religion is to bring about integration in society through the establishment of certain norms. Religion institutionalizes the social norms and persuades the members of a society to accept this norm. In this way, religion strengthens social relations between individuals. The members belonging to a religious faith have a sense of security because they form a relatively stable social group” (Shinha, 1965:24)

The origin of Vaishnavite religion is in vogue, more or less, in India, from the Rig Vedic era. The famous spiritual guides of Vaishnavite religion like Ramanujacharya, Madhavacharya, Nimbarka and others spread this religion from the last part of 8th Century to the end of 12th Century. Later on, in the 14th and 15th Century, this Vaishnavite religion under the guidance of Ramananda, Kabir, Vallavacharya,

Janeswar, Namdeva, Tukaram, Narshi Mehta, Mirabai, Jayadeva, Chaitnnyadeva, and more importantly Jagat Guru Shri Shri Sankardeva propagated through entire India- from Himalayas to the cape Comorin. (Goswami, 2016:13)

Soon after spreading of the concept of Vaishnavism with the solemn belief in the existence of one Supreme God, it started proliferate the movement in 15th Century AD almost through the whole World. A large number of noble people appeared during this period to remove the superstitious beliefs of the society. Well planned and unified action plan inspired the people towards self consciousness. Excellent knowledge in art, literature and other aspects in relation to this religion appeared during this time, and therefore this period is well known as the age of renaissance in history. Exceptional spiritual leaders like Shrimanta Sankardeva, Shri Shri Madhavdeva, Shri Shri Damodardeva, Shri Shri Bhattadeva, Shri Shri Harideva and other flourished in Assam in the NE India and spread the Vaishnavism during that period.

To spread this religion among the people, one type of monastery known as *Sattrra* was introduced in the society. The word *Sattrra* is mentioned in Hindu religious scriptures since Vedic times. It has been used to denote various things or places never straying far from its root, *xat* (Sat) means good or true. (Phukan, 2010:77)

In Assamese Vaishnavism, over the years *Sattrra* has evolved to mean a monastery or a habitat where Vaishnavite reside or gather to recite and listen to prayers to the Lord and participate in religious and cultural activities. The *Sattrra* institution is envisaged as a culture of societal focus, fundamental to the preservation of diverse traditions of religious learning. *Sattrras* were founded by great saints. *Sattrras* have a great impact on social, political as well as economic life of people. Although the *Sattrras*

were established for propagation of Vaishnavite religion; with the passage of time, these institutions gradually transformed into open universities embracing socio-cultural avenues, which includes education, music, art, sculpture, drama, ivory work and others.

Sarma has stated, “The current of the religious history of Assam took a new turn towards the closing decade of the fifteenth century of the Christian era. It was caused by the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Saint Shrimanta Sankardeva. Within two hundred years of its inception the movement firmly established the Vaishnava faith as the supreme religious order of the Brahmaputra valley. The movement also evolved a new institution known as *Sattras* which began to serve not only as the instrument of spreading faith, but also helped to sustain and stabilize Vaishnavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social life”. (1999:1)

1.1 The Problem of the Study

Study on *Sattras* attracted a great number of scholars in Assam. The early history of the *Sattras*, its origin, growth and nature studied by a few scholars of eminence have thus drawn the attention of other scholars of South Asia at the global level.

Barpeta is a land of *Sattras* and Vaishnavite heritage of Assam. Geographical area of Barpeta district comprises 9 Revenue Circles, 11 Community Development Blocks, 129 Gaon Panchayat and it covers a total number of 1081 villages. Barpeta is the Headquarter of Barpeta District; it is located 95 KM North West of Dispur, the capital of Assam, and Guwahati (Metro) City as well being one of the premier urban centres of Northeast India. It is located at 26.32⁰ N 91⁰ E .The area of Barpeta is 3,245 sq KM having a total population of 1.693 million (2011); the literacy rate is 63.81%.

Barpeta came into prominence in the religious map of Assam during Ahom period. There are altogether 84 numbers of *Sattras* established by *Gurujana* and other great saints in Barpeta district, though due to lack of proper conservation, 24 numbers of *Sattras* are almost extinct.

Patbaushi is a revenue village under 11 Nos. Patbaushi Gaon Panchayat of Barpeta Development Block in Barpeta District. The village Patbaushi is situated almost 100 km west side from Guwahati city and 5 km away from Barpeta town. It is situated in the south east direction of Barpeta Sattra. The village falls under the jurisdiction of Barpeta Police Station and Barpeta Mauza, Barpeta sub division as well as Barpeta District, Assam.

At Patbaushi, there are three numbers of *Sattras* established by Saint Sankardeva and Saint Damodardeva. Kumarkuchi and Patbaushi Sattra were established by Saint Sankardeva while Damodardeva established one *Sattra* just near the Patbaushi Sattra which is known as Damodardeva Sattra (*Thaan*). The present study has been done on Patbaushi Sattra (Sankardeva's *Thaan*) where Sankardeva stayed 18 years and six months to propagate the *Eka Saran Nama Dharma*.

Saint Sankardeva set up and established the Patbaushi Sattra in 1549 (*Saka* 1668). *Gurujana* along with a group of his disciples came from upper part of Assam and stayed there for a period of six months at Kaplabari near village near Kapla *beel* (lake). Then he entered in Chenga which is 19 KM away from Barpeta Town. *Gurujana* entered Tatikuchi (where Shrimanta Sankardeva prepared *Brindabani Bastra*) or Barpeta through the tributary of Nakhanda River which is known as Galiya *Jaan* (Channal) and stayed at Chinpora Bhiti for a few months. Afterwards Shrimanta

Sankardeva on his way via Kumarkuchi finally settled at Patbaushi where *Gurujana* began to stay at a *Kirttanghar* (prayer house) that was constructed in the locality. That place was also known as Baralchung (land covered with bee hive). During that period he had created many gems of Vaishnavite literature. In Gurucharit, Patbaushi is known as Baushi Paragana. The *Sattra* is marked by the existence of *Manikut* (sanctorum), *Naamghar* (prayer house), *Math* (a Shrine), *Deul* (House where devotees pray to God on Holi festival), *Patkua* (Ring Well) and the residence of Kalindi Aai (the spouse of Saint Sankardeva).

However, an attempt is being made in the present study to describe the continuity and the changes in case of religious and physical aspect occur in Patbaushi *Sattra* (Sankardeva's *Thaan*) of Barpeta. In the present study it includes different aspects – origin of the *Sattra*, Sankardeva and his time in and around Barpeta, early and present physical structure of the *Sattra*, process of appointment of the *Sattradhikar*, power and authority of *Sattradhikar* and management committee, annual festivals celebrated in the *Sattra*, status and role of women in the *Sattra*, the daily activities of the *Sattra* and valuable items preserved in the *Sattra*. In this thesis, the other *Sattra* Institutions in and around Barpeta has briefly described.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are-

1. To trace the origin of Patbaushi *Sattra* and its development.
2. Religious activities carried out by Saint Sankardeva at Patbaushi
3. *Sattra*'s role in the propagation of Vaishnavite culture.

4. To study organizational aspect of *Sattra* and its changes that it has undergone from time to time.
5. To trace the continuity and changes related to the religious activities performed in the *Sattra*.

1.3 Methodology

Methodology is an essential tool for research of every Social Science. During the study, the information was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary step was applied during the preparation of introductory part, emergence of *Bhakti* movement, Sankardeva and his time at Patbaushi. Relevant information were collected from different sources like research journals, books, publications, historical documents, published and unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, news papers, internet etc.

In case of primary data the following tools were used—

1. Survey Schedule method
2. Open ended interview
3. Case study method
4. Observation method, and
5. Genealogical method.

The first tool i.e. survey schedule method is applied for gathering information like educational status of *Bhakats*, sex, and age wise status of *Bhakats*, occupational status of *Bhakats*. During the festivals observed in the *Sattra* as well as daily activities information were gathered through the Observation method. Open ended interview

method is applied to gather knowledge about the daily activities, role of the *Sattra* Management Committee, status of women in the *Sattra*, duties of *Bhakats*. Case study method is applied for gathering information regarding changes occurring on religious aspects in the *Sattra*. Genealogical method is applied to trace the chronology of Sankardeva's inheritor of fourteenth generations who is the *Sattradhikar* of Patbaushi Sattra.

1.4 Literature Review

The Vaishnavite movement which was started by Shrimanta Sankardeva had attracted many scholars of our country to conduct research on it. Though a lot of works in the form of books and journals have been published yet a very small number of studies have been made with particular reference to the Patbaushi Sattra. To gather the knowledge about the past history of the *Sattra*, a number of secondary sources in the form of books, journals, periodicals and articles, magazines, newspapers, thesis have been verified.

During the first few decades of 20th century, many studies had been made on *Sattra* institutions. Bezbaruah (1914), a dominant figure of modern Assamese literature, was available for the revival of the interest in the Neo Vaishnavite movement. Through the book "Shri Shri Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva", he presented a clear picture on lives and works of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and raise of the Vaishnavite movement for the first time.

Pathak (1959) has done notable work which was tremendously helpful in collecting required data for this research work. It helps to know the raise of Neo-

Vaishnavite movement along with the establishment of different *Sattras* in different places of Assam.

Neog (1965) mentioned the following lines-

“An Assamese Vaishnava *Sattra* proper consists of a Square enclose wall, varying according to its strength with four opening on gate ways called *Karapata* and containing four rows of huts or four long houses each divided into a number of rooms at the sides and the central temple composite of shrine called “ *Manikut*” or “*Bhajghar*” and “Assembly Hall”.

Sarma (1966) may be regarded as the pioneering work in the field of *Sattra* Institutions. Sarma had depicted a clear picture of *Sattra* Institutions in his book. He highlighted the origin and development of *Sattras*, their structural features, functions and contributions to the Assamese society. He highlighted also the income source and the procedure of management of various *Sattras* of Assam.

Pathak (1984) depicted elaborately about the origin and establishment of Patbaushi *Sattra* (both Sankardeva and Damodardeva *Thaan*). He described Patbaushi *Sattra* as a place of harmony among Saint Sankardeva and his followers.

Goswami (1988) highlighted the whole of *Satriya* life and culture. All the aspects connected with the *Sattras*- the various religious services and ceremonies, the organizational set up and functional hierarchy, the place of music, dance and in the *Sattra* milieu the elaborate system of manners and customs in the *Sattra* circle are discussed in details.

Bhattacharya (2004) highlighted the origin of more than six hundred *Sattras* in and around Assam. According to him these institutions could help to propagated Neo Vaishnavite religion in Assamese society.

Goswami (2004) gave a description of the Damodardeva Sattrra in his book. He has written about the origin and development of the *Sattrra*. The *Sattrra* was established by Shri Shri Damodardeva in 1540 A.D. Damodardeva stayed here for 54 years. He mentioned that the *Manikut* (sanctum-sanctorum), *Naamghar* (Prayer house) and the Main Gate were constructed following the style of the *Manikut* of Hoygrib Madhab Mandir, Hajo. He highlighted the list of Damodardeva's descendants and valuable items preserved inside the *Sattrra*. Apart from these, the *Math* (a shrine) which is another attraction of the Damodardeva Sattrra was reconstructed in 1952 according to the "Ancient Temple and Monument Preservation Act, 1904".

Majumdar (2005) is elaborately described the history of all the *Sattras* of Nagaon and Morigaon district of Assam. It is one of the outstanding works on *Sattrra* Institution.

Das (2006) described about Chandsai Atoi who was a follower of Shrimanta Sankardeva though he belonged to Muslim community. Shrimanta Sankardeva told that the Muslims were also the follower of one God so it may not create any problem to adopt Vaishnavism for a Muslim person and he should simultaneously follow the Islam religion.

Roy Choudhury (2007) has described the activities of Mathura Das Burah Ata as a *Sattradhikar*. He has given a minute description about the "*Brindabani Bastra*" which

was prepared according to the idea of Saint Sankardeva and gifted to Koch King Naranarayan where the main role was performed by Mathura Das Burah Ata.

Medhi (2008) aimed at giving an insight into the art and culture of North East India. It contains seven articles on different key heritage issues of the region with a very important article on Shrimanta Sankardeva and his religion.

Barman (2008) depicted elaborately about the religious movement of India, foundation of socio-economic status, tradition of Vaishnavism, Sankardeva and Caste system, the then status of women in view of Sankardeva, Art and culture created by Sankardeva.

Pathak (2008) has described about the past and present situation of Sundaridia Sattra. He described the physical structure of the *Sattra*. He mentioned that the *Sattra* is not only the basis of Neo Vaishnavite religion but it is a symbol of unity and integration of Assamese community.

Phukan (2010) described the life and times of Shrimanta Sankardeva. He highlighted literary works of Sankardeva, *Naamghar* and *Sattra* as a religious institution, *Bargeet*, *Ankiya Naat or Bhaona*, *Oja Pali* (Band of singers), *Satriya* dance, *Brindabani Bastra* and *Bardowa Thaan* with beautiful picture. *Brindabani Bastra* which is the unique creation by Saint Sankardeva took about a year to complete; where he engaged the weavers of Tantikuchi, near Barpeta, to weave the forty-yard-long panel of tapestry depicting Lord Krishna's early life in Brindaban.

Roy Choudhury (2010) wrote on brief view on the political history, cultural tradition, society and religious situation of Assam, Cultural work of Shrimanta Sankardeva.

Rajkhowa (2012) attempts to focus on most aspects of the life, principles, preaching and practices of Shrimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568 AD) one of the most virtuous, colourful and versatile saint of Medieval India. Saint Sankardeva developed profound attraction for Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, the principal personality of monotheism, known as *Eka Saran Nama Dharma*. The saint innovated democratic institutions like *Sattrra* (monastery), *Naamghar* (prayer hall), composed and staged Drama, the famous *Bargeets* or Noble psalms, *Bhatima* or Hymns etc. which made his period as the Golden period of Assamese literature. His work has brought to light the versatile personality of Sankardeva, who is acknowledged as the *Jagat Guru* (the Universal preceptor) and *Sarva Gunakar* (the embodiment of all the virtues), by highlighting on his life, the preaching and practices, as also his epoch- making contribution to humanity through propagation of universal love, peace, justice, liberty, equality and secularism-all these done for the benefit of mankind.

Mishra (2012) gave a brief history of Patbaushi Sattrra. He has described that Patbaushi Sattrra was established by Saint Sankardeva. He along with his disciples came from upper Assam and settle for six months at Kaplabari near the village Chenga, Barpeta. The *Gurujana* entered Barpeta through the *Galiya Jaan* (cannel) and stayed at Chinpora for a few periods. After the great deal of moving, Shrimanta Sankardeva settled at Patbaushi and constructed a *Kirttanghar*. The ancient name of Patbaushi is known as Baushi Paragana (Guru-Charit). The Patbaushi Sattrra is marked by the existence of *Manikut* (sanctum sanctorum), a *Naamghar* (prayer house), a *Math* (a Shrine), a *Deul* (a house where devotees pray to God on Holi festival), a museum, *Patkuwa* (ring well) of Kalindi Aai (wife of Sankardeva), bed used by Kalindi Aai, *Padashila* of *Gurujana* and Guest house. In the Museum there are more valuable

articles and literary works associated with him such as hand-made wooden masks which were used in drama, two doors of copper (donated by Lakshmi Singha, 1694), the valuable literary works like *Gunamala*, *Kirttan Ghosha*, *Adi Dasham*, *Kaliya Daman* drama, *Rukmini Haran*, *Parijat Haran*, *Patni Prasad*, *Ras Keligopal* and *Ram Vijoy* written on *Sanchipaat*.

Roy (2016) in his book mentioned Barpeta as a site of cultural heritage. He briefly described about the Temples and *Sattras* in Barpeta district. He describes about the different festivals celebrated in Barpeta district since the life time of Saint Sankardeva.

Das (2016) described about the family life of Saint Sankardeva and his better half Kalindi Aai. He mentioned that how Kalindi Aai always inspired his husband to propagate Vaishnavism along with the responsibility as the head of the family.

Roy Choudhury (2018) described about the period spent by Sankardeva at Patbaushi and different activities played by him during that period.

Goswami, (present *Sattradhikar* of Damodardeva *Thaan*, Patbaushi) highlighted a genealogical list of *Sattradhikar* of Damodardeva *Sattra*. In his book he has also described the nature of *Prasanga* i.e. Morning Prayer (*jagaran geet*), *Ghosa Prasanga*, afternoon *Prasanga* and evening *Prasanga* and all total 14 *Prasangas* (written by Bhattadeva).

Malik wrote that Chandsai should not renounce the Islam religion for accepting the Vaishnavism.

Neog described the rise and development of Patbaushi Sattrra. He wrote that after 200 years of the death of Sankardeva i.e. in the year 1772, Ahom king Lakshmi Singha donated land to Patbaushi Sattrra which had been written in a copper plate. (Pg 61-62)

1.5 Presentation of Materials

This thesis contains six chapters including summary and conclusion. The present chapter introduces the study of the problem and literature review of relevant information and objectives of the study, methodologies followed to collect data to prepare the study.

Chapter II describes the information of *Bhakti* Movement, Sankardeva and Vaishnavism in Assam, and development of *Sattras* and division of *Samhatis*.

Chapter III present the brief description of Barpeta District as a land of *Sattras*, Patbaushi village and other *Sattrra* institutions established by the *Gurujana* and his followers nearby Patbaushi Sattrra.

Chapter IV deals with Saint Sankardeva's time in and around Barpeta, his literary works, preparation of *Brindabani Bastra*, details of followers who took initiation from Saint Sankardeva at Patbaushi.

Chapter V describes the origin of the Patbaushi Sattrra (Sankardeva's *Thaan*), physical structure, role of *Sattrra* Management Committee, role of local people, daily activities and annual festivals celebrated in the *Sattrra*, role of women in *Sattrra* and income source of *Sattrra*, changes occurs on some aspects in the *Sattrra*, problems of the *Sattrra* and enforcement of illegal migrants in *Sattrra's* land.

Summary and conclusion part of the thesis has been described in chapter VI.