

**Sarmistha Das**

## **CLOCKING THE SATRA: MEANINGS AND MOVEMENTS**

### ***Abstract***

*Religion with its power to unify always brought members within the realm of a single moral community. However, religion also can divide people within the same moral community. Along with the religious activities such authority also influenced the political and economic lives of its members. Thus, such spaces are crucial sites for sociological enquiry, with different meanings for different members who adhere to it. Most often they act as an agency with multifaceted meanings. Such meanings not only cover the religious but also the social, political to the cultural life of the people. More so in case of the satra (a neo-vaishnavite monastery) which not only governs the religious life but gives meaning to the socio-cultural life of people through various performances and rituals. Most often individuals derive their identity from such spaces (satra). Here an attempt is made to understand the origin of the satra as an institution, the meaning the satra (as a space) have had on the people. Moving around the everyday life of a multi-caste Hindu village the paper looks at the nuances of living in a satra village.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Satra, neo-Vaishnavism, Hinduism.

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Durkheim defines religion as “A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unites into a single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”. Durkheim (1912/1995) further argues that the division of human life into sacred and profane realms help them to identify religion in their respective cultures. However, not every phenomenon which involved an awe could be associated with religion. For him religion would work only when there is a community involved in the process of identification. Hence, the institution becomes a significant marker of identifying the individual’s association with religion. We see that there are no religions in the world which existed without a ‘church’ in the history (Keith, 2012:5).

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**SARMISTHA DAS**, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Tezpur University, Naapam, Pin:784028, Assam, Email: sharmishtha.k@gmail.com

Hence, we can argue that religion with its power to unify has the capacity to bring in people under the realm of a single moral community. The above statement gets challenged when we look at the world around which is not ignorant of the numerous examples of religion and its divisive effect on the members of the community. Membership of people to this moral community at times acts as a zone of liminality thereby, becoming a significant *rite of passage*.

To this Milton Yinger (1970) has offered an inclusive definition. For him, to understand religion, one is to focus on what religion does rather than on what religion is. While saying this he follows a Weberian interpretation that meaning in life is a basic human need, however, the nature and intensity of the same would vary according to the individual's interpretation of reality (Keith 2012:6). Thus one can argue that religion has various meanings associated with it. Along with the religious activities it also governs the socio-economic life of the individuals who adhere to it. With this backdrop the paper aims to look at the *satra* as a site of enquiry (from which individuals derive meanings to their everyday activities). Therefore, an attempt is made to look at the origin of the *satra* and understanding the ways in which people understand the *satra* as an institution in itself.

*Satra* in Assam has a long history in Assam. Pre-colonial Assam witnessed a major religious upheaval in the form of neo-Vaishnavism. Towards the latter part of the fifteenth to early sixteenth century a socio-religious and cultural movement which was unique in its essence and revolutionary in its nature took place in the state. The movement gained its momentum in the early parts of seventeenth century and reached its peak in the eighteenth century. This was the socio-religious movement initiated and propagated by Shankardeva and his disciple Madhavdev who were two of the great saints and social reformers of medieval Assam. A group of scholars also refer to this movement as renaissance in Assam as it also led to a new socio-cultural revival through various community activity like *ankiyanaat*, *bhaona* (one act play), *boorgeets* (devotional hymns), *naam* (recital of the *bhagwatpuran*) and so on. This movement came at the backdrop of the socio-economic turmoil in Assam within the various groups practicing Vaishnavism and Tantricism (Bhuyan). The smaller fractions were fighting among each other in order to either prove their religious or political supremacy.

This was the time when large part of contemporary central Assam was under the control of the Ahom state. This new religious practice called neo-Vaishnavism, which rested on the simple philosophy of integration, societal reform and upliftment at a time when the entire Assam was in a socio-political turmoil. The Ahoms were not in favour of the simple philosophical orientation of the new religious practice but were rather skeptical of its popularity among the masses. Hence, at the beginning neo-vaishnavism was pushed far away from upper Assam where the Ahom kingdom had spread its tentacles.

The two aspects of this new religious practice which revolved around submission in front of one supreme God and rejection of caste-based discriminations; led to the creation of a space for universal brotherhood and congregational prayer which was not liked by the Ahom feudal system. This brought a constant conflict with the Ahom royalty time and again (Nath 2011:38). The revolutionary essence of neo-Vaishnavism was felt in its simple philosophy of considering it as a way of life. This new faith initiated by Shankardeva relied on the philosophy of worshipping a single God Krishna or Vishnu. The religious philosophy revolved around taking/ chanting Gods name without any hierarchy. His philosophy was purely based on *sravana*(listening or speaking) *kirtana*(singing) the verses of *Bhagawat Purana*. As a religious practice neo-Vaishnavism was based on the principles of tolerance and simplicity (Sharma 2011:116). Therefore, the ritual hierarchies and dictates of Hinduism did not receive any attention in this unique religious practice. The simplicity neo-Vaishnavism attracted devotees across caste and ethnic barriers into the new religion.

This unique religion symbolically rested on the wide network of *satras*(monasteries) headed by a guru. Anyone could easily enter the fold of neo-Vaishnavism by taking *sarana*(religious shelter) under a guru through following a simple procedure. The *satras* became the hub of socio-cultural and religious life of the Assamese community. The *satra* was recognized as a space where one could sit and devote all his energy towards god. The epicenter of *satra* was the *kirtanghar* (common prayer hall dedicated purely for religious practices) this became an integral part of every Assamese village. Over time the *naamghars* (a space dedicated for chanting the hymns of *bhagwat*) started becoming synonymous with many other socio-cultural activities. For instance, it also acted as a court where everyday decisions and disputes were resolved. For the functioning of the *satra* neo-Vaishnavism rested on the *bhakats* (group of disciples) who would live surrounding the *satra* premise. The *satras* were headed by a *satradhikar*(abbot) who too would reside in the premise of the *satra*. This movement was confined to the Brahmaputra valley during Shankardeva's lifetime. After his death his disciples took the movement forward and spread neo-Vaishnavism across Assam. Towards the sixteenth century different ideological differences resulted in neo-Vaishnavism and it led to the emergence of four different *sanghati* (Nath 2011:39) of *satra*: *purusa*, *kala*, *nika* and *brahma*. The distinction lies in the ideology and the philosophical orientation of the *satras*. For instance, the *purusa sanghati* gives emphasis to prayer. The *kala sanghat* lays emphasis on the guru and is more egalitarian than the rest of the *sanghat*s. The *nikasanghat* follows the principles of outward cleanliness and the philosophies of Madhabdeva (a disciple of Shankardeva) more than Shankardeva. Finally, the *brahma sanghat* is headed by a Brahmin preceptor the Vedic rites and along with *naam kirtan* which lays emphasis on God.

The simple procedure of taking *sarana*(religious refuge) under a guru was so simple that anybody could enter the fold of neo-Vaishnavism without much difficulty. It facilitated the entry of many tribal groups into the fold of Hinduism without the difficulties of Brahmanical Hinduism. Such tribal *neophytes* were called *sarania*s and are still addressed by the same name much after their assimilation into the larger Assamese society. This process, however, does not stop here through a process of renunciation and denunciation the *neophytes* can undergo a process of upward mobility( Sharma 2011: 116).

While the main agenda of the *staras* was social reform and abolition of untouchability, the matters of caste especially on the issues of eating and social relationships manifested over the years. For instance, many Brahmin inmates do not accept the food cooked by the Sudra inmates. Similarly, a Sudra inmate will not take food from an inmate who is below him in the ritual rankings of purity (Nath 2011:57). Hence, one can see the emergence of a hierarchical social organisation within the non-hierarchical religious order.

While the *staras* were initially not supported by the Ahom feudal system. Towards the latter part of the Ahom rule the *satras* received massive land grants, manpower and other endowments from the ruling class over the years. With time they became powerful and started following the prototype of the state bureaucratic organizational structure. In upper Assam four *satras* namely Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garmur, Kuruabahi became powerful and institutionalized (Sharma 2011:118).

Thus, *satra* as a space advanced as a socio-religious institution with various activities to be performed by the *neophytes*. Thus, over the years the *satras* became the power center's not only with substantial amount of land but also with significant number of followers (*neophytes*) under its aegis.

### **Focus of the Paper**

The paper is based on an ethnographic account of people living in a village which originated out of a *satra*. Therefore, the village is also referred as a *satra* village. The presence of *satra* in the language of the naming village makes the village extremely interesting. The village is located 12 kms away from the district headquarter in Nagaon and is home to numerous caste groups like Brahmins, Kalitas(a middle caste group in Assam), Koch(a detribalized Hindu caste), Kaibarta (a Scheduled Caste in Assam). Primarily the village is segregated into two distinct pockets one of the upper castes and the other dominated by the scheduled castes (*kaibartas*). While these two pockets are distinct and are at extremes when it comes to the religious ideologies but for their everyday economic transactions, they are dependent on each other.

The *satra* was the fountainhead of all socio-economic and political decisions in the village. As the local narratives suggests the village was formed as a process of Sanskritization and detribalization. Hence, the entire village

including its water bodies were under the satra. The satradhikar (*abbot*) thus became the sole proprietor of the entire village. While he did not reside in the village, he entrusted his duties to a committee which looked after the everyday activities of the satra. Apart from the cultural activities the satra mostly engaged in the agrarian economy of the village.

This position of the satra continued till the exigencies of the people were limited and land reforms were initiated by the state. Post reforms the agrarian economy of the village changed which was followed by the lower caste religious assertions which started challenging the omnipresent status of the satra. The paper deals with how people in the village look at the satra and participate in the activities of the satra. How the satra has been perceived by different groups and how meanings are derived by different groups about the satra.

### Satra Village

The village under study is an example of a satra village established through a process of land donation and named after the parent satra located at Majuli. The process of village formation is also seen as a part of detribalization and sanskritization. Thus, the village owes its allegiance to its parent satra Dakhinpat at Majuli. The land in the village was donated by *kachari* king Krishna Singha to the satradhikar of Dakhinpat Satra (Deka 2008). The village earned its name as dates to the sixteenth century and was established to spread the ideals of neo-Vaishnavism. However, today there are many villagers who refute the same and argue that the village pre-existed the satra and it was the satra which was formed later. Whether we are to agree with the first version of village formation or the latter one cannot deny the omnipresence of satra in everyday life of the villagers. This was found in the rich cultural heritage of the satra which percolated in the form of dance, art and other cultural forms in the everyday lives of the villagers.

Festivals also played a very crucial role in this process. For instance, the most popular festival being *douljatra* (holi). Celebrated in the Assamese month of *fagun* (February-March), this is an annual festival in the village. Traditionally the festival was connected to the social rhythm and life of the people in village. While the festival is still celebrated in the village, it has lost its mass appeal. A two day festival begins with the *jatra* (journey) when *Jadav Rai* (the idol of Krishna, inside the satra) goes out for a stroll (Gaon Phura) across the village. The *jatra* (journey) begins on *doulpurnima* (full moon) when *jadav rai* (the deity) take a voyage across the village and move out of the sacred space inside the satra. The two day festival ends with celebration of holi, when *Jadav Rai* re-enters the temple after the ritual bath. The *jatra* is followed by songs and dances with a huge congregation of men, women and children participating in it. Traditionally, such congregations also included people across caste groups in it. But today such congregations have become reclusive and restrictive. The notion of shame and self-respect amongst the marginalized has pushed them out of these congregations. Therefore, the festival which at

one point used to unite the villagers today has lost its traditional charm. One can today hear voices of dissent which refutes the rationality of the festival. Traditionally the *jatra* would cover the entire village in its length and breadth but today the movement has become restricted.

Apart from *doul-jatra* (which was the only festival for the entire village), today the villagers have many festivals like *naam-kirtans* and *bhagawat-paath* at the Kaibarta settlements respectively. This Kaibarta residential unit does not have a specific festival like Dakhinpat Satra but during the Assamese month of *bhado* (August-September) there are regular *naam-kirtans*. Apart from this there are also regular *kirtans* which keep the religious spirits high.

The residential arrangement in the village encircled the satra with the Brahmins (as the satra belonged to Brahma Sanghati). This is followed by the residential circles of the other caste groups like the Kalitas (a middle caste in Assam) and finally towards fringe of the village resided the Kaibartas. While the satra was the fountainhead of all decisions it has different meanings for its followers (Das 2018:20). It not only was a religious space but also provide economic and social asylum to its followers. Property disputes between the siblings, instances of elopement, proselytization were some of the key areas of the satra. Besides such activities and participation at the festivals like Holi and cultural partaking of the people at Bhaona (one act play), paal naam (community recitation and prayers) were some of the key activities of the satra.

An elderly Kaibatra from the villagers narrate:

The process of religious proselytization started in the village with the emergence of the satra. The new religious practices started attracting the villagers because, the people living in the area abruptly lost their control over the community land on which they were practicing agriculture. With their conversion into neo-Vaishnavism these people could now have a share in the *Khatopathar* (agricultural land) of the satra. Therefore, to claim that the new religion was open and free and hence received peoples participation would be a partially truth.

The Brahmins argue that the process of conversion was a doubly helpful for the neophytes. It not only helped the *sarania's* (neophytes) cross the liminal zone but also reaped economic benefits for them as membership to the satra along with the religious shelter also allowed them a share in the agricultural land of the village under the control of satra.

## Methods

Negotiating with the issues discussed above required an amount of methodological flexibility. Therefore, informal discussions and regular conversations with the villagers helped in understanding the nuances of the village. Thus, narratives become an important source of primary data for this

research. Participating as a non-participant observer was difficult as most of the times the researcher would miss most important festivities of the village. The villagers were also suspicious of her presence as it confused them with a government representative who was trying to work on some welfare scheme. This became less daunting and more enjoyable as I started visiting more often and they became less suspicious of my presence in the village and acknowledged my presence as a researcher. The field work was conducted for a year from 2016-2017.

### **Socio-Economic relations in a Satra**

The satras have a well-defined institutional arrangement. As mentioned it is headed by a *satradhikar* who is usually not elected but selected from the masses. Under no circumstance he can be dethroned in his lifetime. In terms of the space the satra consists of the *kirtanghar/ namghar* (common prayer hall) which occupy the centre stage. The group of disciples called the *bhakats* occupy the bottom of the hierarchy. The residential settlements which center the satra are called *baha* (residential houses) and the *bhakats* reside in lines all along these *bahas* which are called *hati*. With the head of the satra occupying the center and the celibates occupying the bottom of the residential hierarchy. The structure in a way represented the mediaeval state structure with different layers.

With the Ahom states aversion for the philosophical orientation of neo-Vaishnavism, as a religion it could not mature across upper Assam. It thus led its extensions across the Koch kingdom which offered patronage to the new religion. Gradually when the 'feudal mode of relationship between the master and his serf was projected into this relationship (Guha 1991:10) the ideological resemblance with the feudalism prompted the Ahom along the Koch's to patronize neo-Vaishnavism across Assam.

Thus, land grant to these religious institutions became a common practice. The land granted to the religious and charitable institutions were revenue free, which were dedicated to religious and charitable practices. Such land grants could be classified into three different categories i) *debottar*- land dedicated or appropriated to idols or temples ii) *dharmottar*- land devoted to religious purposes and iii) *brahmottar*-land granted to priest and learned people (Karna 2004:20).

With land in reserve the satras gradually became the power houses of socio economic relations. While, the *satradhikar*'s did not directly engage in agriculture the neophytes did involve in the satras agricultural land. The terms and conditions for agriculture were mutually negotiated between the *satradhikar* and the neophytes. This was the phase during which the satras started spatially expanding themselves. There were different branches of the satras with their nucleus in Majuli (a river island in Assam). Such satras flourished across villages

in Assam. There are many such villages across Assam which were so formed and were popularly called satra village.

In Dakhinpat Satra village the neophytes had usufructuary rights on the land while the satra had its sole ownership. The everyday economic transactions in the village revolved around the agricultural cycles. The *saranyas* (neophytes) were allowed to work in the paddy fields but had to surrender a portion of their produce to the satra. The head of the satra i.e. the satradhikar who controlled all socio-economic and religious decisions in the village resided in Majuli (an island which is at approximately 250 kms away from the village). He would visit the village once in a year. His visit to the village was most coveted and anticipated. Dakhinpat village under study is one of the many satra villages which were under the control of a Satradhikar and hence, he would visit them annually and collect the tithe. In his absence from the village decisions of the satra were taken by the *satra parisalona samity* (the satra management committee, Das 2018:21). This was a body which comprised on members from the village. While membership to this body is desirable it is yet restricted to the Brahmins. The neophytes have to confirm to the terms and conditions of the *satra parisalona samity* in order to participate in the agricultural transactions of the village. The agricultural season revolved around the regular *rabi* and *kharif* plantations with paddy dominating the agricultural crops followed by sugarcane and mustard. The village was known for its rich sugar cane plantations which was a product of the fertile river bed and the alluvial soil. Thus, the satra with all land in the village under its control acted as the sole landowner and the neophytes the sharecroppers in the village. This reproduced a twofold agrarian relationship in the village. The satra dominating the agrarian relations in the village and the *neophytes* following the orders of the satra thus, it was with the satra and its unobstructed power to judge whether a sharecropper deserved all the rights to cultivation the succeeding years or not. For the sharecropper appeasing the satra was crucial as his good relations with the satra also marked a way for his share of land in *kahtopathar* (land which belonged to the satra). For which he may at times have to put an extra effort to keep the members of the satra parichalana samity contented. There are instances when he (a neophyte) would go an extra mile and work in their houses for free as *kamla* (daily labourer) without any economic remuneration, in few cases where the households were liberal he would be offered a meal. But this certainly was not the case in everywhere. In a certain sense for the sharecropper the satra as an institution was the lifeline, dominating the major socio-economic relations.

While the relationships were mostly pleasant there were instances when the strenuous relationships got reified with bitter feelings and mistrust between the groups. The *neophytes* often feared the satra authorities who were the major decision makers in their lives. As some of the major agrarian decisions like pattern of crops, its rotation around the year, amount of land



allotted to each *neophyte* were taken by the samity (in absence of the satradhikar). The neophytes would participate in this process without actively getting involved in the decision-making. Thus, one can see how the everyday lives of the people (in case of the present study the neophytes) get affected without participating in the process of decision making (Lefevre, 1991). This also shows that the satra as a space had different meanings for the Brahmins and the Kaibartas. For the Brahmins it was a foundation of power for the latter it was an agency giving meaning to their daily economic needs.

While on the one hand, the satra exercised unquestioned influence on the villagers, on the other the latter also found in the satra a protector in dire needs. It was a typical feudal patron-client relationship. Agrarian relations across India are relationships of mutual dependence and obligation between two classes of landowner and peasant, termed by Wiser (1937) *jajmani relations*. These relations though feudal also acted as a jacket, a shield, protecting people at distress. However, such mutual relationship of dependence and obligations typical of *jajmani* relations are not seen in Dakshinpatsatra village. Unlike *Kamirpur* there was an absence of occupational caste in the village under study. The symmetrical arrangement of occupational groups was not found in the village under study. But the protective relation between the patron and the client were visible in the village. For instance, the gaonburah (village headman) narrates:

There are Kaibarta families in the village who have been working in the satra land for generations. While today the nature of agriculture has changed, and the new generation is withdrawing from agriculture yet the relationship of dependence and trust continue between the two. In case of emergency and crisis they immediately rush to the satra.

The lack of occupational castes in the village has resulted in the *neophytes* taking up most of the chores in the village besides working in the agricultural fields. Occupational groups such as barbers, washer men were not present in the village, but such odd jobs were carried out by the *neophytes*. The *neophytes* carried on their relationship with the satra because of their trust and dependence with the satra. Such relationships in the village continued till the land reforms were introduced in the state and a few such relations also continued after the land reforms. As a space, it was a traditional and hierarchical in nature headed by the satradhikar and followed by the members of the parichalanasamity trailed by the neophytes at the bottom. Hence, there were primarily two categories which dominated the traditional production relations in the village. The landlord comprised of the satra (dominated by the upper castes like the Brahmins and Kalitas), the sharecroppers and the agricultural labourers which were from the lower and marginalized castes in the village. This continued as a full-fledged arrangement till the land reforms were initiated in the early 1970s.

The satra did not have any restraint on caste and gender of an individual vis-à-vis their conversation. Women were converted into neo-vaishnavism along

with their husbands or fathers. They were never considered as a separate category. Hence, while it was open for all there were predefined boundaries which were not permeable. The satradhikar was considered sacrosanct in the village. During his annual visits to the village he was to be camped at a distance from the residential settlement. This spatial distance was a must for preserving the ritual purity of the satradhikar. The women in the village (irrespective of caste) were neither allowed to visit him nor were to be seen in the proximity. They could pay him a visit from a distance. Elderly women in the village described the satradhikar as powerful and sacred. It was thought and believed that their (women's) presence near the satradhikar would defile him and will bring bad omen not only to the particular family but to the entire village.

### **Altering Equations Today**

The villagers have multiple narratives on formation of the village. The upper caste villagers argue that the village was formed as a process of land donation to the neo-vaishnavite satra. While the lower caste Kaibartas offer a different account of the village formation. Whatever be the truth, the competing narratives of the village formation are quite interesting in a village where the satra enjoyed uncontested social hegemony till some decades back. The emerging competing narrative from the Kaibartas is thus manifestations of not only the declining power of the satra but also a growing new lower caste identity assertion vis-à-vis the satra and traditional upper caste domination in various spheres of life of the village including the agrarian economy.

There was a time when the social and economic life of Dakhinpat Satra village revolved around the satra. The satra through its religious and cultural role bound the people of the village. Not only as an agent of neo-vaishnavism to which the villagers across castes owed their allegiance, but also as a patron of various cultural events and festivals such as *bhaona* (a form of One Act religious play enunciated by Sankardev in the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century to preach his neo-vaishnavite sect), *douljatra* and *naam kirtan*. However, while theoretically there are no restrictions on people's participation in these festivals, there are many counter narratives too.

BenudharSarma, a middle aged Brahmin business man from the village asserts that there are no castes based restrictions on participation of people in different socio-religious festivals in the village. One is not barred from entering any social space including the satra on the basis of one's caste affiliations. However, such accounts are not corroborated by the lower castes.

Jiban Das, a middle aged Kaibarta (lower caste) peasant from Dakhinpat narrate that although there are no overt caste discriminations but way in which such discriminations are made. It is true that no lower caste was ever denied access to the satra, but at the same time the

lower castes never felt equally welcomed to the satra like the upper caste villagers which was humiliating for them.

The satra being the owner of most of the land in and around the village, its dominant position in the economic sphere and as a traditional feudal authority had been most conspicuous in the village. However, the traditional power structure started changing with the implementation of the various land reforms since independence of India, especially since 1973 (which was subsequently repealed and implemented again) the introduction of the Panchayati Raj System in the village (Das 2017:220). This was accompanied by a parallel socio-religious movement among the lower caste under the aegis of Sankar Sangha, a radical neo-vaishnavite organisation in the 1960s and subsequently under the aegis of Ek Saran Bhagabati Samaj which was a breakaway faction of the lowest castes like the Kaibartas.

The Gaonburah (village headman) mentions, that although the villagers were earlier fairly united on the grounds of religion, there were occasions on which the social schism in the village came to the fore. He narrates how one such occasion became a watershed in the socio-religious life of the village. On that occasion, the *satradhikar* from Majuli was on a visit to the village. Some Kaibarta villagers wanted to pay a visit and offer payas/*kheer* but they were stopped from meeting him. Humiliated at the incident, the Kaibarta villagers (from many surrounding villages) got together and called for a congregation of villagers and called for Ila Ram Das, the founder of Ek Saran Bhagawati Samaj.

From then, the Kaibarta villagers of Dakhinpat broke away from the satra and became followers of Ek Saran Bhagawati Samaj and set up their own naamghars (literally means prayer house, but the Naam ghars became the most crucial sites of social, cultural and even juridical discourses in the village) for religious activities.

Satras presence in the village has been conspicuous to the everyday life of the villagers. However, this traditional edifice started changing with the implementation of various land reforms since India's independence. Especially since 1973 and the implementation of land reforms (which were subsequently repealed and implemented again). This was accompanied by a parallel socio-religious movement among the Kaibartas in the village under the aegis of Shankar Sangha, a radical neo-vaishnavite organisation in the 1960s and subsequently under the aegis of Ek Saran Bhagabati Samaj which was a breakaway faction of the castes like the Kaibartas. These two occasions had a far-reaching impact on the traditional social organization of the satra vis-à-vis the village.

The Gaonburah (village headman) mentions, that although the villagers were united on the grounds of religion, there were occasions on which the social schism in the village came to the fore. He echoes similar narratives of a few elderly kaibartas.

On one of his annual visits, the *satradhikar* was offered milk and jaggery by few kaibarta men from their way they were stopped by the members of the *parichalona samity* and were not allowed to offer their tithes to the *satradhikar*. This infuriated the men as they felt humiliated. This was the beginning. The men (mostly from the village and also from the neighboring villages) got together and called for a congregation in the village. This congregation took place exactly on the ground where the *satradhikar* had setup his makeshift tent. With time this congregation became a movement as the kaibartas started protesting by not participating and withdrawing themselves from various activities of the *satra*.

The *satra* for long acted as the largest landowner in the village. The *satra* with its control over 621 bighas of agricultural land occupied a central position in terms of controlling the socio-economic activities in the village. While the wetlands and the grazing ground could be accessed by all, the villagers had limited rights on them. *Satras* dominance over the resources in the village continued till the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century when forces of the colonial state penetrated the traditional land relations through different control mechanisms. The Assam Land and Revenue Act 1886 which was the culmination of a series of change in the land and revenue systems in the state brought about considerable changes in the existing land ownership pattern. Visible shifts in agrarian relations were marked during the post-independence period, when progressive land reform measures became an important part of the state agenda. These initiatives resulted in land distribution and reallocation. The size of land holdings was fixed, and individual ownership came under the scrutiny of state. Reflections of such organised macro level moves were also seen at the micro level. *Dakhinpat Satra* village also was not an exception to the new process of change.

The *satra* on the other hand did not do anything to assuage the aggrieved villagers who then went to the leaders of the Shankar Sangha which had a strong organisation with many followers in the nearby villages. The Sangha being a radical neo-vaishnavite organisation which fought against the Brahminic domination empathised with the villagers and it convened a huge congregation in the village under the leadership of Acharya Ila Ram Das, who was a Kaibarta himself and hailed from the Nagaon district. This congregation marked the parting away of the villagers from the *satra* who joined the ranks of the Sankar Sangha. Later on, Ila Ram Das himself had parted away from the Sangha accusing its leaders of one-upmanship with the Kaibartas and the other lower castes and formed his own organisation called *Ek Saran Bhagabati Samaj*.

The self-determining movement of the Kaibartas away from the dictates of the *satra* was also reinforced by the land reform measures of the state. The *satra* by then was no longer the sole landowner in the village. The ceiling surplus land of the *satra* was redistributed among the landless families in the village and the *satra* had a total of 50 bighas of land under its control. This resulted in the Kaibartas finding brethren from their own community who

had land. This helped them find economic independence away from the satra.

Over the years the Kaibartas started setting up their own naamghars (which literally means prayer house). The Naam ghars became the most crucial sites for social, cultural and even juridical discourses in the village along with the religious activities. In a way these naamghars started substituting the satra in every possible way. The satra had lost its long-established aura with time the institution started representing an institution of the yester years.

As Cantlie defines:

Assamese Vaishnavism is institutionalized at village level in the Name House System. The name house is the local community within which its members ordinarily live their lives (Cantlie 1984, 116).

In every village there is at least one name house to which the members belong and form a part of the religious congregation consisting of a restricted association of households who combine specially for the religious purposes. The name house becomes the core unit of the rural society (Cantlie 1984, 116).

However, it will be difficult to literally translate the *naamghar* into name house but, one cannot deny its presence in the everyday affairs of the villagers. In the village under study, the traditional authority of the satra broke and made way to the new socio-religious spaces like *naamghars*. While the *naamghars* came as a response to the hierarchies of the satra, with time the *naamghars* also became isolated by the caste giving way to hierarchies.

The *naamghars* were managed by respective organizing committees which included the influential caste members from each residential unit. The *naamghars* are autonomous in nature and manage not only religious but also many important social functions. But, none of the committees affiliated to the *naamghars* had women representatives in them. While women were engaged in the everyday activities of the *naamghar* they were restricted to the margins. Women in groups participated at different rituals of the *naamghars* but their presence was subjected to notions of purity. Absence of women from the decision making bodies impedes their agency in the village. As the *naamghars* developed as influential centres several issues like elopement, marriage, breaching the food taboos are resolved and negotiated in the *naamghars* with imposition of a fine. In such cases the defaulters (who do not abide by the rules of the *naamghar*) are punished by imposing fine (which often includes a community feast). Thus, the *naamghars* apart from being a space for spiritual gratification acted as a decision making body most of the times.

While the influence of the satra with time has declined it continues to hold its power and position on certain ground. Till date the satra acts as the only landholder in the village which still leases out land for sharecropping unlike the rest of the villagers who lease out land on *sukti* (contract). The new contract system

is much more stringent on the tenants wherein they are required to give an absolute amount of product/money to the landholder irrespective of the nature of the harvest. This is not a tenant friendly practice and is favourable for the landowner who in the process irrespective of the kind of produce gets his fixed share.

But the sharecropping system is more liberal in the sense that under it the tenants are required to part with fifty percent of the crop to the landholder. Thus, it gives an allowance to the nature of the harvest, that is, if the harvest is bad then the total share of the landholder will also come down although the percentage will remain the same.

Thus, many kaibarta villagers continue to remain attached to the satra land as sharecropper. As satra can afford to continue with its tenant-friendly practices unlike other landholders in the village because of the fact that it owns a large acreage of land while the other landholders in the village who lease out land are basically small and marginal landholders. This has helped the satra to hold on to its influential position in the village. However, this has not resulted in these sharecroppers following the satra in other aspects of life. They maintain their distance from the satra and the socio-cultural practices it patronises. Satra also does not try to enforce its ideology and practices on these lower caste villagers. Thus, despite the extant social tension between them, they have created a mutually negotiated space which allows them to address each other's exigencies.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, it can be concluded that the satra has variety of meanings in the everyday life of the villagers. For long it acted as a total institution taking care of the economic, social and religious facets of peoples' everyday life. But this notion of satra changed with the beginning of land reforms and the subsequent movements in the village as discussed. While the satra is pervasive in the life of the villagers in general, it has lost its magic over the years as the economic and religious control of the satra declined. Today the kaibartas in the village have found their own brethren's who are challenging the traditional social hierarchies in the village (as they have access to land, education, social network with the world outside) because of which the dominance of the satra parichalanasamity is withering. The mushrooming of alternate spaces of worship like *naamghars* (outside of the satras jurisdiction) along the stara is an indication of people moving away from the dictates of the satra. However, the dependence of a few villagers in the satras agricultural land is nothing but a reification of satras ubiquitous presence in the everyday life of the village. Also, the stories on village formation and the name of the village is a reiteration of the satra and its complimentary presence.

Thus, we can say that the political and economic life of the people in the village have changed today and there are new meanings that people in the village are giving to their lives. This is apparent in the lower caste assertions first witnessed

in early 1970s in the village which also have had a significant role to play the agrarian economy of the village. The lower caste assertions in the village were also emboldened by the land reform which was taking place around the same time. The assertions of the lower caste in the village received the support of the Ek Saran Bhagawati Samaj, a splinter neo-vaishnavite group of the lower castes which came into being in 1973 and which had a strong following in the Nagaon district. The association with the Bhagawati Samaj paved the way for the segregation of the lower caste villagers from the control of the satra. The lower castes have set up their own *naamghars* and have stopped celebrating most of the festivals (e.g. holi) and rituals patronized by the satra which they traditionally celebrated with much funfair. Thus there is a break in the traditional relationship of the villagers with the satra at social and cultural level.

However, despite such segregation, it is to be noted that the satra remains the largest land holder with 50 bighas of agricultural land. The satra also continues to give employment to the landless lower caste families in the village who are directly engaged in the satra land as sharecroppers.

It is to be noted that while most of the lower caste villagers have moved out of the control of the satra, the latter continues to exercise its influence upon the villagers. The satra is still the largest landholder in the village and a large number of lower caste villagers are dependent on satra land as sharecropper. It has been mentioned earlier that the satra is the only landholder in the village which still leases out land for sharecropping unlike the rest of the villagers who lease out land on contract. It has also been mentioned that the contract system is much more stringent on the tenants wherein they are required to give an absolute amount of product/money to the landholder irrespective of the nature of the harvest.

But the sharecropping system is more liberal in the sense that under it the tenants are required to part with fifty percent of the crop to the landholder. Thus, it gives an allowance to the nature of the harvest, that is, if the harvest is bad then the total share of the landholder will also come down although the percentage will remain the same. Thus, a large number of lower caste villagers continue to remain attached to the satra land as sharecropper. Satra can afford to continue with this tenant-friendly practice unlike other landholders in the village because of the fact that it owns a large acreage of land while the other landholders in the village who lease out land are basically small and marginal landholders. This has helped the satra to hold on to its influential position in the village. However, this has not resulted in these sharecroppers following the satra in other aspects of life. They maintain their distance from the satra and the socio-cultural practices it patronises. Satra also does not try to enforce its ideology and practices on these lower caste villagers. Thus despite the extant social tension between them, they have created a mutually negotiated space which allows them to address each other's exigencies making living in a satra village textured in its own sense.

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