



The Traditional Economic and Religious Practices of the Satras in Assam: A Historical Study

Swarchita Das

*Research Scholar, Department of Sankaradeva Studies, Mahapurusha Srimanta
Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Guwahati Unit, Assam India*

Received: 20.09.2026; Accepted: 22.09.2026; Available online: 30.09.2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

This research paper deals with the traditional economic and religious practices of the Satras in Assam from a historical perspective. During the Medieval period of Assam, Srimanta Sankaradeva founded the religious faith, Neo-Vaishnavism which is also known as Eka-Sarana-Naama-Dharma, with its primary focus on Bhakti (devotion) to Lord Sri Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He made the religious practices of Neo-Vaishnavism very simple and liberal by making congregational singing (kirtan) and listening (shravan), the main methods of showing Bhakti (devotion) to Lord Sri Krishna, along with associating with him. By aiming to propagate his religious faith, the saint laid the foundation of Satras (central monasteries) and Namghars (community prayer houses) in Medieval Assam. Prior to the colonial period of Assam, the economy of the Satras operated from royal patronage as well as other sources of livelihood, whereas the foremost religious activity of the Satras was Prasanga. This research paper examines the traditional economic practices of the Satras in Assam. It also understands the importance of Prasanga as a traditional religious practice of the Satras in Assam, this research paper adopts a historical and qualitative approach. It is based on Satra visits, secondary sources such as books published by various authors, related historical literature, and online resources.

Keywords: Srimanta Sankaradeva, Satras, Traditional Economic Practices, Traditional Religious Practices, Assam, Historical Study

Introduction:

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a notable *Bhakti* saint from Medieval Assam. Furthermore, he was also a poet, cultural architect, scholar, social reformer, humanist, philosopher, composer and playwright. Within the broader framework of the significant *Bhakti* Movement of India, Srimanta Sankaradeva established the religious faith, Neo-Vaishnavism which is also called *Eka-Sarana-Naama-Dharma* in Medieval Assam during the 15th and 16th centuries. The meaning of the term "*Eka-Sarana-Naama-Dharma*" is "Take Shelter in One Religion". Neo-Vaishnavism is primarily monotheistic which is centered on *Bhakti* (devotion) to one Supreme God, Lord Sri Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The religious faith revolutionized the religious and social life of Medieval Assam by eliminating regressive customs, creating an egalitarian society, fostering social equality and removing caste-based disparity. It provides primary importance only to the worship of Lord Sri Krishna, and not Radha-Krishna unlike the rest of the Vaishnavite Schools of India where the worship of

The Traditional Economic and Religious Practices of the Satras in Assam: A Historical Study Swarchita Das Radha-Krishna is a fundamental feature. It also provides considerable focus to the *dasya* form of worship in which the devotees treat themselves as the servants of Lord Krishna (Baruah 17). In his Neo-Vaishnavism, the Saint gave recognition to and accepted all people regardless of caste, creed, social status and gender. In the eyes of Srimanta Sankaradeva, all people were the same and equal. Brahmins, Sudras and Pariahs are regarded equally in the spiritual activities of the faith and chanting the name of the Divine (Kakati 36-37).

In his faith, the saint introduced a system of initiation which is known as *Sarana* (*Soron Lowa*), through which entry is provided to all people belonging to different castes and creeds. The *Satradhikar* plays the primary role in *Sarana*. The core scriptures of the faith are *Bhagavat*, *Kirtan Ghosha* and *Naam Ghosha*. The *Bhagavat* is a translation of the original Sanskrit scripture, *Bhagavata Purana* into Assamese language by Srimanta Sankaradeva thereby making it easily understandable for the local people. Srimanta Sankaradeva translated more than half of the *Bhagavata Purana* of which the *Dasama* (Book X) is the most famous one (Baruah and Hazarika 142). *Kirtan Ghosha* was written by the Saint which is considered the magnum opus of the faith. *Kirtan Ghosha* is a long devotional poem which is separated into various sections (Baruah 17). Apart from *Bhagavat*, Srimanta Sankaradeva and Sri Sri Madhavadeva also rendered Valmiki's Ramayana's last canto, *Uttara Kanda* and first canto, *Adi Kanda* respectively into Assamese language thereby making it easily available for the local people. Srimanta Sankaradeva also wrote *Bhatimas* and these are the songs or sayings of a *Bhata*, a panegyrist or a man who sing by glorifying the emperors and rich men (Neog 196).

Srimanta Sankaradeva advised his disciples that *Bhakti* (devotion) from a pure heart is essential to worship and associate with the Divine and that *Vedic* rituals and sacrifices are not required. The religious faith seeks to reject Vedic ritualism and idol worship with its primary emphasis on *Bhakti* (devotion) to Lord Sri Krishna in the form of congregational singing (*kirtan*) and listening (*shravan*) to His Name and deeds. The religious faith stresses on purity and cleanliness in all three aspects such as physical, spiritual and mental. Srimanta Sankaradeva laid the foundation of the democratic socio-religious institutions such as *Satras* (central monasteries) and *Namghars* (community prayer houses) in Medieval Assam with the aim to propagate his Neo-Vaishnavism. The *Satra* serve as a common social platform where all people can engage in the religious activities transcending caste, creed, social status and gender. In *Satras*, the *prasada* is distributed from the same container to all people equally and then eaten together. *Satras* organized social activities such as disaster relief, charity, and healthcare and also provide support to the persons who are in need.

This research paper is an attempt to present the sources of livelihood and religious activities of the *Satras* with specific focus on *Prasanga* in Medieval Assam from a historical perspective. In this research paper, the term 'traditional' refers to the customary economic and religious practices that functioned prior to the colonial period of Assam. The scope of this research paper is confined to the traditional economic sources and religious practices specifically *Prasanga*, of the *Satras* in Assam and their transformation in colonial and contemporary Assam falls outside the scope of this paper.

Objectives:

1. To examine the traditional economic practices of the *Satras* in Assam.
2. To understand the importance of *Prasanga* as a traditional religious practice of the *Satras* in Assam.

Research Methodology:

This research paper adopts a historical and qualitative approach. It is based on *Satra* visits, secondary sources such as books published by various authors, related historical literature, and online resources.

Research Questions:

1. What were the traditional economic practices of the *Satras* in Assam?
2. What was the significance of *Prasanga* as a traditional religious practice in Assam?

The Traditional Economic Practices of the Satras in Assam:

Before the colonial period of Assam, the income of the *Satras* of Assam was mainly obtained from the land grants originally made to them by the Koch rulers, specifically Naranarayana and Chilarai, and by the Ahom rulers from Jayadhwaj Singha (1649-1663) till Ratnadhawaj Singha (1679-1681). These land grants made by them comprised an integral part of royal patronage which supported the sustenance, improvement and development of the *Satras*. The Ahom ruler Siva Singha allocated some plots of land for the evolution of Barpeta *Satra* (Talukdar 34). In particular, the rulers like Naranarayana, Rajeshwar Singha, Pramatta Singha were respectful, compassionate and benevolent towards the Vaishnavite saints and took care of the *Satras* of Barpeta region by providing them with land grants for their maintenance and growth. The *Bhakats* (monks) practiced agriculture in those lands and they provided a small portion of the agricultural produce obtained from those lands as *kar* (tax) to the *Satras* as a means of supporting them. Apart from royal patronage, the system of paying *Guru kar* (tax to the preceptor) also existed. During the visit of the first *Adhikara* of Barpeta *Satra* to Koch Behar to meet Madhava, he offered two *narayani* (Koc) coins to Madhava for the purpose of keeping the *Satra's* lamp burning (*sala banti*) as a token of the *kar* that the disciples would be offering to the *Satra* (Neog 331-332).

During the visit of the King Viranara-yana to the Barpeta *Satra*, he offered *Guru-kar*. Damodara is also regarded to have informed his lay disciples to pay their religious (*dharma kar*) to Vaikunthanatha Bhattadeva at the Patbaushi *Satra*. The Monks relied on begging and accepted presents for the purpose of their sustenance and the issue of maintaining the *Satra* did not arise in the initial times. The new comers and the lay members emerged forward along with some offers in the name of the Superior. The laymen brought the first fruits to the *Satra* when harvest was ready. Furthermore, the new comers, laymen and visitors also offered money, clothes and vegetables to the preceptor (Guru), on other functions. Those things were received by the preceptor when he met his disciples, and rich people offered handsome presents of money and things. During the visit of Madhava to Koch Behar, it was observed by him that the monks did not obtain things as per their convenience. Then, he invited all the officials of the state, who supported him, and asked them that if they could take charge of the monks for some time. As a result, the officials agreed to Madhava and helped the monks with food for a period of two months by distributing them among themselves. In Medieval Assam, one day-to-day component of the administration of *Satra* was levying of taxes, specifically in the Ahom empire, every disciple had to pay an *anna*, one *pura* of grain and a napkin (*gamoca*). It is said that during the period of Rudrasimha, this levy was first made (Neog 331-332).

The importance of Prasanga as a traditional religious practice of the Satras in Assam:

Before British colonial rule, the devotees used to hold discussions with the preceptor and sang prayers within the premises of *Satras* and these small concourses were called *Prasangas*

and as the talks and songs were dedicated to the Divine, they were also called 'Hari-prasangas' or 'Hari-katha Prasangas.' During the days of Srimanta Sankaradeva, *Prasangas* were organized; the original *Bhagavata-purana* and *Bhagavadgita* were read and explained; recitals of "Bhatimas", the "Lila-mala" and the "Gunamala" were performed and the *Oja-palis* performed *kirtanas*, but these were organized in no definite sequence but as per the demand of each event. The *Prasangas* were classified into two divisions such as the *nama* or *nama-prasanga* (the religious activity of chanting various kinds of verses by glorifying God) and the *Bhagavata* or *Bhagavataprasanga* (the religious activity of chanting the Sanskrit scripture *Bhagavata-purana*) and ceremonies of the day were also classified into three various programmes such as the *matins* (*puwar prasanga*), the afternoon services (*biyali-prasanga*) and the evening services (*ratir prasanga*). These classifications were still continued after the days of Srimanta Sankaradeva but it was considered necessary to develop each into a number of smaller sub-divisions (Neog 341-342).

According to Vaikuntha Dvlja, Madhava arranged these fourteen *Prasangas*, such as 1) *Bhatima* 2) *capaya* (*caupai* verses) 3) *Gunamala* 4) "Lila-mala" 5) *tatparya* (the ending warning verses of various works revealing *bhakti* as the ultimate spiritual teaching) 6) *ghosa* verses 7) *pada* verses, 8) (*raga* compositions) 9) *nama* 10) *path* (verse readings) 11) *Bhagavata* 12) *jaya* (calling 'glory be to God', etc 13) *haridhvani* (chanting God's names in unison) 14) *katha* or narration (telling the stories of Krishna or Rama or the Guru) (Neog 342).

According to the *Katha-guru-carita*, Madhava resided at Sundaridiya after the demise of his Master and the *Guru asana* was established by Madhava there. Madhava also classified the *Prasangas* into fourteen and corrected the manner in which they were needed to be performed. He also corrected lines for the gathered devotees to sit as before this they possibly sat hurriedly. But the old system of three types of *Prasangas* continued. During the time of the visit of Mathuradasa to Koch Behar to meet Madhava, the latter wanted to know of the former whether the three types of *Prasangas* were still correctly organized at the *Satra* of Barpeta. Mathuradasa is said to have arranged the fourteen ceremonial sittings such as I. *matins* (*puwar prasanga*) which included 1) morning *raga* compositions (*gita*), 2) morning *bhatima*, 3) morning *nama-kirtana*, 4) morning recitation of verses from *Bhagavata* and 5) morning recitation of verses (*path*), II. afternoon services (*biyalir prasanga*) which included 6) afternoon *path* 7) afternoon *nama-prasanga* (*kirtana*) 8) afternoon recitations from *Bhagavata*, III. evening services (*ratir prasanga*) which included 9) evening readings of the *Guna-mala*, 10) evening recitations of the "Lila-mala" 11) evening *Bhatimas* 12) evening *raga* compositions (*Borgeet*) 13) evening *nama-prasanga*, 14) evening *path* (Neog 342).

At present, this programme is still ongoing at the *Satra* of Barpeta. Damodara also noticed the three *prasangas* which comprised of the twelve sections. The sections could be expanded to sixteen during the fasting days such as the eleventh day of the moon and the final day of the solar month. The *Bhagavata-purana* was daily read and explained in every morning, afternoon and evening services. Bhattadeva and Arjunadeva of the *Loca-Satra* also noticed the twelve *Prasangas*. It became usual for the *Satras*, asserting development from Damodara, to keep twelve types of *Prasangas*. In his *Dakhinpat Satra*, Vanamali conducted eleven or twelve *Prasangas*. The *Vamsigopa-ladevar Caritra* mentions the three main divisions of *Prasangas* which is constituted of *nama-kirtana*, *pada-path*, *oja-kirtana* and recitations from the *Bhagavata-purana*. One specific point to be noted here is that the *Prasangas* did not comprise of image worship (Neog 343-344).

Conclusion:

It can be concluded that, in earlier times, the economic practices of the *Satras* operated through numerous means of sustenance in order to generate income for their proper functioning, whereas their religious practices were also organized in a very effective and systematic way. The royal patronage received by the *Satras* supported them to a great extent in their maintenance and progress, as it gave the *Bhakats* with opportunities to utilize land as source of income for the betterment of the *Satras*. This proves that the *Bhakats* were very sincere, dedicated and hardworking in contributing to the overall progress of the *Satras*. The system of paying *kar* (tax) to the Guru (preceptor) by the disciples contributed to the efficient daily functioning of the *Satras*. By following this tradition, the disciples showed due respect to their Gurus and proved the value of this relationship, as well as their responsibility and concern for the development of the *Satras*. In earlier times, the *Prasanga* was a major religious activity of the *Satras* in Assam and continues to be practiced in contemporary times. It was conducted by the *Satras* to show *Bhakti* (devotion) to God. The *Prasangas* created a peaceful environment within the premises of the *Satras*, which was invaluable for the spiritual well-being of the disciples. By engaging in *Prasangas*, the devotees felt spiritually complete and connected with God. Hence, in earlier times, the *Satra* economy worked very well with the support received from various sources, and the religious activities of the *Satras* were conducted with purity and devotion.

References:

1. Barua, Swapnanil. Hazarika, Jyoti Prasad. History of Assam and Art and Culture of Assam. Global Net Publication, 2023.
2. Baruah, Girish. Essays in Srimanta Sankaradeva. Tilottama Publication, 2022.
3. Kakati, Banikanta. "Teachings of Srimanta Sankaradeva". Teachings of Srimanta Sankaradeva, edited by Ramani Malakar, Biswajit Kalita, Anwesha Mahanta and Munindra Mahanta, Sabharam Foundation, 1977, pp. 36-37.
4. Neog, Maheswar, Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam. LBS Publications, 1965.
5. Talukdar, Radhakanta. "Sri Mathuradas or Barpeta Satra: Tahani aru Aji". Barpetar Aitijya, edited by Bhupen Raichoudhury, Rekha Prakashan, 2010, p. 34.