CHAPTER IV

THE AUNIATI SATTRA

Auniati Sattra is situated in the western part of Majuli, around 7 Kms from Garmur, the Island headquarters and 8 Kms away from Kamalabari Ferry Ghat. Majuli can be reached from the mainland Assam by two key routes - from Jorhat through Neemati Ghat, and from North Lakhimpur by Luit-Khabalu Ghat. Luit-Khabalu Ghat lies on the North bank of the River Brahmaputra. However the Island can be reached via Jorhat, the district headquarters of Jorhat district. The road distance from Jorhat to Neemati Ghat is 14 km. There are at least two ferry services to Majuli every day, one around 10.30 AM, the other around 2.30 PM. Jorhat is 320 Kms away from Dispur (Guwahati), the State capital and is connected by National Highway #37 by surface.

4.1 History of the Sattra

The Auniati Sattra was established at Majuli by Ahom King Sultanla. Later he was renamed as King Jayadhvaj Simgha after he adopted the Vaishnavism from the first Sattradhikar of Auniati Sattra, Shri Shri Niranjandeva who was mistaken as the son of Sattradhikar Shri Shri Misradev of Kuruwabahi Sattra who was buried alive by the earlier King Pratap Simgha. The ministers and the astrologers in the court of the Ahom King Jayadhvja Simgha told that the former King did not do a right thing by
killing the Sattradhikar Shri Shri Misradev, and because of that the Kingdom was facing all sorts of evil happenings and the latter became repentant for the heinous crime. Later King Jayadhvja Simgha decided to invite the son of Misradev with a mind to get initiated himself under Kuruwabahi Sattra. The wife of assassinated Sattradhikar suspected the honesty of King Jayadhvja and decided to send Niranjandeva, the Bhagavati of Kuruwabahi Sattra to the King in place of her son. Unknowingly the King got initiated under Niranjandeva and asked him to establish a Sattra on his own. Subsequently the King came to know of the deceit and wanted to punish Niranjandeva. However he was prevented from doing so by his council of ministers citing, that now he was his disciple and had no moral right to punish his guru Niranjandeva. Afterwards Niranjandeva started the work to establish a Sattra that was granted to him by the King with all sorts of help. Niranjandeva started his mission with a group of seven devotees from the Kuruwabahi Sattra. They selected a plot of high land (Ati) at Majuli full of Auni pan (Piper Silveryticum) - a kind of betel creeper, and so the name of the new Sattra came to be known as Auniati Sattra. Niranjandeva was later given the idol of Lord Govinda from the Kuruwabahi Sattra where two images were there- one of Lord Govinda and another of Lord Madanmohan, the former was brought from Puri and the latter was designed by a carpenter at the advice of Shri Shri Sankaradeva.

Niranjandeva became the first Sattradhikar and received enormous favour of King Jayadhvja who endowed the Sattra with 81,650 bighas of land along with large number of resident devotees from different Sattras in order to strengthen the man power of Niranjandeva because he could manage only seven inmates from Kuruwabahi as said before. The said seven devotees later came to be known as the Satmanbhogia who were later entrusted with the duties of bor-aldhora, bagish, bor-deori, duolia bhagavati, guwakota, dhan bhalari and duolia pujari. This Sattra grew well in course of time and occupied the topmost position amongst the Sattras of Assam in terms of wealth and human resources i.e., the devotees.
Auniati Sattra has been identified as one of the principal and oldest monastic Satras of Assam. In the existing literature on Satras, Auniati has been given the first position in the concept of *Chari Sattras of Assam*. It is one among the four principal *Vaishnavite* Satras. They are- Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garmur, and Kuruwabahi. Auniati Sattra sprouted from the Kuruwabahi Sattra and therefore under the said concept, Kuruwabahi Sattra is justified to replace the Auniati Sattra. However if the ‘initiation’ of the King by Niranjandeva is taken into consideration, Auniati Sattra is rightly mentioned first in the said concept.

### 4.1.i Auniati Sattra during the Ahom Rule

During the rule of the Ahoms in Assam, Auniati Sattra played a very significant role in the political and administrative affairs of the State. It is mentioned in the Assamese chronicles that almost all the Ahom Kings used to take help and assistance from the *Sattradhikar* of Auniati Sattra on different occasions, and invited them to be present in the royal court and sought their blessings, and in time of need took their valuable advice and suggestions. In this regard it may be mentioned that from the time of the establishment of the Auniati Sattra, almost all the *Sattradhikars* had participated in the coronation ceremony of the King as the royal religious preceptor, where he was received as the most dignified and most respectful person. In this way the Ahom Kings handsomely offered royal assistance to the Sattra by constructing its building and gave attractive gifts along with huge amount of revenue free lands and *Paiks*.

As per information given by the present *Sattradhikar*, the Ahom Kings on different occasions used to send the *Barbaruah* and the *Bar Khataniyars* to the Sattra for receiving counseling and advice from the *Sattradhikar* and the *Satmanbhogia*.

Economic help to the Sattra was granted by the Kings at different times till the close of the Ahom rule in Assam. In this regard it should be mentioned that King Jayadhvja Simgha had inscribed in copper plates the list of the gifts and donations given to the Sattra and kept those charitable deeds on record. Similarly King Gaurinath Simgha and
Chandrakanta Simgha also had donated lands to the Sattra. As a result the Auniati Sattra became the owner of a huge amount of lands. It is found in the District Gazette of Assam of 1905 that till that time the Auniati Sattra had 21000 acres of revenue free land and about 10,000 acres half revenue free land, which according to the Sattra record are still in its possession. So to maintain this huge amount of landed property, a revenue branch has been working with various employees.

The Sattra had numerous disciples in medieval times. The Kings sometimes deputed the Sattradhikars to different places within the kingdom to increase the number of his disciple. Thus during Ahom rule there were large number of devotees which eventually increased the population of the Kingdom. Increase in the number of devotees and disciples had helped the King in safeguarding him from internal troubles, and at the same time Sattradhikar remained spiritually faithful to the State. This indirectly but very effectively strengthened the State’s administration.

On the other hand, such an act of royal patronage indirectly gave the Sattra a political empowerment. The Auniati Sattra in subsequent time began to exercise control over a large movable properties. The Sattradhikars also formulated economic policies on their own and the Sattradhikars of four royal Sattras were empowered by the King even to play magisterial power of limited range within their own jurisdiction. In this way during the period of the Ahom rule the Auniati Sattra became a principal institution recognized by the royal court as well as the Assamese society.
4.1.ii Genealogical chart of the Sattradhikars of Auniati Sattra

Fig. 8

FAMILY HISTORY OF NIRANJANDEVA

KANDALI SURAYA

BISWAMBHAR  

RAMAKANTA KANDALI  

KRISHNA CHARAN  

(Krishnanda (Krishai) - Wife Basuki Yai)

SRIKESHBH DEV (MATERNAL UNCLE SON BROTHER) 2nd SATRADHIKAR

SRI SHRI DAMODAR DEV 4th SATRADHIKAR

SRI SHRI PRAN HARI DEV 6th SATRADHIKAR

SHRI SHRI HARI DEV 5th SATRADHIKAR

JOY KRISHNA (SHRI OM)  

SRI SHRI LAKHMINATH DEV SRI NATH 7th SATRADHIKAR

SRI SHRI PADMAPARI DEVI 8th SATRADHIKAR

GONDA LAKHIPATI CHAKRABHATI  

SRI SHRI JADUMAM DEVI (Brought from Bar-Mahira Sattra)

SRI BASUDEV (TWO WIVES)

AM DEV  

HAM DEV  

CHANDRA KANTA

SHRI SHRI DUTTA DEV 11th SATRADHIKAR

DHARMESWAR (DEKA ADHIKAR)

SIVAKANTA  

UMAKANTA (DEKA ADHIKAR)

SRI SRI LILA KANTA DEV 13th SATRADHIKAR

RAMAKANTA

SHRI SHRI ASWAKANTA DEV

(SRI GUNAKANTA

(Present Satradhikar of Bar-Mahira Sattra)
DAśARThA, GRANDFATHER OF BANA MĀLI DEV (FROM BORAH FAMILY'S EIGHT GENERATION) (Dakshaṇ Pat Asramaṇe)

SUR DEV

KESHADEV (WIFE HIMKANTI)

SHRI SHRI KAMAL DEV (BROUGHT FROM DAKSHEN PAT ASRAMA) - 12TH SATRADHIKAR

THE SIXTH (6TH) GENERATION OF KURUWABAHI MISRA DEV (BROUGHT FROM KURUWABAHI SATTRA)

PURNANANDA

MOHON CHANDRA DEV

ACHYUT CHANDRA DEV

BOLO CHANDRA BRARAGYA CHANDRA BHUDHA CHANDRA

RAGHUCHANDRA

JADUCHANDRA

SHRI SHRI HIM CHANDRA 14TH SATRADHIKAR

SHRI RAM CHANDRA

SHRI HSRI JOGANANDA (KURUWAHABI)

SHRI SHRI KRISHNA CHANDRA D (GARAMUR SATTRA)

BOUGHAT FROM KURUWABAHI SATTRA

SHRI SHRI BISHNUCHANDRA DEV 15TH SATRADHIKAR

VIJOY MAHARA (DULIAJAN)

BHUban CHANDRA

CHANDRA KANTA DEV

SHRI SHRI DEVAKANTA

UMAKANTA

SHRI SRI PITAMBAR DEV 16TH SATRADHIKAR

ADITYA

MANIK

DAUGHTER

Chronological order of the Satradhikars of Auniati Sattra -

1. Shri Shri Niranjan Deva Goswami
2. Shri Shri Keshab Deva Goswami
3. Shri Shri Ram Chandra Deva Goswami
4. Shri Shri Damodar Deva Goswami
5. Shri Shri Hari Deva Goswami
6. Shri Shri Pran Hari Deva Goswami
7. Shri Shri Lakh Nath Deva Goswami
8. Shri Shri Padmpani Deva Goswami
9. Shri Shri Lakh Ram Deva Goswami
10. Shri Shri Kusha Ram Deva Goswami
11. Shri Shri Deba Dutta Deva Goswami
12. Shri Shri Kamal Chandra Deva Goswami
13. Shri Shri Lila Kanta Deva Goswami
14. Shri Shri Hem Chandra Deva Goswami
15. Shri Shri Bishnu Chandra Deva Goswami
16. Dr. Shri Shri Pitambar Deva Goswami - the present Sattradhikar

The middle name Deva/Dev are used only by Sattradhikars

4.2 Present day Auniati Sattra

Auniati Sattra of Majuli, for the last three and half Centuries has been playing important role in the spreading Vaishnavite faith and culture amongst the Assamese society. At the same time it has brought significant changes to the society by way of uplifting the backward people and educating the masses by establishing Sanskrit tols, schools and colleges in various parts of Assam. Currently Auniati Sattra of Majuli has 294 inmates and more than 10 lakhs of disciples all over Assam. The Sattra is run by a Sattradhikar and assisted by Deka Sattradhikar, the ‘head’ and the ‘deputy head’ respectively.

4.3 Economic Status of the Sattra

It has already been mentioned that the economic status of the Auniati Sattra appears to be sound during Ahom rule because the Sattra received plenty of land grants from a number of Ahom Kings who donated not only land but also other movable properties like valuable goods including utensils and other objects. In this work, surveys and case studies were conducted amongst the bhakats or the resident devotees of the Sattra. Such studies reveal an unbalanced
economic status among them; some of the bhakats are maintaining a good economy whereas his immediate baha neighbor is having a pitiable condition. Here the status of a senior bhakat named Shri Budhindra Nath Barpathak, aged 80 years reflects enormous misery in his day-to-day life. The present researcher interviewed Shri Bhadreswar Sarma who accompanied His Holiness Shri Shri Dr. Pitambar Deva Goswami to Lijiang, China. He had financial problems and had no money for his trip. It appears that around 5% of the total bhakats of the Sattra maintain a low economic status, and the story behind such condition is connected to non-availability of suitable jobs for the aged ones to earn money.

As we all know that Assamese culture can be regarded as the resultant outcome of an all round effort made by Shri Shri Sankaradeva put forwarded in the capacity of a religious preacher and a social reformer through the establishment of the Sattra institution. Small scale industries like production of hand fan, basketry works based on bamboo, cane, stalk of areca nut together with boat-making, making of Guruasana, beads of basil plant, preparation of paper from Agoru plant called Sachipat, cotton and bamboo leaf for writing religious manuscripts have little variation from the other Sattras, those were established at the time of Saint Sankaradeva. Hand-fan making is a regular mini-industrial activity followed by the making of basil beads and both the products have a good market although hand-fans have a major demand. Boat-making is not practiced nowadays and mask-making was never a vocational trade in the Sattra.

4.4 Problems Faced by the Sattra

Sattra both as a religious and as a socio-cultural institute attracts visitors from inside India and abroad. Its abundantly valuable cultural milieu can become a permanent attraction to the tourist in a formal way. It is a known fact that in the formal sector all the Sattras including Auniati are popular in the field of tourism. However with all its name and fame, Auniati Sattra is yet to achieve any milestone in tourism sector. It has been observed that several socio-economic problems have been working behind in minimizing the importance of the Sattra and its status in tourism day by day.
Although several steps/works have been adopted to focus the Neo-Vaishnavite culture and Sattra institution of Majuli, yet a very little has been done in resolving the accumulated social and economic problems over the years that has crippled the Auniati Sattra. Some crucial problems can be specified as follows:

a) Social problems:

(i) Gradual decline in the number of Sisyas is the main social problem of the Sattra because it does not receive enough male child as new incumbents followed by the decline in sending the male child to the Sattra at present,

(ii) Spread of Christianity specially among the tribal population in Northeast India also has threatened the very existence of the Sattra and is considered as another problem to Auniati,

(iii) Inmates leaving the Sattra for different reasons is another problem.

b) Economic Problems:

Since the last few decades the Sattra has been facing economic crisis due to the several reasons shown below:

(i) Flood problem: So far the economic problems are concerned, flood and associated erosion often stands as an economic hindrance in the economic development of the Sattra. Owing to such a regular calamity or devastation as a result of recurrent floods and erosion, the Sattra has been shifting from one location to another

(ii) Lack of government assistance: Government’s assistance in this respect is also miserably poor so as to make the Sattra economically sound.

(iii) Deplorable communication: Moreover poor communication system, deplorable condition of roads and transportation of Majuli Island are instrumental in the Sattra’s slowdown.
(iv) Decreasing amount of revenue (religious revenue or Guru Kar) from Sisyas:
The ecclesiastical order of Sattra is instrumental for the development of feudal elements in the society where the principle of equality does not work properly. It is for this reason that the people of lower social order refuse to become the Sisyas of a Sattra. Besides Guru Kar (Guru Tax) to be paid by Sisyas becomes unbearable for economically backward people, and whereas in such situation religion like Christianity offers them economic assistance, they naturally show inclination to accept latter.

4.5 Impact of Modernization on Auniati Sattra

During the end of the last Century, impact of modernization has been observed in the Sattra. In the first decade of the current Century, Auniati Sattra has undergone a lot of changes in its architectural style and pattern. Equally changes have been witnessed in the Sattras’ food and dress habits, choice of recreational activities and the majority of the changes are driven by the electronic media.

On the other hand there appears to be no changes in the traditional rites and rituals observed in the Auniati Sattra. Therefore the Auniati Sattra has still managed to maintain its old traditional values intact. However the standard of living in relation to the dwelling places has definitely showed signs of modernization. Use of cell phone and access to Internet is seen among the inmates of the Sattra along with limited use of cable television.

In the Auniati Sattra, stress is given to educate the bhakats through formal and traditional teachings. In earlier times, the education of the bhakats was limited to primary education only in the vernacular languages and Sanskrit, in Government Sanskrit tols and schools, mostly attached to the Sattra. They were expected to develop the knowledge to enable them to recite and read only the Shrimad Bhagavata, Kirttangosha and other relevant religious scripts and also different dialogues of bhaonas. In the past the Sattra did not approve of modern education. Even the present day Sattradhikar of Auniati Sattra, Shri Shri Dr. Pritambar Deva Goswami had to struggle to obtain his university degree in the face of tough opposition of his Sattra.
inmates. His predecessor Late Dutta Deva Goswami did not support to get educated in English language, but however did not oppose to basic education. He in fact brought a printing machine in 1871 and published a news magazine by the name Asam Bilasinee in 1871. Sattradhikar Late Hemchandra Goswami was the pioneer in allowing to pursue higher education. He established a High English School at Kamalabari called ‘Majuli Auniati Hem Chandra High School’ with his own effort in 1924. He also allowed the bhakats of his Sattra to get high school education and thus a change began in the Sattra’s era of English education. The need of modern education has attracted the attention of all the Sattradhikars of all the Sattras in allowing English to be taught to the young bhakats. Shri Shri Pitambar Deva Gowami, Sattradhikar of Auniati Sattra himself is a doctorate in Assamese literature, and gives preference to higher education, and is continuously pushing others forward to go for higher education. In fact he owns a computer set and has an Internet connection, and the Sattra has got an offset printing press.

Modernization has both positive and negative impacts. The Sattra should take the positive aspect only and use it for the greater benefit of the society. There should be strict rules and guidelines in the usage of electronic media. In this case role of the Sattradhikar is vital.

The Auniati Sattra is no less than a University in itself considering the diverse cultural-cum-academic-cum-spiritual activities associated with it.

4.6 Components of Auniati Sattra

The structure of the Auniati Sattra has seven components.

1. The supreme deity of Lord Sri Sri Govinda is enthroned in the Manikut (sanctum sanctorum);

2. The Sattradhikar who is the celebrated custodian of the Sattra stays in the Gosaighar (Sattradhikar’s residence);

3. The Namghar (prayer hall) is situated at the heart of the Sattra campus.

4. The Vaishnava devotees living in the Hatis (living quarters of the monks);
5. Sattra’s Treasury (bhoral);
6. Storehouse or the granary and
7. The bhakats

Lord Govinda resides in the Manikut. All the works in the Sattra are conducted on behalf of Lord Govinda. The bathing, worshiping, offering food, processes of devotional service (like arati, arcane, vandana) and other activities of worshiping the idols of the Lord Govinda along with other idols of Basudeva, Bhubanmohan, Giridhari are carried out regularly according to stipulated schedule. The bor-deori (chief priest) Shri Pradeep Sharma, performs the ceremonial bath of Lord Govinda followed by worship. The remaining idols are then bathed and worshipped later by deuri (assistant of the priest). The door of the Manikut is kept closed until the activities for the Lord Govinda are over. After completion of the rituals, the door is opened and the devotees sing bairagi songs and take blessings of the Lord. After completion, devotees meet the Sattradhikar in his gosaighar. Sattradhikar Shri Shri Pitambar Dev Goswami showers his blessings on the devotees as a part of his daily service to the Vaishnavas. This is mandatory. It is also compulsory for all the inmates of the Sattra to inform him for going out of the Sattra even if it is for a day.

Laksminarayan in the form of Salagrama is worshiped following the pancaratra (The word literally means “one originating on development in five (panca) nights (ratri).” However, the correct denotation of the two words involved here is a matter of doubt. It is said that on five nights, Lord Narayana delivered five lectures to five deities, namely, Ananta, Garuda, Visvaksena, Brahma and Rudra and accordingly the system came to be known as Pancaratra) rituals. Only the verses from the Vedas and the Puranas are used in this worship.

Auniati Sattra’s rituals are based on the ancient pancaratra system practiced traditionally by a section of the Brahmans following the puritanical rituals. Locally produced food items like rice, gram, moong pulse and fruits is offered as prasad to Lord Govinda. There are also occasions when kacha mithoi made of a mixture of
*kacha* rice powder, milk, ghee, jaggery, honey together with limited amount of cardamom, clove and black pepper in the form of laddo together with *paramanna* (rice cooked in milk with sugar with limited amount of spices) are also offered to Lord Govinda. *Paka-mithoi* (sweetened *laddos* made of rice powder fried with jaggery along with cardamom, clove and black pepper) is made and used amongst the devotees of the Sattra. It is known from the *bhakats* that in the earlier days, *paramanna* was offered daily. In the case of *prasad* offered in the Auniati Sattra, one peculiarity that is observed is that along with gram and moong pulse, same quantity of rice is mixed to make the *prasad*.

Shri Tarun Sharma, is the *bagish* of Auniati Sattra. He reads and interprets the *Bhagavata*. Sri Dulal Sharma aged 60 years, the assistant *Bhagavati* (*Pashim hati*) informed that in earlier times, in Auniati Sattra the person who read the Bhagavata was known as *bhagavati* but during the time of Shri Shri Pranaharideva (former *Sattradhikar*) the name was changed to *bagish*. In the earlier time *Sattradhikar* himself did the interpretation of the *Bhagavata*. Shri Shri Pranaharideva was unable to take the responsibility and handed over the charge to the *bhagavati*. At that time *bhagavati* had the title *bidyabagish* and so every one called him *bagish*. So *bagish* is one of the most important officials of the Sattra. He also receives an idol for personal worship at his residence, and also receives heavy fund for it. Shri Dulal Sharma is his assistant and he informed that he is known as *duvaliya bhagavati*. He recites the *Bhagavata* in the absence of the *bagish*.

There are six *pathakas*, one of them is the *barapathak* and another one is a *duvaliya pathak*. These two persons recite the Assamese script of the *Bhagavata* and *Puranas*, Mahabharata as well.

24 *sravanis* (listeners) listen to the recitation of the *Bhagavata*, although any one also can listen to them.

There are six *baranamalagovas* (initiators of the prayer session). They have *baranamalagovas* for midday prayer session. There is also one *budhanamalagova* and another *baraginamalagova* as well.
7 pairs of Oja–kirtaniya (expert in Kirtangghosa recital) along with palis (assistants) with each pair are observed. dohariyas (repeaters) are also there. They perform at Namghar.

There are 7 gayans and 7 bayans. The names of the 7 gayans are Shri Basudev, Shri Baraborgayan, Shri Binodgayan, Shri Patul Gayan, Shri Ramen Gayan, Shri Rupjyoti Gayan, Shri Biren Gayan, Shri Rupeshwar Gayan and 7 bayans include Shri Madhab Bora Shri Borbayan, Shri Badan Bayan, Shri Nabir Bora Bayan, Shri Bishnu Bora Bayan, Shri Ananta Bora Bayan, Shri Prasanna Kr Bayan, Shri Prabin Bora Bayan. Dohariya bayan and learners are also there. Each pair performs in the Namghar on one of the 7 days of the week.

In the Namghar there are two ashirvadiyas. One of them is baraginama and the other is bar-ashirvadiyas. They give blessings at the end of the nam-prasanga sessions.

The gosaighara or bhitara is the residence of the Sattradhikar or Adhikara. It is one of the important places next to the Manikut and Namghar. Most of the daily activities of the Sattra take place in the gosaighara. Adhikara performs his daily activities in the gosaighara like giving initiation. The Adhikara discusses the various matters of Sattra with the bhakats and offer necessary suggestions, gives advices in the fore court (chara). On certain occasions it is also observed that initiation is also conferred in the chara (forecourt) as well, where the Adhikara meets the visitors coming from the faraway places. All the disputes and trials are carried out at the gosaighara.

To help the Adhikara in his daily activities there are separate designated office bearers., They are:

Sri Bhadreswar Sarma Aldhara, aged 60 years (a resident of Pashim hati) is the present bor-aldhora of Adhikara. He is the head of the office bearers in the services of the Gosaighara and is one of the 7 manabhagiyas. He makes all the arrangement for the meal and other services of the Adhikara. Adhikara himself cooks his own meals.
He prepares _guva_ (areca nut with betel leaves) for _Adhikara_ and he also cuts _guva_ for _bhakats_ for use in the _nam_ sessions. In the absence of _bor-aldhora_, he has to carry out the duties of _bor-aldhora_ also.

Besides these, _bacandhova_ (utensil cleaner), _panitola_ (water drawer), _kamandaludhova_ (water pot cleaner), _khutikatiya_ (maker of wooden stands for cooking), _4 nisaphura_ (night watchman) are other functionaries attached to the Sattrā._Nisaphura_ also have to gather the fire wood, _caracova_ prepares the seats in forecourt and dons the bed of the _Adhikara_ and _majindar_ keeps the accounts of income and expenditures. In the case of Auniati Sattrā the _majindar’s_ work at present is increasing day by day. Hence now-a-days three _majindars_ are there in the Auniati Sattrā. The _majindar_ is also considered as chief accountant. This _majindar_ is attached to the _gosaighara_ has to supervise the works of _majindars_ of _chawl bhoral_ and _dhan-bhoral_.

Sri Dharmeshwar Sharma, 80 years, (of _Dakhin Hati_) informed that earlier there were more office bearers in the Sattrā, (when he was small boy) called _khataniyar_. His duty was to maintain good relationship with the royal households. At that time _bar-khataniyar_ was also one of the _7 manabhagiyas_. Due to change in the governing system, this rank is obsolete totally.

The _chawl bharali_ holds a very responsible job. Here the word _chawl_ means all kinds of incomes of the Sattrā. So he is one of the most important office bearers. He has to supply all the required items for Govinda’s worship at the _Manikut_ and _Namghar_ too. He maintains records of all the income and expenditures of Sattrā including the records of land, properties of the Sattrā. He distributes the largesse to each of the office bearers according to the existing practices. According to the wish of _Adhikara_ all the expenditure pass through him. He has an assistant called _dhandiya bharali_. Besides this _4 bhetidhara_ (collectors of the offerings), _4 bara_ (supervisors), _4 mithoibandha_ (makers of sweetened laddos), _1 akhaighariya_ (supplier of rice corns), _3 chawlkara_ (rice pounder), _1 paricaraka_ (personal helper), _24 camuvas_ (workers) are also present.
Dhan bharali (treasury officer) looks after all the immovable and movable properties including all the rare books of the Sattra with two assistants – one is called guvabharali (store keeper of the areca nuts) and another called lon-bharali (store keeper of salt). Guvabharali also has to keep the records of income and expenditure of the items like tamolapana (areca nut and betel leaves) and fruits. On the other hand lon-bharali keeps record of all the incomes and expenditures like salt, oil, ghee, utensils, etc. They distribute the items as per established practice or according to the special orders of the Adhikara. They have a watchman, a few numbers of baricova (attendant). One majindar assists dhan bharali.

In Auniati Sattra, 7 top office bearers are there. The selection of manabhagiyas is on the basis of their age, experience and eligibility. They are generally appointed by Adhikara.

Satmanabhagiyas consists of

1. Bor-aldhora

2. Bagish

4. Duwalia bhagavati

5. Guwakota

6. Dhan bharali

7. Duwalia pujari

When all the bhakats of the Sattra sit with sat-manabhagiyas for worshiping, it is called the Samuha or thula. The name is Bhrama personified and as such this thula of bhakats is called the Brahmathula. The members of this Brahmathula reside in the hatis. Regularly Adhikara pays obeisance to his Brahmathula and also prostrates before them in the concluding session of the Palnam on the last day.
There are total 294 inmates at the Sattra who reside in the four hatis – *uttar hati* (northern hamlet), *dakhin hati* (southern hamlet), *pub hati* (eastern hamlet), *paschim hati* (western hamlet). They earn their living on their own. They renovate and repair their dwellings in the four *hati* (hamlets) with their own money. Only in the special cases they get support from the Sattra. About 4-5 *bhakats* reside in each *baha* (apartments) in the *hatis*. They usually bring one or two male children of their relatives and friends and keep with them for giving proper training in the *Vaishnava* tradition for continuing their future life in the Sattra. Without compromising with the rules and regulation of the Sattra, these children are sent to schools and colleges. The Sattra has a Sanskrit *tol* by the name *Chatuspathi*. All the children do their studies in it. The residence of the *Deka Adhikara* is situated in the middle of the *uttar hati*. This practice has been continuing since long.

### 4.7 Devotees (*bhakats*) of Auniati Sattra

Devotees living in the hatis are all celibates who lead an intensely devotional life within the four walls of the Sattra. They sever all connections with their families for the sake of devotion, so they are above all worldly bondages and they always keep certain differences from other people in respect of their mode of living, dress habit, way of talking and likes. Such devotees are known as *Kevaliya bhakats*. (*keval*—meaning alone). They are indifferent to any kind of worldly attraction and are called *udashin bhakat*.

It is correct that Saint Sankaradeva did not advocate such type of extreme form of devotional life. He himself led an ideal householder’s life along with his wife and children. Most of his disciples were also married persons with the single exception of Saint Madhavadeva. Even Saint Madhavadeva was also advised by Saint Sankaradeva to marry. But Saint Madhavadeva declined to accept the suggestion of his *Guru* Sankaradeva by counter arguments.

Though Saint Madhavadeva was a lifelong celibate he did not recommend celibacy to be a general practice. He advised his disciples not to take him as their
model and adopt celibacy. But inspite of his negative recommendations celibacy came to stay as a customary practice in Satras. Many of the later proselytizers were also celibates. The ideals set by them and the advantage of celibacy towards devotional life helped to increase the number of Vaishnavas adhering to this mode of life. Furthermore, Shri Shri Damodardeva lost his wife in his early life. As such most part of his life he remained as a celibate. Most of the followers of Shri Shri Damodardeva being influenced by the ideal of their spiritual preceptor made up their mind to spend their life as celibate devotees. Thus the tradition of celibacy entered into the four walls of the Sattra. On the four sides of the Namghar, there are usually four rows of huts known as chari hati, where the bhakats reside. The residential quarters in the hatis are called baha. The system of chari hati however, is not the general feature of all Sattras. In Auniati Sattra, only celibate devotees are allowed to reside in the peripheries of the hatis.

Table : 1 The table below shows the distribution of the bhakats according to age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of bhakats</th>
<th>Total(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-55</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-60</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-65</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66-70</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71-75</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76-80</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.7.a Sattra and the Diminishing Strength of Residential Bhakats

The major causes of diminishing strength of bhakats in Sattra in general are:

i) Lack of initiative among the disciples for offering their sons to lead a celibate life in the Sattra.

ii) Growing tendency for pursuing new job opportunity among the educated section of the bhakats.

iii) General deterioration of economic status of Sattra.

iv) Insufficient economic support provided by the Sattra to its bhakats.

v) Due to family planning less numbers of children is seen among the disciples.

vi) Sometimes bhakats leave the Sattra as they desire to lead a family life.

vii) For higher education a few bhakats stay outside the Sattra, and after getting a suitable job they do not return.

viii) Economically sound families do not send their children to the Sattra.

Table :2 The table below shows the diminishing strength of bhakats of the Sattra

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No of Bhakats</th>
<th>Informer/Remark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>Sri Basudev Gayan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>Sri Tulashi Rajkhuwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>Present study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.7.b Educational Qualification of the Bhakats.

The main aim of the Sattra is to provide religious education and guidance to the common people and for this self education is of utmost importance. Though in earlier days, education was the birth right of a select few of the higher echelons of the society, slowly the seeds of education spread to the general masses also. In keeping with the changing situation, the bhakats of the Sattra also started their schoolings and reached various levels of education which is highlighted in the table below.
Table: 3 Table showing the Educational Qualification of the Bhakats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Qualification</th>
<th>No. of bhakats</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary (I-V)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>12.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Level (VI-VIII)</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>40.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Level (IX-X)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>22.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Secondary (XI-XII)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-graduate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.7.c Residences of Bhakat

Their residences are arranged on long roofed sheds with a long front verandah, divided into individual apartments. Each apartment opens out to the front verandah and also at the back. At present there are 110 baha at the Sattra. Each apartment has a kitchen. In each baha there is a separate corner where a bhakat keeps the altar for offering his daily prayers. Owing to minimum height of the roof and less number of windows, darkness prevails inside during the day time. Generally a celibate devotee cooks for himself and keeps the floor of the hut finely plastered with earth, and the inside of each baha looks perfectly clean and well organized. They also keep the surroundings of the hut neat and clean. The celibate bhakats generally maintain a small kitchen garden. They also plant certain medicinal plants.

4.7. d Household Utensils

Things of daily use of the bhakats are very simple. Wooden furniture of various heights is never used. They use rush mats (kath, dhara) made of grass, bamboo slits and ribs of withered plantain leaves. Such type of mat are specially kept for guests. Anybody paying a visit to a baha is given such a mat to sit. They use utensils made of metals or earthen vessels for cooking, and various other purposes.
4.7.e Food Habit

Food of the kevaliya bhakats is simple. Their food items consist of the things that grow in the garden and those offered by the individual families. Almost all the reformers including Shri Shri Sankaradeva and Shri Shri Madhavadeva were non-vegetarians. Bhakats of Auniati Sattra are vegetarian and purchase food item from shops located outside the Sattra.

4.7.f Dress Habit

Celibate devotees residing in the Sattra circle are very scrupulous in maintaining the traditional practices. Their usual dress consists of three pieces of cloths such as dhuti (loin cloth), a chadar (wrapper) and a gamocha (towel). Other than this general dress, sometimes they use tailored garments when they go out of the Sattra campus. Though ordinarily a celibate wears dresses of cotton cloths, but on special occasions they prefer to wear silk garments. Emphasis is always given to the simplicity in their livelihood. Coloured cloths are never used by the bhakats. Simple foot-wears they use outside the Sattra and wooden foot wear, i.e. paduka and sandals made of koir (phanati) are commonly used inside Sattra premises. But in day to day duties within the Sattra, devotees remain bare footed.

The celibates living within a Sattra are in the habit of keeping long hairs but not the matted hair like the ascetics. Like the fair sex they tie their trailing hair to back of the head. They are clean—shaved and keeping of beard and moustache is against their tradition.

4.7. g Manners

The celibates are very much polite and polished in manners and dealings. A devotee irrespective of his age is generally addressed or referred to as Atoi. The close fraternal relationship between one devotees to another is also noticeable. A senior devotee behaves with a junior with utmost civility. A celibate while talking to someone within their own fraternity or outside never speaks in terms of the first person as it indicates sort of egoism. The use of first person in singular number is rarely seen. In case of
necessity they will rather use the plural form as ‘we’ or ‘ours’. There is a peculiar form of use of the passive voice in sentences in ordinary discussion with the bhakats. It is seen that there is a class of special Assamese vocabularies within the Vaishnavite Sattra circle which are used to express the general euphemism.

The celibate bhakats remain scrupulously neat and clean. They do not take tea, even do not chew pan or tamul (areca nut with leaves together with a little lime) and strictly no food without taking their morning bath. While in the campus they never touch anybody. The bhakat acting as ghai-deuri or main priest is very careful so that he is not touched while handing over the nirmali (offerings of flowers and leaves) to someone. Whenever a celibate goes out of the Sattra compound for some work he must invariably take bath after coming to his baha or residence.

When someone visits a celibate in his residence, he is very careful so that his washed clothes, spread on the rope is not touched by any outsider.

Eating anything in others house is regarded as taboo by the celibates. According to some celibates of the Sattra, nowadays some relaxation is noticed.

4.7.h Enrollment of Bhakats

The usual practice of bringing young boys into the fold of the devotees is done by a senior devotee who acquires young boys of 4-12 years old as his assistant (aldhara) and keeps with him in his hut. An aldhara learns the traditional practices by staying along with a senior celibate. In due course an aldhara is elevated to the rank of a celibate bhakat. After the death of a senior celibate, the aldhara of the deceased gets the ownership of the hut of the senior celibate. The procedure regarding the ownership of the hut is that the junior one gets it when the senior devotee makes such a will before his death. Otherwise a close relative of the deceased may claim the hut. In the absence of any claimant the hut and the properties, if any, may be taken over by the Sattra.
Various circumstances lead a person to accept the life of a celibate. In this connection 6 (Six) special cases are cited below.

(i) Case A.

Madhab Chandra Barbayan a senior celibate of the Sattra is nearly 70 years old and has spent 58 years in the Sattra. He joined the Sattra when he was 10 year old. His uncle was also a bhakat residing in the same hut (baha). His parents were disheartened as they lost several of their children in the cruel hands of death due to some unknown disease. When Mr. Barbayan was born, his parents took vow to send him to the service of Lord Krishna as a lifelong servant to him so that he may grant their son a long life. He hails from a village called Gorokhiadoi, Jorhat

(ii) Case B.

Tridib Sharma aged 6 year stays in western hati of the Sattra. After his poor father committed suicide, his grandfather brought him to the Sattra for a safe livelihood and education. Tridib is now slowly learning the Sattra way of life.

(iii) Case C.

Prasanna Bhuyan is aged about 32 years and hails from Pathalipahar near North Lakhimpur. His father Sri Balindra Bhuyan is a farmer while his mother is a house wife. He came here at the age of 10 and has an interesting story of reaching here. Sri Kusha Sharma, a bhakat from the Sattra had gone to his native area to look for someone to bring to the Sattra. On the way, he met Prasanna and his father and he volunteered to come here. After coming here he loved the atmosphere here and decided to stay back. During his stay he picked up various skills and learnt various dance forms like gayan bayan, chali nach, gopa dhemali, mati akhora, apsara nach and so on. He has participated in various dance performances across India- Delhi (26th Jan, Assam Tableau 2002 ), Delhi (15th Aug,2000), Bengaluru (Temple festival 2011), Delhi (National Museum and Kamini Museum), Jodhpur ( Sangeet Natak Academy), Shillong ( Shankar Mandir ) and so on.
(iv) Case D.

Ananta Kalita, aged about 24 years, is a graduate and currently pursuing M.A in Assamese. At the age of 7, when he had come with his father to see the Raas festival, the then Sattradhikar Sri Bishnu Chandra Dev Goswami gave a requirement of one child to Ananta’s father. To honour the Sattradhikar’s request he stayed back and did not go back to his birthplace, Morigaon. His father, Sri Bhagwan Kalita is a farmer and has 3 more sons, out of whom Ananta is the second. He studied in the Auniati Sattra School and later at Majuli College. He is also studying Sanskrit in the Auniati Kamaldev Chaturprarthi in Madhyama class. He plays Khol and has also performed in programs held at Jorhat and Dhemaji. He is also taking his studies seriously, daily putting about 2 hours in the early morning and evening. In between he also participates in the nam prasanga in the Namghar.

(v) Case F.

Jayanta Saikia came to the Sattra at the age of 7 about 23 years back from his native village of Phulbari, North Lakhimpur. His father Sri Mahendra Saikia was a small shop keeper and his mother Srimati Kamala, a housewife. They were 2 brothers of whom he was the younger. His coming to the Sattra was the result of a fulfillment of a vow his parents made for curing one of his ailments when he was ill. Now both his parents are no more and he rarely goes to his home.

(vi) Case G.

Manik Kakati, aged about 69 years hails from Bakuagaon in Majuli. His parents died when he was small. He was sent to a cow shed to work where the economic situation was not good. He did not get any salary and did not even have proper food and clothes. He was brought to the Sattra by his elder brother when he was about 20 years old. The Sattra provided him with the basic amenities of life so that he could live a decent livelihood.
4.7. i A Celibate’s View about the Outside World

Though they live within the Sattra compound, the celibates are not completely secluded from the outside world and they keep themselves updated. On several occasions this researcher met senior devotees to know their reactions on the prevailing situations of the society. Reacting to changed situation prevailing everywhere, Shri Tulasi Rajkhuwa made a comment on the problem of the decreasing number of celibate devotees at the Sattra and the difficulties arising out of it. He also made certain comments on the present scarcity of the essential commodities. Further he said that there was a time when most of the things of his daily necessity were offered by the local people. They used to send to the bhakats a share of vegetables of their garden, milk and all other essential commodities. According to him, “the days of plenty and surplus have gone and the days of scarcity have come”. To him the high growth of population has paved the way of scarcity. As such the high growth of population should be checked.
Fig. 9. Sketch of the entrance of Auniati Sattra, Majuli

Fig. 10. A big Jappi welcoming all at the entrance of Auniati Sattra Majuli
Fig. 11. SATTRADHIKAR’S RESIDENCE IN THE NORTH GUWAHATI CAMPUS OF AUNIATI SATTRA

Fig. 12. SKETCH OF THE INTERIOR VIEW OF SATTRA NAMGHAR IN MAJULI
Fig. 13. SKETCH OF THE EASTERN SIDE HAMLETS (BAHA)

Fig. 14. SKETCH SHOWING ROOF OF A BAHA

Fig. 15. SKETCH OF INTERIOR VIEW OF A BAHA
PL.26. ENTRANCE OF AUNIATI SATTRA, MAJULI

PL.37. FRONT VIEW OF AUNIATI SATTRA NAMGHAR
PL.28. SATTRADIKAR OF AUNIATI SATTRA

PL.29. DEKA SATTRADIKAR OF AUNIATI SATTRA
PL.30. BRASS DOOR AT AUNIATI SATTRA

PL.31. VIEW OF MANIKUT (KEPT INSIDE THE NAM GHAR)

PL.32. SATTRADHIKAR’S RESIDENCE IN AUNIATI SATTRA, MAJULI
PL.33. STATUE OF GAUDA INSIDE THE NAMGHAR MAJULI

PL.34. BHAKAT NARRATING THE SANSKRIT AND ASSAMESE BHAGAVAT
PL.35. UTTAR HATI OF AUNIAI SATTRA, MAJULI

PL.36. INSIDE VIEW OF A BAHIA

PL.37. MAKING OF LAIS BY A CHILDREN DEVOTEE
PL.38. A.
TREASURE HOUSE

PL.38. B
TREASURE HOUSE

PL.39. A BHAKAT
BUSY WITH DAY TO DAY TASK