


# Recontextualising *Sattras* In Contemporary Assam: From Bhakti-Centric Institutions to Cultural and Touristic Landscapes

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper critically examines the evolving role of the *Sattras* of Assam, reinterpreting their historical and religious foundations through the lens of contemporary cultural and economic transformations. Established as spiritual and socio-cultural institutions rooted in the Bhakti movement initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva, *Sattras* have long served as custodians of Neo-Vaishnavite doctrine, Assamese identity, and indigenous art forms. However, in recent decades, these institutions have experienced a paradigmatic shift, increasingly engaging with cultural tourism, heritage commodification, and state-sponsored promotion. This study adopts an exploratory and secondary data-based methodology, integrating a range of qualitative and quantitative sources, including government tourism data, cultural heritage reports, and previous ethnographic studies, to trace the multifaceted trajectory of *Sattras*. The paper presents visual analyses such as trend graphs, comparative bar charts, and a correlation model to illustrate the interplay between cultural preservation and economic imperatives. In doing so, it interrogates whether the integration of *Sattras* into the touristic economy enhances or dilutes their spiritual and cultural significance. The findings contribute to broader discussions on the sustainability of sacred institutions in the context of the modern cultural economy, offering insights into policy design, heritage management, and religious institutional resilience in Northeast India.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Context

The *Sattras* of Assam, monastic institutions founded under the aegis of the 15th–16th century saint-reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva, are among the most significant cultural and religious establishments in Northeast India. Initially conceived as centres for disseminating the Bhakti-based Neo-Vaishnavite movement, *Sattras* served not only as spiritual sanctuaries but also as engines of social reform, artistic creation, and community identity. Their historical function has spanned education, literature, music, drama, and spiritual discipline, rooted in egalitarian principles that challenged caste hierarchies and ritual orthodoxy.

In the postcolonial and especially post-liberalization period, however, the role of these institutions has witnessed a gradual yet perceptible shift. From functioning primarily as spaces of worship and cultural education, many prominent Sattras are now increasingly integrated into the cultural tourism economy of Assam. Events such as Raas Mahotsav, Sattriya dance performances, and Bhaona dramatisations are marketed as regional attractions. This transformation is not merely incidental but is actively shaped by state tourism policies, media narratives, and changing socio-economic aspirations of local communities.

### 1.2 Statement of the Problem

While Sattras continue to assert their spiritual and pedagogic authority, their increasing visibility in cultural tourism circuits raises critical questions. Is this transformation enhancing or diluting their original religious ethos? Are Sattras evolving organically to meet modern demands, or are they being strategically commodified under the pressures of heritage tourism? Most importantly, what are the socio-cultural and economic consequences of this recontextualization for Assam's identity and the Sattra institutions themselves?

Current scholarship on Sattras largely focuses on their historical and theological foundations, with limited attention to their evolving functions in contemporary society, especially within the framework of cultural economy and tourism studies. This research addresses this gap by exploring the multi-dimensional role of Sattras in 21st-century Assam.

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

The paper aims to:

1. Examine the historical role of Sattras as Bhakti-centric institutions in Assamese society.
2. Investigate the transformation of Sattras into spaces of cultural performance and tourism.
3. Analyse the socio-economic and cultural implications of this transformation on both institutions and communities.

### 1.4 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. How have the religious, cultural, and social roles of Sattras evolved in the last few decades?
2. What are the driving forces behind their integration into Assam's cultural tourism strategy?
3. What implications does this transition hold for the spiritual, cultural, and economic sustainability of Sattras?

### 1.5 Research Methodology Overview

The paper adopts an exploratory approach, relying exclusively on secondary data, including government tourism statistics, policy reports, scholarly literature, and media archives. Graphs and charts will be used to visualise patterns such as tourist footfall, economic input/output, state investment, and community participation. Where relevant, correlation models will be proposed to depict relationships between tourism activity and changes in ritual or institutional practice.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Historical and Religious Foundations of the Sattras

The origins of the *Sattra* institution in Assam are intrinsically linked to the 15th-century socio-religious reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva, whose Neo-Vaishnavite Bhakti movement introduced a distinct form of devotion centred on *nama-kirtan* (chanting), egalitarian worship, and moral discipline. Scholars such as Neog (1965) and Sarma (2002) have detailed how the *Sattras* emerged as multi-functional institutions, combining the spiritual with the socio-cultural: hosting religious rites, preserving art forms like *Bhaona* (theatrical performance), and promoting a cohesive communal life rooted in Bhakti.

Traditionally, Sattras were autonomous centres of religious education, manuscript preservation, and ritual practice. However, their roles were never entirely apolitical or detached from the larger cultural fabric of the region. Their

influence extended into local governance, economic life, and even resistance to colonial interventions (Baruah, 2010). These layered roles laid the foundation for their contemporary complexity.

## 2.2 Theoretical Approaches to Religious Institutions and Cultural Change

Studies on religious institutional change often draw from theories of cultural commodification (MacCannell, 1976; Greenwood, 1989) and heritage tourism (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1990). These frameworks suggest that sacred sites increasingly undergo functional reassignments when exposed to the forces of tourism, media representation, and state promotion. This process may result in either cultural hybridisation or ritual dilution, depending on the agency of stakeholders.

In the Indian context, studies by Bhardwaj (1997) and Singh (2002) on pilgrimage and tourism suggest that spiritual landscapes are not static; they adapt under political, economic, and technological pressures. Similar transformations have been observed in other religious spaces such as Pushkar, Varanasi, and Jagannath Puri, where religious meaning often overlaps with economic logic.

## 2.3 Literature on Sattras and Tourism: Emerging but Fragmented

While historical and theological analyses of Sattras are well-documented, contemporary academic work examining their interaction with tourism, media, and state cultural policy remains fragmented. Research by Bordoloi (2018) touches upon the symbolic capital of the Sattras in Assamese identity politics, while Goswami (2020) highlights the increasing use of Sattras spaces during state-sponsored cultural festivals.

However, empirical studies measuring the socio-economic impact of this transformation are few. There is also a lack of theoretical integration that explains the shift from sacred to semi-secularized cultural sites. This paper attempts to bridge that gap by offering a synthesized visual model of transformation.

## 2.4 Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework is proposed to guide this study. It illustrates the evolving function of the Sattras under the influence of socio-cultural and economic forces, aligning the theoretical strands of Bhakti heritage, cultural commodification, and religious institutional transformation.

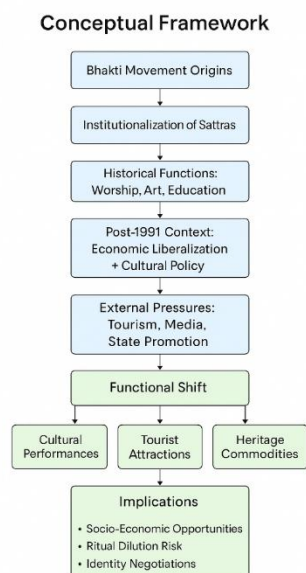


Fig. 2.1 Conceptual framework *Source: Researchers' interpretation*

## 2.5 Identified Research Gaps

1. Lack of data-driven analysis connecting Sattras transformation with state tourism dynamics.
2. Insufficient theorisation on how sacred institutions navigate their identity under market forces.

3. Underrepresentation of Assamese religious sites in the broader discourse on heritage commodification in India.

This study addresses these gaps by combining cultural theory with secondary data to present a nuanced view of how sacred heritage is being strategically repurposed in Assam.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative exploratory research design, supported by visual data representation and secondary quantitative datasets where applicable. The rationale for adopting an exploratory framework lies in the evolving and under-theorised nature of the transformation of Sattras in contemporary Assam. Given the lack of cohesive empirical studies addressing the shift from Bhakti-centric religiosity to tourism-centric institutional dynamics, an open-ended, flexible methodology is warranted.

The study further integrates a theory-informed conceptual model to map the trajectory of Sattras as hybridised institutions negotiating between spiritual authenticity and cultural commodification.

#### **3.2 Data Sources**

As a secondary data-based inquiry, the study draws from the following categories of sources:

1. Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed journal articles, historical monographs, ethnographic accounts, and conference proceedings related to Neo-Vaishnavism, Sattras, cultural commodification, and religious tourism.
2. Government Reports and Policy Documents: Tourism Department reports of Assam, Ministry of Culture schemes, Northeast cultural development programs, and district-level administrative data (particularly Majuli, Barpeta, and Nagaon).
3. Media Archives: Newspaper reports, cultural festival coverage, televised documentaries (Doordarshan, DY365, Prag News), and state tourism promotion materials.

#### **3.3 Methods of Data Collection**

Data were systematically collected using the following steps:

1. Literature Compilation: Using Scopus, JSTOR, and Shodhganga to gather scholarly sources on Sattras institutions and related cultural theory.
2. Archival Mining: Reviewing state tourism portals, annual cultural policy documents, and archived festival brochures.
3. Database Extraction: Collecting tourism statistics from the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, and the Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC).
4. Media Content Coding: Selecting and analysing relevant newspaper and news channel content between 2010 and 2024, coding for keywords such as “Sattras festival,” “Majuli tourism,” and “cultural showcase.”

#### **3.4 Analytical Framework**

The data were interpreted through a thematic content analysis, informed by existing theories of:

1. Cultural Commodification (Greenwood, 1989)
2. Heritage Management and Tourism Studies (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996)
3. Institutional Transformation Theory (Scott, 2001)

### **4. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL OVERVIEW OF SATTRAS**

#### **4.1 Origins of the Sattras Institution**

The establishment of the Sattras in Assam is inseparable from the 15th-century religious and cultural awakening initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449–1568), the seminal figure in Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism. Influenced by the

Bhagavata Purana, the pan-Indian Bhakti movement, and local tribal religiosities, Sankaradeva synthesised an inclusive, monotheistic faith known as Ekasarana Naam Dharma. This doctrine emphasised devotion (bhakti) to a single deity, Lord Krishna, while rejecting caste-based discrimination, elaborate ritualism, and image worship—elements pervasive in Brahminical Hinduism of the time.

Unlike contemporaries such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal or Ramananda in North India, Sankaradeva's emphasis on institutionalised community life laid the groundwork for the Sattrā system. These institutions were not transient spiritual communities but structured socio-religious orders that brought together education, art, and worship under one roof. They often occupied significant landholdings and played an economic role in their regions.

#### 4.2 Structure and Internal Organisation

The typical Sattrā comprises a central Namghar (prayer hall), flanked by *Hatis* (residential quarters for celibate monks or *bhokots*), a temple (*manikut*), a sacred water tank (*pukhuri*), and administrative areas. The head of the institution, the Sattradhikar, performs both religious and administrative duties and is often revered as a semi-divine figure within the monastic hierarchy.

Sattras are broadly classified into four Sanghati (orders) based on doctrinal emphasis and caste policies:

**Table 4.1** Sanghatīs and their characteristics

Sanghati	Characteristics	Inclusion of Lower Castes/Tribes
Brahma Samhati	Retains orthodox Brahminical rituals	Minimal
Purus Sanghati	Emphasizes Sankaradeva's original egalitarian vision	Moderate
Kala Sanghati	Strong tribal and Shudra representation	High
Nika Sanghati	Conservative; emphasizes ritual purity	Low

Source: Researchers' interpretation

This classification shows how different Sattras negotiated social realities and regional demographics. For instance, Kamalabari Sattrā (Majuli) is known for its aesthetic purity and artistic rigour. At the same time, Barpetā Sattrā is often lauded for its democratic assembly structure, including historical participation from non-Brahmin devotees.

#### 4.3 Cultural Production and Intangible Heritage

Sattras are not merely centres of prayer; they are crucibles of cultural creation, instrumental in shaping Assamese identity.

- **Sattriya Dance:** Codified within the monastic tradition, Sattriya was originally a male-only performance linked to ritual worship. It was recognised as one of India's classical dance forms in 2000. The style's devotional undercurrent, narrative structure (based on Krishna Leela), and rigorous technique make it both a spiritual and artistic discipline.
- **Ankia Naat:** These one-act plays, authored by Sankaradeva, used allegorical Krishna-based stories and were performed in Brajavali, a mixed Assamese-Sanskrit language. Their emphasis on moral didacticism and stylised gestures influenced the development of Assamese drama.
- **Music and Manuscript Traditions:** Sattras preserved Borgeet, a genre of devotional songs with strict melodic structures. They also maintained manuscript cultures, including hand-illustrated versions of the *Kirtan-ghosha*, *Bhagavata*, and Sankaradeva's compositions. Some of these are now archived at the Sankaradeva Kalakshetra and various university libraries.

- **Crafts and Textiles:** Monks produce ritual masks (*mukha*) and perform scroll painting (*pat chitra*), while some Sattras have preserved traditional weaving methods.

Importantly, these cultural forms were embedded within ritual cycles, ensuring that culture was not just “produced” but lived.

#### 4.4 Spatial Distribution and Regional Variations

The Sattrra network is extensive but non-uniform. Their density and influence vary significantly across regions:

**Table 4.2** Spatial Distribution and Regional Variations

Region	Notable Sattras	Characteristics
Majuli (Upper Assam)	Sri Sri Auniati Sattrra, Kamalabari Sattrra, Dakhinpat Sattrra	Cultural and ritual epicentre; tourism hotspot; threatened by erosion
Barpeta (Lower Assam)	Barpeta Sattrra, Patbaushi Sattrra	Strong community involvement; egalitarian legacy
Nagaon (Central Assam)	Bordowa Thaan (Sankaradeva's birthplace)	Historic value and lineage connections
Sivasagar (Upper Assam)	Bengena Ati Sattrra	Close links to Ahom royal patronage

Source: Researchers' interpretation

Majuli, in particular, has been the focus of UNESCO interest and has experienced the most direct transformation into a heritage-tourism space. However, it also suffers from riverbank erosion, which threatens many Sattras physically and poses questions about cultural survival vs. environmental precarity.

#### 4.5 The Sattrra as a Living and Negotiating Institution

In contemporary Assam, Sattras function on multiple registers, as religious orders, heritage sites, cultural training centres, and increasingly, tourism destinations. Several factors contribute to this evolving role:

- **Integration into Policy:** The Assam government has positioned Sattras at the centre of its cultural diplomacy and tourism campaigns. Events like the *Majuli Festival* and *Rongali Utsav* often feature Sattrra-led performances and exhibitions.
- **Institutional Modernisation:** Many Sattras have adopted formal curricula for training in Sattriya, registered under university systems. Some now use digital archiving, websites, and social media to promote their programs.
- **Contestation and Critique:** While these adaptations ensure continuity, critics argue that spiritual depth is being diluted. Public rituals for tourists, the entry of non-devotees, and state-driven “branding” of Sattras have led to internal debates within the community.
- **Gender and Access:** Although traditionally male-dominated, a small number of Sattras have begun permitting female performers and lay participants, reflecting broader socio-religious reforms in Assamese society.

### 5. FORCES OF TRANSFORMATION – FROM BHAKTI TO HERITAGE

#### 5.1 Introduction

The Sattras of Assam, once conceived as insulated devotional enclaves rooted in bhakti, have over the last century undergone significant shifts—spatially, structurally, and ideologically. These transformations are not the result of a single force but of multiple, overlapping pressures: state policy, cultural tourism, media representation, ecological vulnerability, and changing social aspirations within Assamese society itself.

This chapter critically examines these forces, identifying how the original spiritual mandate of Sattras is now entangled with the politics of heritage, identity, and public consumption.



## 5.2 Policy and the State: From Patronage to Branding

The first major axis of transformation stems from state involvement in cultural preservation and promotion. Post-Independence, Sattras were formally recognised as part of Assam’s tangible and intangible heritage. However, state policies often served dual purposes—cultural preservation and tourism-driven commodification.

### Key shifts include:

**1. Cultural Policy Integration:** Government-funded institutions like the Sankardeva Kalakshetra, Srimanta Sankaradeva University of Health Sciences, and various Sattriya Academies now institutionalise Sattria culture within educational and cultural policy frameworks.

**2. Festivalization:** Events like the Majuli Festival, Rongali Utsav, and Namami Brahmaputra have featured Sattria performances prominently. These festivals position Sattras as living museums, performing curated spirituality for tourists and political audiences.

**3. Funding and Dependency:** Many Sattras now rely on government grants to maintain their infrastructure and run schools. While this supports preservation, it also introduces bureaucratic dependency and dilutes spiritual autonomy.

These changes effectively reposition the Sattria not as a sacred site of religious practice, but as a “heritage brand” representing Assamese identity in the national imagination.

## 5.3 Cultural Tourism and the “Performing” Sattria

The rise of cultural tourism has brought the Sattras unprecedented visibility, but also challenges. Tourists—both domestic and international—visit Majuli and Barpeta primarily for their scenic beauty and cultural charm. However, the experience of the Sattria becomes less about spiritual immersion and more about consumable aesthetics.

**Table 5.1** Shifts in the Function of Sattria Spaces

Domain	Traditional Function	Current Transformation
Namghar	Congregational prayer and scriptural study	Performance venue for tourists
Hatis	Monastic residences	Exhibition areas and guest quarters
Festivals	Devotional expression (e.g., Raasleela)	Cultural spectacles with sponsored events
Manuscripts	Sacred texts read during rituals	Artifacts for display and archiving

Source: Researchers’ interpretation

## 5.4 Media, Technology, and Representation

Sattras have also entered the digital age. Many now maintain websites, YouTube channels, and social media accounts that promote their performances, workshops, and educational courses.

### Benefits:

- **Wider Outreach:** Enables global awareness and diaspora connection.
- **Preservation:** Digital archiving of Borgeet, manuscripts, and dance forms.

### Risks:

- **Mediated Authenticity:** Performances adapted for the camera often lose contextual sacredness.
- **Selective Representation:** Only visually “appealing” elements (e.g., dance, mask-making) are highlighted; theological aspects remain obscured.

This shift reflects a deeper trend in heritage discourse: what is legible to outsiders becomes prioritised over what is sacred to insiders.

### 5.5 Internal Responses: Adaptation and Contestation

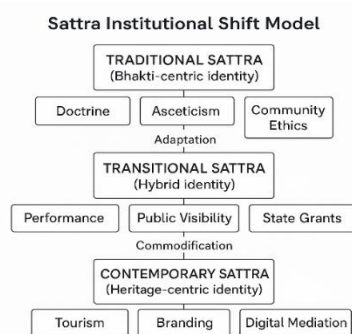
Not all transformations have been externally imposed. Some originate from within the Sattra community itself:

- **Youth Engagement:** Many younger monks are proactively adopting new roles—as cultural ambassadors, scholars, and performers.
- **Curriculum Evolution:** Institutions like Kamalabari and Auniati have launched structured programs in Sattriya dance, manuscriptology, and Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy, recognised by formal universities.
- **Gender Inclusion Debates:** A handful of Sattras (e.g., Barpeta) have begun opening limited spaces to female performers and scholars, challenging centuries-old restrictions.

However, this internal diversification has also led to doctrinal contestations. Conservative voices argue that such changes violate the ascetic and devotional purity of the original Sattra model.

### 5.6 A Model of Transformation: Sattra Institutional Shift

This section proposes a conceptual framework to explain the evolutionary shift of Sattras in Assam from spiritually centred monastic institutions to multi-functional cultural complexes. This transformation is neither uniform nor linear but follows a pattern of recontextualization shaped by theological, sociopolitical, and economic forces.



**Fig. 5.1** Sattra Institutional Shift Model. *Source: Researchers' interpretation*

#### Stage 1: Bhakti-Centric Traditional Identity

At this initial stage, the Sattra functions as a closed, ascetic religious order organised around Guru-Bhakta devotion, the teachings of Srimanta Sankaradeva, and ritual purity. Its key characteristics include:

1. **Doctrinal Centrality:** Emphasis on Bhakti (devotion), Naam (chanting), and Ekasarana Dharma.
2. **Ascetic Structure:** Monastic discipline, celibacy, spiritual apprenticeship, and withdrawal from public life.
3. **Community Ethics:** Reinforcement of moral order through regulated communal activities like Nam-Prasanga (congregational singing).

These Sattras primarily served as spiritual regulators, not public performers. The Namghar was a ritual site, not a cultural stage.

#### Stage 2: Transitional Identity – Between Ritual and Visibility

This middle phase marks the gradual opening of Sattras to the broader socio-cultural world. The internal rituals continue, but a parallel, outward-facing function emerges. Key markers include:

1. **Performance and Spectacle:** Institutions begin staging Bhaona (religious theatre), Raas-Leela, and Sankari music in public festivals.
2. **Public Mediation:** Print media, photography, and later digital tools began documenting and disseminating Sattra activities.
3. **State Recognition:** Government grants and tourism policies start recognising Sattras as cultural heritage sites.



This transitional mode creates a dual identity: ritual purity inside and cultural performance outside. It is at this stage that the Sattras become legible to outsiders as heritage, history, or tourism.

### Stage 3: Heritage-Centric Contemporary Identity

In the current phase, some Sattras have transitioned fully into multi-sectoral institutions. While ritual life still exists, the primary visibility is cultural, economic, and political. This new identity is marked by:

**1. Touristic Infrastructure:** Museums, craft workshops, guided tours, photography zones, and performance spaces.

**2. Branding and Commodification:** Sattras brand themselves via unique traditions, such as mask-making (Samaguri), Satriya dance (Auniati), or ritual architecture (Barpeta).

**3. Digital Mediation:** Sattras now use websites, YouTube channels, and social media to reach diasporic and global audiences.

**4. State-Endorsed Heritage:** Significant government investment, promotion in “spiritual circuits,” and inclusion in cultural policy documents.

At this stage, the Bhakti ethos becomes one of several pillars, alongside cultural visibility, economic relevance, and administrative prestige.

Here’s a breakdown of the three stages with core components:

**Table 5.2** Three stages of Sattras’ transformation

Transformation Phase	Key Focus	Structural Features	Public Interface
Bhakti-Centric Institution	Spiritual authority	Guru-shishya order, strict ascetic rules, Naam practices	Minimal (insular)
Transitional Cultural Complex	Dual identity	Ritual + performance; occasional public festivals	Moderate (theatre, music, grants)
Heritage-Centric Institution	Cultural visibility	Museums, festivals, tourism, digital content	High (tourism, branding, politics)

Source: Researchers’ interpretation

#### 5.6.1 Implications of the Model

**1. Cultural Survival Through Recontextualization:** The shift reflects not decay but adaptive resilience, preserving core identities through newer forms.

**2. Negotiated Authenticity:** The model shows how tradition is not lost but translated for newer audiences and registers, often strategically.

**3. Challenges of Commodification:** The transformation is not without cost. Ritual purity, celibacy norms, and doctrinal clarity often get diluted.

This Model of Sattras’ Institutional Shift thus helps us understand how religious spaces survive not by resisting change, but by absorbing and reformulating external pressures, a crucial insight for policy-makers, anthropologists, and heritage planners alike.

## 6. CASE STUDIES FROM THE FIELD

This chapter presents selected case studies of prominent Sattras across Assam to demonstrate how the forces outlined in the previous chapter manifest on the ground. The goal is not only to highlight patterns of transformation but also to contrast different strategies of adaptation — from aggressive public engagement to more guarded preservation.

### 6.1 Case Study 1: Sri Sri Auniati Sattras, Majuli – The Neo-Traditionalist Model

**Background:** Established in the mid-17th century, Auniati Sattrā is among the most influential Sattras in Assam. Known for its strong adherence to Brahma Sanghati ideology, it holds vast religious, cultural, and political capital.

**Transformation Highlights:**

- 1. Institutional Expansion:** Auniati has opened several satellite campuses and schools that teach Sattriya music and dance formally.
- 2. Cultural Diplomacy:** Its monks regularly perform outside Assam, including national and international festivals.
- 3. Heritage Curation:** Maintains a museum that showcases masks, ancient texts, and Ahom relics, making it highly palatable to tourists.

**Observation:** Auniati has adopted a neo-traditionalist model, combining strong institutional identity with curated public visibility, yet retaining spiritual authority.

**6.2 Case Study 2: Barpeta Sattrā – Democratisation and Spatial Openness**

**Background:** Founded by Madhabdev in the 16th century, Barpeta Sattrā stands apart for its egalitarian ethos, historically allowing participation from non-Brahmin devotees and even limited female engagement in certain activities.

**Transformation Highlights:**

- 1. Open Namghar Architecture:** Spatial inclusivity reflects a theology of openness, a contrast to highly regulated spaces of other Sattras.
- 2. Mass Participation:** Hosts large-scale community festivals like Douḷ Utsav and Raas Mahotsav, where the public plays a central role.
- 3. Women’s Participation:** While women still do not become Bhakats (monks), they now take part in cultural events, script recitation, and festival coordination.

**Observation:** Barpeta exemplifies “performative democratisation” — where accessibility and inclusiveness are emphasised over strict ritual orthodoxy.

**6.3 Case Study 3: Samaguri Sattrā – Specialisation and Craft Heritage**

**Background:** Samaguri Sattrā in Majuli is globally known for its mask-making tradition, an ancient art form used in Raasleela and Bhaona performances.

**Transformation Highlights:**

- 1. Craft Commercialisation:** Artisan Bhakats now create masks not just for rituals but also for sale to tourists, museums, and theatre companies.
- 2. Workshops and Tourism:** Offers hands-on mask-making experiences to visitors, generating revenue and awareness.
- 3. Global Exhibitions:** Participates in cultural expos across India and abroad.

**Observation:** Samaguri showcases a “craft specialization model” — where a single element of tradition becomes the institution’s cultural signature.

**6.4 Case Study 4: Batadrawa Than – Pilgrimage and State-Supported Revival**

**Background:** Located in Nagaon, Batadrawa is the birthplace of Srimanta Sankaradeva, making it one of the most symbolically potent religious sites in Assam.

**Transformation Highlights:**

- 1. Political Attention:** The Assam government has launched major beautification and development projects here, branding it as a key pilgrimage destination.

**2. Infrastructure Overhaul:** New museum, digital kiosks, meditation halls, and bhajan mandaps have been constructed.

**3. Sankari Tourism:** Promoted as a flagship of Assam's spiritual tourism circuit.

**Observation:** Batadrawa reflects a “state-pilgrimage fusion model”, where political will and cultural capital converge for institution-building.

These case studies reveal that Sattras are not homogenous in their response to modern pressures. While some like Auniati and Bordowa embrace institutional scaling, others like Barpeta emphasise ritual authenticity and public participation. Still others, like Samaguri, selectively capitalise on aesthetic niches.

What unites them all, however, is a strategic negotiation between tradition and transformation, each carving its niche within Assam's evolving cultural ecosystem.

## 6.5 Comparative Summary Table

**Table 6.1** Three stages of Sattras' transformation

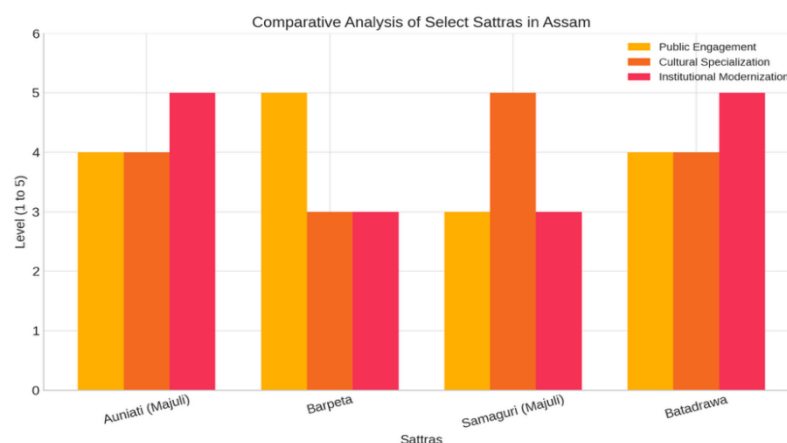
Sattras	Dominant Strategy	Public Engagement	Cultural Specialization	Degree of Institutional Modernization
Auniati (Majuli)	Neo-traditionalism	High	Music, Dance	High
Barpeta	Democratization	Very High	Inclusive Rituals	Moderate
Samaguri (Majuli)	Craft Specialization	Moderate	Mask-making	Moderate
Bordowa (Batadrawa)	State-Driven Pilgrimage	High	Heritage Tourism	Very High

Source: Researchers' interpretation

**Below is the comparative chart showing key transformation parameters across the four case study Sattras. The chart visualises:**

- Public Engagement
- Cultural Specialization
- Institutional Modernization

Each parameter is rated on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (very high), based on interpretive secondary analysis.



**Fig. 6.1** Comparative Analysis of Select Sattras in Assam. Source: Researchers' interpretation

The comparative matrix presented above illustrates more than just institutional differences; it highlights how diverse strategies of adaptation emerge in response to regional heritage pressures, religious expectations, and state-market interactions. The Sattras studied exhibit three distinct but sometimes overlapping trajectories:

### **1. Spectrum of Public Engagement**

- Barpeta leads in terms of community integration and mass participation. Its open rituals, layperson access to the Namghar, and women's participation signal a horizontal expansion of religiosity.
- Auniati and Bordowa (Batadrawa), while public-facing, do so through a more controlled, curated format (festivals, museums, government-backed events), suggesting a vertical model of engagement — rooted in institutional control.
- Samaguri engages selectively, mostly with tourists and artisans, showing a sectoral public limited to craft and performance.

This divergence suggests that publicness in Sattras is not uniform: it is spatially and culturally constructed.

### **2. Cultural Specialisation as Branding**

- Samaguri has achieved global distinction through its mask-making tradition, which serves as a branding device. Similarly, Auniati has packaged Sattriya dance and music as a performing art.
- Barpeta, in contrast, leans on ritual and community mobilisation, resisting a marketable aestheticisation of its identity.
- Bordowa leverages its symbolic birth-site value of Sankaradeva to attract cultural capital and political interest.

What emerges here is a pattern of heritage modularisation, where Sattras focus on a specific cultural product (dance, craft, shrine) and elevate it as a public symbol.

### **3. Modernisation and Institutional Expansion**

- Auniati and Batadrawa stand out in their modern infrastructural development, external funding channels, digital documentation, and political connections.
- Samaguri has modernized craft techniques and tourism infrastructure, though to a lesser degree.
- Barpeta, however, retains a strong resistance to formal modernization, possibly to preserve its egalitarian theological core.

This suggests a correlation between modernization and symbolic capital — the more a Sattras aligns with state narratives or market logic, the more modernization it undergoes.

#### **6.5.1 Synthesis and Emerging Patterns**

Across the four case studies, we observe that:

1. All Sattras are negotiating institutional authenticity versus cultural accessibility.
2. The role of the state, tourism policy, and market sensibilities is increasingly shaping the Sattras transformation.
3. There is no single pathway; rather, Sattras are evolving through pluralistic models based on geography, theological legacy, and administrative vision.

We can thus conceptualise Sattras transformation as a continuum, not a binary, with institutions moving dynamically between ritual guardianship and cultural entrepreneurship.

## **7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **7.1 Conclusion**

This study has critically examined the evolving character of Sattras in Assam, tracing their trajectory from Bhakti-centric religious institutions to multifunctional cultural and touristic sites. Drawing on the foundational philosophy of Srimanta Sankaradeva and the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, this research has demonstrated that the transformation of Sattras is not merely an aesthetic or infrastructural adaptation but a structural realignment — shaped by negotiations between theology, state policy, public culture, and market demands.

The conceptual model outlined in Chapter 5, supported by comparative case studies and graphical analyses, shows how the Sattras are being recontextualised, shifting their role from guardians of sacred orthodoxy to active agents in Assam's cultural economy. In doing so, Sattras have adopted multiple identities: ritual sites, performance spaces, craft hubs, and heritage attractions. Yet, this transformation also invites critical questions about authenticity, sustainability, and doctrinal dilution.

Importantly, the paper shows that this evolution is not uniform across institutions. While some Sattras embrace tourism and visibility, others remain fiercely committed to theological purity. This heterogeneity calls for context-sensitive policy interventions, not one-size-fits-all heritage models.

## **7.2 Key Findings**

1. Sattras today function within a multi-scalar framework, influenced by local communities, state mechanisms, religious networks, and global cultural circuits.
2. The transformation of Sattras is best understood through the lens of cultural recontextualization, wherein traditional religious institutions repackage themselves for new modes of visibility and survival.
3. Tourism and state heritage discourse have significantly contributed to the Sattras expansion but have also introduced pressures of commodification.
4. There exists a continuum of institutional identities, ranging from spiritually closed to culturally open models.

## **7.3 Recommendations**

### **1. Institutional Safeguarding with Adaptive Flexibility**

Sattras must be supported in ways that preserve doctrinal integrity while allowing for cultural outreach. Policies should differentiate between ritual zones and tourist interaction zones to maintain sanctity.

### **2. Community-Driven Heritage Management**

Local bhaktas, not just state bodies or NGOs, should be active stakeholders in heritage management plans. Participatory frameworks must ensure that institutional decisions remain grounded in local epistemologies.

### **3. Transparent Cultural Funding and Documentation**

Funding for Sattras should be transparent and well-documented, with clear distinctions between allocations for religious upkeep and cultural programming. Government bodies must encourage archival and digital documentation of oral traditions, performances, and artefacts.

### **4. Academic Collaboration and Research Platforms**

There is an urgent need for interdisciplinary research into the evolving nature of Sattras. Collaborations between historians, anthropologists, policy-makers, and religious scholars can generate evidence-based strategies for safeguarding while innovating.

### **5. Monitoring Cultural Commodification**

While heritage commodification is inevitable in the tourism age, its impact on ritual practice, guru-shishya parampara, and ethical codes must be monitored. Cultural audits and periodic reviews can offer valuable safeguards.

## **7.4 Final Reflection**

The Sattras, once imagined as an ascetic retreat for spiritual enlightenment, has now become a palimpsest of meanings, simultaneously a site of devotion, resistance, performance, memory, and economics. In recontextualising itself, the Sattras has not dissolved its identity, but has rather multiplied it, embracing complexity as a form of resilience.

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