

**ENCHANTING TRADITIONS: UNVEILING THE MYSTIQUE OF KAMALABARI SATRA  
RITUALS**

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**Abstract:**

In the 15th and 16th century, Sankaradeva spread the Neo Vaisnavite movement in Assam. It ought to be feasible to say that Vedanta philosophy had an impact on his philosophy. He has explained the Eka Sarana Nama Dharma ideology, in which he says that Krisna is the sole God that a proselyte must worship. Satra is the product of neo- vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva which was introduced to propagate the ideals of neo vaishnavism. The prime function of satra is to propagate vaishnavism and to continue religious practices among its disciples. Uttar Kamalabari satra is one of the most anticipated Satra in Majuli who work for the upliftment of religious and cultural activities. Except the daily religious activities, they also celebrate other socio-cultural festivals and functions in the Sattra every year such as ceremonies of birth and death anniversaries of the first two Gurus, Shri Shri Sankaradeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva, the Ata Purushs, and the Satradhikars (Chief of the Sattra).

**Keywords:**

*Kamalabari Satra, Rituals, socio-cultural activities, Majuli*

**Objectives:**

The objectives of this paper are to study the various socio-cultural festivals and functions, including religious and secular celebrations, ceremonies commemorating Gurus Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva, Ata purushs, Satradhikars, devotional programs, and fasting.

**Methodology:**

This paper is based mainly of Primary data by taking interviews from experts of their field and secondary data collected from secondary sources i.e., books, research paper, newspaper, magazine, thesis and few websites in the internet. The paper is descriptive in nature which is based on historical method of research.

**Introduction**

Satra and Namghar are closely related to Assamese society, involving religious practices and multi-dimensional activities for cultural development. People respect these institutions regardless of caste, creed, or religion for their contributions. Satra, a neo-vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva, aims to propagate vaishnavism and continue religious practices among its disciples. It includes activities like nam prasanga, nritya, and geet, as well as acting, art, sculpture, and Sanskrit study. The Satra is organized democratically, with a Satradhikar as the principal spiritual guide and preceptor. The campus accommodates monks and lay devotees, with both celibate and married monks allowed.

In the 15th century, Sankaradeva founded Satras in Assam, which were not just seminars or discussions but also a structure of prayer halls with systematic elements. After his death, the new religion divided into four Sanghati, including Brahma, Purusa, Nika, and Kaal. Satras were centers of the vaisnava saint and were primarily located in Namghar, Monikut, Karapat, and Boha. The Kamalabari Sattra, now divided into Purana, Natun, and Uttar, has become a center for art, culture, literature, and classical studies. The Sattra celebrates various socio-cultural festivals and functions, including religious and secular celebrations, ceremonies commemorating Gurus Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva, Ata purushs, Satradhikars, devotional programs, and fasting.

**Rituals of Kamalabari Sattra**

In Kamalabari Sattrā Guru-asana kept in the Manikut which represents the supreme deity. The everyday religious practises of the Sattrā include several congregational services which is a day long process. The main components of the daily services, also known as nitya nam prasanga, include hymns and song singing, prayer chanting accompanied by musical instruments, and the recitation and explanation of sacred scriptures. The Kamalabari Sattrā's regular religious practise consists of 14 different kinds of prayers, or chadhyaprasang, which are separated into three prasangs: puwa prasang (prayer in the morning), biyali prasang (prayer in the evening), and ratir prasang (prayer at night). (sarma, 1966)

**i. Puwa-Prasanga (Morning service):** The singing of the borgeets (morning raga songs) is the first part of the morning service. The borgeet includes the section of Jagon, Khelon, Chalan and nritya. The first part describes about Lord Krishna getting up from bed, and the second is the borgeet that describes the Lord travelling to Vrindavan with cows. The second section is a singing of a bhatima that relates how Lord Krishna used to be awakened by his mother Yasoda and sent to tend cows.

Following that, a prayer known as Krishna daka (calling Lord Krishna) is uttered along with the singing of an upadesha (a type of prayer song). Following the singing and prayers, a pathak (reader) reads certain sacred texts. The first few chapters of Namghosa, Kulupya Ghosa were read by them. The Pathak then recite Naam- Kirtana. Following two kirtanas from Kirtana Ghosa, and after that doba will be played and naam kirtan will be concluded by giving Joydhoni, or "the glory of the names of Lord Krishna," together by all the devotees.

After that pathak will give raga and reads morning verses from the holy books- Janmo rahashya, Prothom skandho, Ditiya skandho, Anadipaton, Ajamil uponakhyan (sasthaskandha), Amrit mathon, Rukmini haran, ekadesh skandha, bolisolan (astam skandha), Daxam, Bhokoti pradip, Bhakti ratnakar, and Nam malika. The last ceremony of Puwarprasanga is the reading of the *Charitputhis* (Biography) of the two *gurus*-Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva by the Pathak. After that they conclude this session by giving Jaya.

**ii. Biyalir-Prasanga (Afternoon service):** In this session the first part is the Pathak recites book which was read in the morning session. He recites one section from the following works- Janmorahashya, Prothomskandho, Ditiyaskandho, Anadipaton, Ajamiluponakhyan (sasthaskandha), Amrit mathon, Rukmini haran, ekadeshskandha, bolisolan (astamskandha), Daxam, Bhokoti pradip, Bhakti ratnakar, and Nam malika. After that he will read NamGhosha. After reading Namghosha the pathak recites Kulupiya ghosa (prayer) and conclude it with Upadesha (prayer). The last part is the reading of Charit Puthis by Burha Bhakat (Elder bhakat).

**iii. Godhuli-Prasanga (Evening service):** First service of the Godhuli prasanga starts with playing of doba where all the bhakats gather and recites chapters from the Gunamala, Guru Bhatima, Lilamala, Chapay, tutoi. After that they sing two borgeets describing the glory and greatness of the Lord Krishna and is known as seva-kirtana. The borgeets are sung by playing khols (a kind of drum) and taals (cymbals) performed by gayan-bayan. The evening nam kirtana, which includes nam-daka comes next. After that ojpali of ghosha kirtan was performed. The last item is recitation of passages from Dasama Skandah composed by Shrimanta Sankaradeva. (Borgayan, 2023)

### **Independent and Annual Festivals in Kamalabari Sattrā**

**i. Janmastami-** The birth anniversary of Lord Krishna is commemorated on Janmastami, which falls between the middle of August and the middle of September. In the month of Bhada, it occurs on the eighth lunar day of the dark fortnight. All of Majuli's Sattras and villages commemorate Janmastami, with tremendous fanfare. A special devotional programme is held in the prayer house by the bhakats. They offer naivedya and pakamithoi (offerings consist of fruits mug pulse, chickpea, ginger, etc) in front of the Guru-asana and all the bhakats sit together and perform nam-prasanga followed by recitation of the Namghosa. The Chadhya pragang of that day also contains three kirtans from Sisuleela (stories of Lord Krishna's childhood). Then the offerings are distributed. All the Bhakats observe fasting on that particular day. The Sattriya drama known as "janma yatra" is performed at night. Additionally, they conduct a play in Assamese that tells the tales of Lord Krishna's birth.

**ii. Phalgutsov or Holi:** The Phalgutsov, also known as Phakuwa or Holi, is one of the most significant festivals that is observed in the month of Phagun (middle of February to middle of March). In addition to the daily prayer services, they perform special nam-prasanga with gayan-bayan. After it is over, the young boys play with each other with colours. The senior bhakats usually do not take part in it. Bordeuri puts a tilaka (a small round mark) on the forehead of the senior bhakats after nam-prasanga ends. On the first day before nityaprasang, fresh clothing is provided to the Guru asana. The bhakats are given coloured powders called "fakua with chandan" to apply to on their foreheads. Holi songs are sung and bhaona is performed in the evening. The next day, celebrants perform Holi geets and organise a parade through adjacent villages while carrying an image of Lord Krishna, during which time worshippers present the God with betel nuts, leaves, and money. Young bhakats engage in color-based play with one another. The celebrants sing the borgeets of Shri ShriSankerdeva and Shri ShriMadhavdeva during this occasion.(Sarma, 26/03/2013)

**iii. The raas mahotsav:** Every year in Kamalabari Sattrā, a festival is held with tremendous fanfare and joy. It is observed on Purnima, the day of the full moon in the month of Kati (mid-October to mid-November). To make the event grander, a unique devotional programming is added to the daily services. This goes on for two days. The youthful bhakats perform bhaonas in the evening while dressed in both male and female costumes. The bhaonas, which are held at the Sattrā auditorium, are highly anticipated by the devotees and the local people.

**iv. The Three Bihus-** Magh Bihu, Bohag Bihu, and Kati Bihu are Hindu festivals celebrated in mid-January, mid-February, and mid-October. Magh Bihu lasts for two days, beginning on Puh's 13-14 January. Bhakats observe by constructing a meji on Uruka and burning it in front of Sattradhikar on Bihu. Bohag Bihu lasts for three days, with Uruka, Garu Bihu, and Manuhar Bihu. Kati Bihu, on the 14th or 15th day of Ahin, is marked by the ceremonial planting of basil plants.

#### **Anniversary of the Gurus or Guru Tithis:**

With due solemnity, the bhakats celebrate the death anniversaries of Shrimanta Sankaradeva, Shri Shri Madhavadeva and Shri Shri Badula Padma Ata. These tithis are held for four days in an elaborate manner because of their extra-ordinary significance. These four days there is continuous namkirttana, gayan-bayan, dance, ojaṇṇali, ghosha kirttana, bhaona and such cultural activities throughout the night. There is no rest or sleep in the eyes of the organizers, performers or the audience. The first day – Chaul Bhujoni, second day- Thaponi, third day Kirttana, fourth day- Bhangoni and with that the celebration ends. Performance of gayan-bayan, chalinritya, beharnritya, ojaṇṇali, ghoshakirttan by the bhakats marks the Guru Tithis. Sometimes bhaona is also held in the Namghar during the Guru Tithis.

**i. Chaul Bhujoni:** Caul-bhojani is a ritual in Hinduism where bhakats receive uncooked eatables like rice and lentils after completing nama-Prasanga. The principal Deuri, who distributes sacred food, puts a clean cloth on the guru asana, which symbolizes the gurus Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva. The main deuri sets the Sarai, and after lighting the main banti, the Namlagowa sings puvār gits, which begin the Prasanga. Nam-lagowa and Kirtan begin the Krsna Daka, chanting the nama and glory of Lord Krsna loudly. The Pathaka reads three Kirtans from the Kamsa Bada chapter of Kirtana-Ghosa, followed by the distribution of prasada. On caul-bhojani, mogumah is served as prasada, and the Kirtan ghar'sdaba is played. The Pathak reads the Bhakti ratnavali concurrently, with no strict restrictions. The Gayana-bayana programme begins after the Carita Path or Padaputhi Path, featuring guru mridangadhemali, baha-sāhni, mancoknac, bhor-tla, and Ghosa-Kirtan. The Jhumura dance performance, featuring three to four boy monks, concludes the day's schedule. The Gayana-bayanas perform the dhemali, Aawebalakaknukaiuparasara in Sindhura Raga. The naamlagowa sings "ckulupghoṣā" and Dhorilowaghosa, which are poems prescribed for festivals and feast days. A Kirtan signals the end of the day's program, marking the end of the prasangia for the day.(Saikia, 2023)

**ii. Thaponi:** The thapani ritual, dedicated to Sankaradeva, involves placing cari Sastra (four holy scriptures) on the guru asana. A deuri prepares and decorates the thapana early in the morning, while the namlaguwa sings a morning song and bhatima. The Pathak sings three verses from the Kamsa-Badha part of the holy scriptures, followed by reading the Bhagavata purana and Caritaa. The reading continues on the day of Caul bhojani, narrating Sankaradeva's departure from Ganakkunci and his

transfer to Kakatkuta, Kocbehar. Gayana-bayana plays guru mridang dhemali, followed by the nadu-bhangidance. The nadu-bhangi dance concludes with the ghosa-Kirtan, featuring verses from the 10th section of the Bhagavata-purana and Nam-ghosa. The oja-pali presents Vyah Kirtana, followed by evening prasanga, performed on the day of Thapani. The tradition of evening prasanga originated from Sankardeva's arrival at Madhavdeva's residence, where he left the prasanga without completing it to welcome his guru. The griha is a devotional ritual where the Bhagavata-purana, believed to be written by Sankardeva, is carried with great honor and placed in the Kirtan ghar. The bastra of the guru asnas is different in each guru's tithi, and a new cloth is offered to them. The Deuri places four Sastras on the sides of the Guru asnas, with the holy scripture dasama placed in the south direction and ghosa and ramavali in the north. The rag reponi is performed after the scriptures are installed, and the ghosa-kirtan is performed by 10-12 artists using bhor-tal and bartal. The day's program ends at dusk with the ghosa-kirtana. The evening religious activity begins with the playing of sarkha and daba, followed by the evening bhatima and Gavana-bayana, featuring ram-dhemali. The bayana performs bahi-cahini and thiya-cahini, while the gayana sings thiya chahini songs. After Prasanga, the Ata Griha, a prime store of the Kamalabari Sattrā, preserves belongings of Sankardeva, Madhabdeva, and Badula Padma āta. In the morning, rituals include Nama-Prasanga, GurumarddanDhemali, Nadubhangi dance, Raga Reponi, and Chali dance. After GunamalaBhatima, Ram Dhemali is played, followed by the 'BorPravesh' dance. (Goswami, 2006)

**iii. Kirttana:** On the day of Sankardeva's death, devotees and disciples gather at the Kirtan house, wearing turbans, to sing the Bargeet "Gobindasiptahu baal gopalang" in "Ahir" raag. They sleep in new beds and perform morning prasanga without bathing. Gayan vakata, wearing holly cloths, sings morning songs, including "Maanchok" without instruments. Guru Kirtana is a day when Naam Lagowa starts singing krishna, and all vakata and Mahapurushiya people perform Hal khoti and Vaatkhoti. They can eat rice at night. The kulupiyaGhosa, sung by Jagannath Jagannath Jagannath Jagannath Jagannath Hari, sings at the event. Vakata sits face-to-face, facing north, and Pathak, a helper, helps. Doba will play after naam, and Vagabati will read Mangalasaron. It is played after three pada of the third Kirtan ghosa, "Ramese Goti vojo Mor Moti." Deuri worships Sattradhikar and Buhravakata, then seeks permission to decorate the sarai at Aata's house. Aasirbada is restricted for Kirtan days.

**iv. Bhangoni:** The ghosadhemali ceremony ends in the morning, marking the beginning of Bhangoni. The Yatra-ghosa is a crucial ceremony in the Sattradhikar, where Bura bhakats, Bar-gayana, and Bar-bayana perform the final journey of Sankardeva. The narrator narrates the Yatra-ghosa, with children and young bhakats participating in a standing performance. The program lasts for an hour and includes reading the Carita Path by senior Buda bhakats. The chosen bhakat must follow rituals, fast, and seek permission from Sattradhikars, Buda bhakats, and the audience.

### **Tithis of The Former Sattradhikars:**

The Kamalabari Sattrā celebrates the death anniversary of former Sattradhikars of Kamalabari Sattrā. The tithis involve recitation of Bhagawata, Charitputhis, Kirttānghosa, gayan-bayan, biharnach, ojpali, chalinach, bhaona, and prasad distribution. The Sattradhikar offers Sorai, betel nut, leaf, and money, and inmates observe fasting.

### **Special Devotional Functions:**

**i. Palnam:** Palnam is a three-day succession of prayer services, with bhakats participating in rotation. It is divided into three sections: aag, maj, and sesh, with devotees lighting earthen lamps and offering salt, ghee, and incense. This practice is not held annually in the Sattrā. The festival involves congregational prayer by Sattrā inmates in rotation, offering salt and rice. Seven rounds are completed within three days, starting at 12 noon and reciting kulupiyāghosa, Kirttānghosa, and upadesh. Gua pan and prasad are distributed at the end of each turn.

**ii. Hari Kirttan:** A bhakat performs a three-day service during their lifetime, usually between February and April. They are assisted by colleagues and invited from other Sattras. The service includes bhaona, gayanbayan, beharnritya, ojpali, and chalinritya. Each celibate celebrates Hari Kirttan individually for three to four dyas, held between February and mid-April. The the Hari Kirttan

of Sattradhikar performs after their death by the next sattradhikar, involving various programs such as nirtyaprasang, bhaona, gayan-bayan, biharnitrya, chalinach, and oja-pali. The concerned celibate arranges all programs independently. (Borah, 2023)

**iii. Fasting:** Sattra devotees fast on Ekadashi, Amavasya, Purnima, and Sankranti, without requiring small boys to do so.

### **Conclusion:**

Kamalabari Sattra is a cultural and religious centre in Majuli, offering unique festivals and functions. It has a religious and spiritual character, with interpretations varying. The Sattradhikar emphasizes the worship of tulsi plant, which destroys sinfulness and earns religious merit. Magh Bihu, an ancient festival, is considered life-giving and pure. The Sattra also celebrates the tithis of former Sattradhikars and burhabhakats, as well as special devotional programs like palnam and harikirttan.

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