

Role of Traditional Institutions in Peacebuilding: A case Study of
the *Satras* and *Namghars* in Assam

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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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DEPARTMENT OF PEACE & CONFLICT STUDIES & MANAGEMENT

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
SIKKIM UNIVERSITY

[A Central University established by an Act of Parliament of India, 2007]

Date - 10/06/16

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled “**Role of Traditional Institutions in Peacebuilding : A case Study of the Satras and Namghars in Assam**” submitted to Sikkim University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, is my original work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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case Study of the *Satras* and *Namghars* in Assam”**

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ABBREVIATIONS

AD – Anno Domini

ADR – Alternative Dispute Resolution

AYUS- Adhyatmic Yuva Sanmilan

CCRT- Cultural Resource Training Centre

CDC- Community Development Council

CHT- Chittagong Hill Tract

CPAU - Cooperation for Peace and Unity

CR- Conflict Resolution

CT –Conflict Transformation

DDA-District development assemblies

FGD – Focused Group Discussion

HFTCC-Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Coordinating Committee

IDA – International Development Association

IKS – Indigenous Knowledge System

JBNQA- James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement

L.P. – Lower Primary

LPC - Local Peace Council

NGO – Non Governmental Organisation

NSP- National Solidarity Programme

SDO - Sanayee Development organisation

SDO- Sub Divisional Officer

SDPO- Sub Divisional Police Officer

SHG- Self Help Group

U.N – United Nations

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

CHAPTER 1

1.1. Introduction

Peacebuilding is a comprehensive process which includes examination, analysis, evaluation and responses towards conflict. Different terminologies used in the emerging area of Peace or Conflict studies - analysis, intensity, sensitivity, negotiation, mediation, resolution, transformation, settlement, management, strategy, goal, reconstruction, participation, equality, democratization-all are inclusive under this umbrella term. A summative definition of peacebuilding, generally agreed, aims at the following objectives: preventing the resumption or escalation of violent conflict in conflict-prone societies and establishing a durable and self-sustaining peace; addressing the underlying sources of conflict, building or rebuilding peaceful social institutions and values, including respect for human rights, building or rebuilding institutions of governance and the rule of law.

The term peacebuilding first emerged in the work of Johan Galtung over 40 years ago. In his essay *Three Approaches to Peace: Peacekeeping, Peacemaking, and Peacebuilding*, Galtung advocated for the creation of peacebuilding mechanisms to endorse sustainable peace by addressing the “root causes” of violent conflict and supporting indigenous capacities for peace management and conflict resolution (Galtung, 1976). The concept gained international popularity in peace studies and among practitioners of conflict transformation in the following decades. At the United Nations, peacebuilding came to the forefront of intergovernmental debates with Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali’s landmark report *An Agenda for Peace* (1992). This historical document projected post-conflict peacebuilding as one of a series of tools at the UN’s disposal following preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peacekeeping and post conflict peacebuilding. Encompassing a wide range of activities, peacebuilding was defined as post-conflict, “action to identify and support structures which tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (Ghali, 1992).

Since 1992, numerous documents have helped refine the UN's understanding of peacebuilding.¹

Johan Galtung (1996) promoted peacebuilding for sustainable peace by addressing the root causes of violent conflict and supporting indigenous capacity for peace management and conflict resolution. If examined closely, Galtung here called for sustainable peace—a long lasting peaceful existence, examination of the root causes—factors that really breed conflict in the ground level, but often overlooked and supporting indigenous capacities—local, native organisations/parties to be engaged in the peace process. International peacebuilding initiatives often face limitations due to their lack of understanding local issues and grass root perspectives. In order to be effective, the work of various organizations has to be embedded in the overall peace building plan. Improved planning and effective organizational co-ordination are crucial for successful peace operation. In a multi-functional mission, with geographical dispersion, there is always a danger of miscommunication if each component reports only to its central headquarters without lateral contact at every level (Jeong, 2002).

Peacebuilding is about creating the conditions of peace in the most constructive and sustainable manner. *An Agenda for Peace* is one of the cornerstones of the discourse of peacebuilding. Talking about peacebuilding, this historical document states post conflict peacebuilding as “cooperative project” to avoid the breakdown of peaceful conditions. Efforts towards peace should “include comprehensive efforts to identify and support structures which will tend to consolidate peace and advance a sense of confidence and well-being among people”. It is clearly stated that “...post conflict peacebuilding is to prevent a recurrence” (1992). The declaration makes it clear that idea of peacebuilding is not to avoid a crisis nor to settle a issue temporarily. Transcending the concepts of resolution, management or settlement, Peacebuilding calls for a holistic range of activities to restore or rebuild a torn foundation. So, peacebuilding started getting scholastic attention not merely as a post conflict activity, rather as a holistic approach, an extended, people centric voyage for peace. According to Lederach,

¹ For more details see the Report *UN Peacebuilding: An Orientation* published on 2010 by the United Nations Peacebuilding Support office.

“Peacebuilding is more than post accord reconstruction. Here, peacebuilding is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. The term thus involves a wide range of activities and functions that both precede and follow formal peace accords. Metaphorically, peace is seen not merely as a stage in time or a condition. It is a dynamic social construct. Such a conceptualization requires a process of building, involving investment and materials, architectural design and coordination of labor, laying of a foundation, and detailed finish work, as well as continuing maintenance” (Lederach, 1997).

Rebuilding and empowering the foundations of a society that has been ragged apart by conflict is not an easy task. Protracted or violent conflict leave behind not only physical destruction and institutional disarray, but also a torn social fabric characterised by mistrust, trepidation and massive difficulties in even imagining the possibility of working together towards common goals. The elements of mistrust or anxiety are not specific only to the major or violent conflicts. Though conflict should not be categorised as major or minor, it is true that some conflicting issues do not have wider or larger impact like a war, genocide, trafficking or health hazards. But if examined in the context of their area of influence, such issues too have same significance as a war has on the national context. The hostility borne out of the encroachment of a land leads to an antagonistic environment in a village which share same characteristics of the atmosphere due to a war in a country. Breaking the stability is what conflict stands for and it is existent in any level of conflict. Therefore conflict should not be ignored by considering whether it is major or minor .But depending on the level and nature of conflict, strategies towards resolution of conflict do differ. Imposition of a fixed set of peacebuilding strategy may not work in every situation. At a fundamental level, conflict originates from individuals' behaviour and their repeated interactions with their surroundings, in other words, from its micro-foundations. A micro-level approach advances our understanding of conflict by its ability to account for individual and group heterogeneity (Philip, Patricia and Tilman, 2009). Hence originates the terms like conflict analysis and conflict

sensitivity. Peacebuilding as a process always calls for the collaborative initiatives of all these activities with equal importance upon all areas of the society.

Innovation is an urgency of the time as specifically designed and academically defined set of peacebuilding proposals may not fit into each conflict situation. It leads to more and more introspection over the issue and it results in the need of engaging local, native knowledge and issues with the academic propositions. Coordination among different actors is the central component of a successful peacebuilding strategy and this coordination extends up to respect to and inclusion of traditional, existing social knowledge, practices and institutions. Need Assessment studies should be located on the real field and it is only the real people from the fields can supply the naked truth. Traditional institutions, the knowledge they carry forward and their practices are socio-cultural resources rooted on the local need and situations.

Many surviving traditional institutions and their practices are found to be still useful in modern peacebuilding, conflict transformation and resolution processes. These traditions are not only of historical significance, they are of great value to all of them who are dealing with conflict and helping others to deal with conflict (Boege, 2006). Traditional institutions are living treasure houses of the age old cultural characteristics of a race or a region. Most of these practices rest on the moral authority of respected community figures, for example, village elders, community leaders or other sources of counsel. Often these figures demand a certain level of reverence and there is a strong social expectation that their judgments, verdicts recommendations or advices will be held fast on. Secondly, many of the practices have a public element that stands for the transparency of decision-making processes. They are deliberately accessible -perhaps held in a central point in a village, a community centre or at an accessible location between two disputing villages- with this public dimension providing a visible affirmation of legitimacy. Multiple public witnesses may make it more difficult for disputants to disagree with a decision or an agreement that is made as a result of arbitration. Sometimes, this public element may take the form of ritual or a public display (oath taking, apology, semiotic display etc) that symbolises reconciliation or a new understanding. Thirdly, many of the practices have a storytelling aspect. This public

articulation of grievances and perspectives is highly accessible and may conform to the dominance of oral traditions. Fourthly, there is often a strong emphasis on relationships rather than a definitive agreement. This stems from recognition of those disputants and their families and communities are likely to continue to share the same resources (e.g. water or routes to a market) over an extended time period. There is thus a sophisticated understanding of the nature of peace and conflict as processes rather than as events. Finally, the peacebuilding practices often rely on locally derived resources (Ginty, 2010).

Culture has been recognised as an enabler and driver of sustainable development. The Outcome document of 2010 Millennium Development Goal Summit² stated that, “culture can be a powerful driver for development, with community-wide social, economic and environmental impact” (2010). Apart from its contributions to the field of revenue generation,

“...culture-led development also includes a range of non-monetized benefits, such as greater social inclusiveness and rootedness, resilience, innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship for individuals and communities, and the use of local resources, skills, and knowledge. Respecting and supporting cultural expressions contribute to strengthening the social capital of a community and fosters trust in public institutions” (2010).

Cultural factor influence the overall nature of lifestyles, individual behaviour, consumption patterns, values related to environmental stewardship and our interaction with the natural environment. It is the social structuring of the outer as well as the inner self. It is integrally associated with the issues of peace, conflict and building peace. So addressing the issue of conflict or peace without taking care of cultural aspects is a superficial activity. For instance, local and indigenous knowledge systems and environmental management practices provide valuable insight and tools for tackling ecological challenges, preventing biodiversity loss, reducing land degradation, and mitigating the effects of climate change (2010). Culture sensitive approaches help to

² Outcome Document of the 2010 Millennium Summit, *Keeping the promise: united to achieve the Millennium Development Goals*, A/65/L.1 (New York, 2010) was adopted by the General Assembly by consensus on 22nd September, 2010 in New York which reaffirms world leaders’ commitment to the MDGs and sets out a concrete action agenda for achieving the Goals by 2015.

understand the social ,economic and human rights perspectives of an issue. Hence academicians opine that in the light of contemporary nature of conflicts, it may be propagated that the integration of current practices and compatible traditions may result in new, effective, approachable, successful and sustainable methods of peacebuilding. With this aim, the present research looks into examine the role of *Satras* and *Namghars* in the peacebuilding process in the wider sense of the term.

1.1.1. The Institutions-*Satra* and *Namghar*-

Satra and *Namghar* are two of the very influential traditional institutions in Assamese society. *Satra* and *Namghar* are the institutions conceived by Sri Manta Sankardeva. Both these institutes were initiated in Assam in the last decades of fifteenth century, with the aim to disseminate the teachings of the new philosophical tradition of Sankardeva with an aim to build a harmonious society. Though originally conceived to disseminate religious teachings, these institutions gradually turn out to be the socio-cultural institutions .*Satra* and *Namghar* are considered synonymous to the Assamese identity. Ranging from religion up to culture, these two traditional institutions mark the elemental nature of Assamese culture. Assam is an agrarian state and the fundamental nature of Assamese society is still marked by agrarian, rural characteristics. The state undoubtedly has gone through the process of urbanasiation and urban and semi-urban developments have been taking place .But the core culture of the state in a comprehensive sense, is still under the traditional, rural hold. Residents of the cities and the towns of Assam still bear the traditional nature of the society. Hence irrespective of residential differences, there is overwhelming influence of the *Satras* and *Namghars*.

Satras and *Namghars* share the same objectives and role in the society but there are differences in their structural pattern. *Namghars* are micro level institutions available in every village. The villagers of the particular village are the members of the *Namghar* and most of their socio- cultural rituals or functions are observed under the patronage of that *Namghar*. The villagers select one or two persons to run the basic activities of the *Namghar* and all of them contribute a minimum amount to run the functions. On the other hand, *Satras* are comparatively bigger (both physically and impact wise) institutions with large number of members, though there is no any hard and fast rule for being a member.

Sankardeva and later, his disciples selected some particular areas and established the *Satras*. *Satras* are classified on the basis of celibacy. It is of four types – monastic, *grihasthi* (married/householder), semi monastic and admixture. *Satras* have large compounds which include residence of the chief and the members, prayer hall, visitors' hall etc. *Namghars* are small physical structures within the specific village and nobody resides within the compound. Majuli is the famous river island where the major *Satras* and hundreds of *Namghars* are situated.

The present study aims to look into the components of peacebuilding mechanisms practised in these two institutions, their relevance in present and potentiality for future usage. In both the institutions, traditionally designed conflict resolution mechanisms have been used for the last five hundred years. Both these institutions have served the role of advisories for local dispute settlement or resolution of conflicting issues within their respective area of operation. Social crimes (caste clashes and so on), disputes over land, parental issues, family matters, resource inequality or theft are generally resolved through public gatherings at *Namghar*. *Satras* also serve the same purposes in a wider social setting. Apart from the conflict resolution methods, there are also distinctive cultural practices with strong elements of social solidarity and community participation. People irrespective of class, community or creed can come and participate in these cultural activities. Social functions (marriage ceremony, funeral, annual religious festivals like *Bhaona*, *Sabah* etc) cannot be conducted without the *Namghar* and *Satras*. Hence, these two institutions offer an interesting area of study to examine the peacebuilding components they carry forward. The study has been delimited to the *Satras* and *Namghars* of Majuli, which is the centre of Vaishnavite culture.

1.1.2. The Study Area- Majuli

A. Location -

The word Majuli, also called as Majali, Mojali, Majoli stands for a piece of land encircled by river water. *Maj* in Assamese stand for the central or in between; so Majuli is the central place located in between water bodies. It is a river island, water locked inhabited zone that falls under the Jorhat district (Nath, 2009). Majuli, a sub-division of

Jorhat district of Assam is situated between 260 -25¢ north latitude and 930 -39¢ n 940 -35¢ east longitudes. It is situated at 85 metres above the sea level and is at a distance of about 40 kilometers from Jorhat town. The total area of Majuli is 584.38 square kilometer according to the 2011 census of Government of India (Census Report, 2011). Though it was once the largest river island in the world but it is now regarded as the largest freshwater Island of Asia. The Island is surrounded by three rivers viz. the Brahmaputra to the south and the Subansiri and Kherkatia in the north bank. Moreover, the Island almost touches the North Lakhimpur district on its northern side. Tuni is the only river flowing inside the island. Majuli has a large number of dead river channels, converted into either ponds or beels.

Majuli was declared the sub-division of Jorhat on 26th January, 1979. Garamur is the sub-divisional headquarter of Majuli. The Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO), Civil is the administrative head of Majuli. Majuli is divided in to two development blocks- *Ujani* or Upper Majuli Development Block and Majuli Development Block. There are three revenue blocks (*Mouza*) in Majuli- Ahataguri, Kamalabari and Salmora. There are twenty Gaon panchayats under the two development blocks. Majuli has three police stations which are headed by Sub Divisional Police Officer (SDPO). Total about 1.1 lakh people of Majuli are literate, among them about 64 thousand are male and about 50.1 thousand are female. As per the 2011 census data literacy rate of Majuli is 79%. 86% of male and 71% of female population are literate here (ibid,2011).The first educational institution of formal education was Karhal Gaon L.P. School (Lower Primary school) which was established in the year 1878.Before it, education in the island was prevailed in the form of *Tols* within the *Satra* premises. The *pathshalas*, basically run by Sanskrit experts also imparted education on Sanskrit and religious issues. *Satras* were the centres of education up to the colonial period. Majuli College, established in 1962, is the oldest higher educational institute in the island (ibid, 2011).At present there are six degree colleges in the island. Most of the government and administrative offices are situated in Garamur and Kamalabari. Both these places are emerging as small townships in recent times. Except

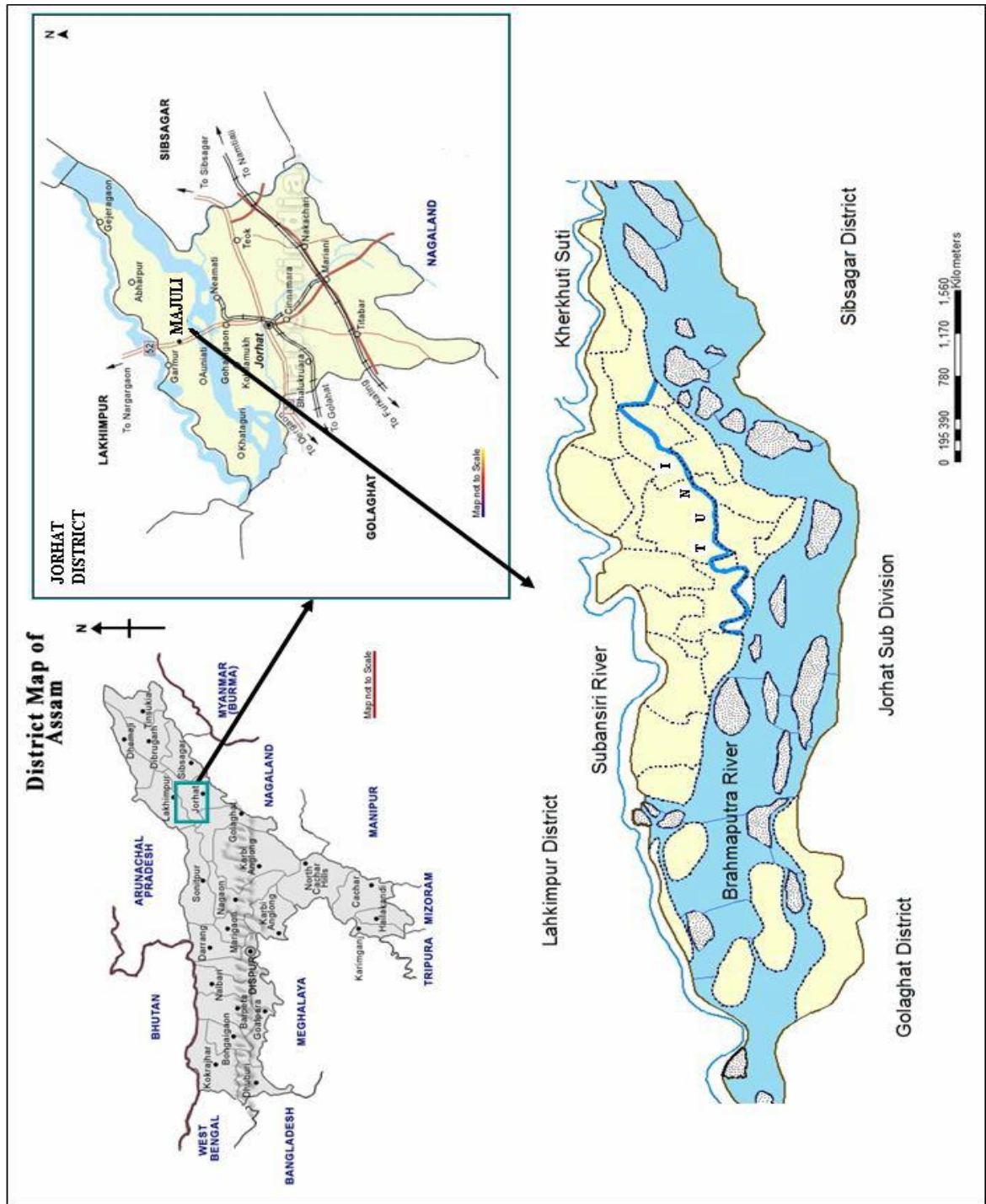
these two places, the entire Majuli can be regarded as rural area, and is treated as a *Char*³ (Nath, 2009).

Namoni Majuli or Lower Majuli is the area that consists of majority of the *Satras*, it consists of a mixed population of different communities and also headquarter of the Island i.e. Garamur is located in this block. *Ujani* or Upper Majuli is dominated mainly by Mishing population and also by the other two tribes of the Island i.e. the *Deoris* and *Sonowal Kacharis*. As per the 2011 census the total population of Majuli is-1, 67,304. The Ujani Majuli block consists of 68,847 souls while the Majuli block is the home to 98,457 souls⁴.

One of the major tribes in Majuli is the Mishing with a total population 64,984 soul (Ibid, 2011). Mishings are one of the offshoots of the Mongoloid stock while linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group. They are divided into eight sub-ethnic and social divisions. Agriculture is the major source of livelihood of the Mishings (Nath, 2009). The Mishings are found scattered almost all over the island, though they are concentrated in the Northern belt, Jengraimukh being the centre. *Deori* is another major tribe residing in the island. The Deori population of Majuli is inhabited in three villages- Majar Deori Gaon, Sriram Deori Gaon and Deori Pam Gaon. Other castes in the Island are Brahmans, Yogis, Koch, Kalitas, Keots, Kumars and Ahoms. All of them follow Hinduism while a few Muslim families have also been settled in Kamalabari area of lower Majuli in recent years. Majuli falls under the 99th Assam legislative assembly constituency reserved as a tribal constituency under certain provisions of the Indian Constitution. It is one of the 9 assembly segments of Lakhimpur Lok Sabha constituency.

³ The mid-channel bars of the fluvial regime of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries are locally known as *Chars*. These are almond shaped alluvial formations. *Chars* are subjected to erosion and flood and are geographically unstable in nature.

⁴ Statistical data as available in the Census Report, 2011, Government of India. For more details, see www.census2011.co.in.



Map 1. Map of Majuli- The Study area

Source- www.jorhat.gov.in

The passage to the Island is possible only by water transportation facilities-ferries, country boats. All these ferries and boats run from Nimati ghat. At present ferry services are available through Dakhinpat, Afalamukh, Salmora, Phuloni, Chumoimari and Kamalabari from Jorhat run by tendered farms and also under Inland Water Transportation services. From the northern part, ferry services are available through Dhunaguri, Bahgora, and Badati ghat from the district of Lakhimpur. Small steamers also run on these routes. Within the island, there are limited number of buses under Assam State Transport Corporation and private commercial vehicles like Tata Sumo, Tata Magic, Winger etc for transportation purpose. Bus services under Assam State Transport Corporation were introduced during 1986⁵

Majuli has been a favourite destination for tourists, both national and international. The Vaishnavite institutions of *Satras* and *Namghars*, the rich performing cultural elements of Satriya culture, picturesque natural beauty, rich biodiversity, the serene lifestyle of the Mishing community and unpolluted rural lifestyle attract large number of tourists throughout the world. The wide view of the mighty Brahmaputra, the scenic beauty of the Mishing villages, the long spread mustard crops with yellow flowers spreading the fields up to extreme horizon in the month of December-February create scenes of heavenly beauty in the island. There is a gradual growth of tourism industry in the form of resorts, lodges, home stays and commercial sightseeing in the island. It has been one of the nominees of the World Heritage Sites of UNESCO.⁶

⁵ Information collected from the district office of Assam State Corporation, Baruah Chariali, Jorhat.

⁶ World Heritage is the designation for places on Earth that are of outstanding universal value to humanity and as such, have been inscribed on the World Heritage List to be protected for future generations to appreciate and enjoy. The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage is an international agreement that was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1972. Since 1972; UNESCO under its World Heritage Centre has been selecting certain unique and diverse sites from different countries of the world and conferring the status of World Heritage site. Once a country signs the Convention, and has sites inscribed on the World Heritage List, the resulting prestige often helps raise awareness among citizens and governments for heritage preservation. Greater awareness leads to a general rise in the level of the protection and conservation given to heritage properties. A country may also receive financial assistance and expert advice from the World Heritage Committee to support activities for the preservation of its sites.

B. Climate:

The Majuli Island falls into the tropical zone. Surrounded by water on all sides, it has a moderate climate, cold from November- February, pleasant in March-April and mid-September-October, and summer in May to mid-September; cool breeze is common mainly on the riverside and not as rare in the centre as well (Nath: 2009). Being surrounded by two rivers, its climate is suitable for the locals as well as tourists. As per the available data, the maximum temperature in Majuli these days remains between 30o-34o celsius in summer and minimum 10o-12o celsius in winter; its humidity being as high as 80 percent. The average annual rainfall recorded in Majuli is 200-250 inches. It sets in beginning with April and remains up to September (Nath, 2009).

C. Flora and fauna:

Majuli is a fertile area and suitable for growing varieties of herbs, trees and crops. The Island was once full of jungles and forests thereby providing shelter to enormous wild animals and birds. Even a few decades ago the Island had full of forests and jungles that comprised of trees like *uriam (Bischofia javanica)*, *koroi (Albizia lebbek)*, *ejar (Lagerstroemia speciosa)* in which animals and birds such as, rhino, tiger, elephant, jackals, *haikali*, *dauk (Amaurornis phoenicurus)* etc. could be found (Hazarika, 2004). Hundreds of varieties of fishes, birds and large number of migratory birds are found in Majuli. River dolphins are also found in the river Brahmaputra and surrounding tributaries. Majuli has been losing its natural and forest resources due to increasing population, devastating flood and erosion. Now except the *Chaporis* (islets created by flood) with thinly covered *birina* reeds, jungle or animal herds are hardly found in Majuli. For the last ten to fifteen years, the island, especially the villages outside the embankments have been facing the problem of wild elephants leading to destruction of agricultural products and man-elephant conflict during the season of flood.

D. Livelihood

The livelihood of the people is based mainly on agriculture. The Census data of 2011 says 29.81 percent of the total population constitutes the total workforce of which

80.85 percent belongs to the farmers and another 2.05 percent agricultural labour.⁷ Primary objective of the cultivator is mainly the production of enough rice so as to subsist from one harvesting season to the next. Other items of cultivations are mustard seeds, black pulses and certain varieties of other crops such as jute, sugar cane, maize, potato, vegetables etc. People are engaged in cultivation throughout the year. Rice is cultivated twice or thrice a year- *Ahu (Lai)* in the month of December-January, *Bao* in the month of May-June and *Sali (Amdang)* in the month of June-July. Mustard and black pulses are cultivated mainly for commercial purpose. Strawberry and Watermelon are new entrants in the field of commercial crops which have been produced in the *Chaporis* or the river Banks. The Island which once witnessed rich production of crops deteriorated gradually since the earthquake of 1950 and more severely due to constant flood in the 90s of the last century. Frequent flood and erosion have been serious threats before the agricultural scenario of the island.

Apart from cultivation people also occasionally earn by selling their domesticated animals like buffalo, ox, cow, pig etc. While in times of disaster most of them engage themselves as daily laborers and some move out to towns to work in factories, laborers etc. to sustain their family. Fishing is one of the major occupations of the people of the island of certain communities, particularly the Kaibarta, Mishing and Deori people are integrally associated with fishing. The existence of the rivers, swamps, ponds make Majuli a natural breeding ground of varieties of fishes. The island is still known for the availability of varieties of fishes. The Kaibarta community is genuinely associated with the fishing business which is operated in the rivers, rivulets, beels (registered and unregistered), ponds etc. Besides selling in the local markets, fishes are exported out of the island, especially to the markets at Jorhat. There are also considerable sections engaged in non-agricultural occupation such as teachings, salaried jobs, tailoring, business undertaking, shopkeepers including selling of fish, meat etc. Teaching is the basic profession among them. However, even these sections of the people make use of their cultivable land. While the women folk also earn by selling their woven products and their domesticated animals. The Kumar people of the island are known for their expertise

⁷ For more details, see the Census data 2001, Government of India.

in pottery which has been occupying significant role in their economic lives. Kumars, concentrated in the South-Eastern area of the island have been traditional experts in making different materials (*kalah, tekeli, nadiya, mola*, and different decorative items like toys, show pieces etc). Boat making is also prevalent among these people. A considerable section of people from Auniati and Salmora are engaged in the boat making business.

The Mishing women of Majuli have a reputation of being expert weavers. They weave traditional cloths like *ri:bi* (a sheet with narrow stripes, wrapped to cover the lower garment and the blouse), *gaseng* (used for the same purpose as that of a *ri:bi*, but having broad stripes of contrastive colours), *Gonro Ugon*, (dhoti) *Gero* (a sheet, wrapped round the waist to cover the lower part of the body, or round the chest to cover the body down to the knees) etc and among their woven products the *Gadu* or '*Miri Jim*' (blanket) is world famous (Kuli, 2008, Mipun, 1993). Sericulture, especially the production of Mulberry silk (*Asomiya Pat*) is a popular tradition among the Yogi people. Handicraft materials including bamboo products, cane products are also available in specific areas. Mask making is a popular craft of the island and certain *Satras* –Chamaguri in particular, is quite rich in this aspect. Kosha Kanta Goswami and Hem Chandra Goswami from Chamaguri *Satra* are famous artists in the field of mask making. The decorated handmade cane fans of Auniati *Satra* also deserve special mention. A single handmade fan costs minimum five hundred rupees. Deori community is famous for their traditional weaving uniqueness. Textile and Bamboo and to a considerable extent cane craft are the strongest aspects of Deori art and craft.

1.2. Review of Literature

Literature on peacebuilding covers a wide variety of issues providing a sound background study. Peacebuilding is available in all types of conflict situations and resolution processes and every experience offers new insights into the area. Literature on this subject is outcome of both theoretical understandings of the issue and of experiences perceived through practical implications of those theories in the field. In the present research, three themes have been focused on-the general understanding of Peacebuilding, the traditional mechanisms of Peacebuilding and literature on the specified area of

research-*Satras* and *Namghars*. The broader understanding of Peacebuilding deals with the origin, development, current status and the basic features of this mechanism. Writings on traditional mechanisms of Peacebuilding are narratives on different prevailing traditional practices in different societies and their ways of functioning. Writings on *Namghar* or *Satra* have been focusing on their socio-cultural relevance, and to some extent on the role they play in the society. Therefore, those existing writings have been used for exploring this idea.

1.2.1. Peacebuilding - General understanding

Sustainable peace does not mean that long-time antagonists merely lay down their arms but that they achieve profound reconciliation that will endure because it is sustained by a society-wide network of relationships and mechanisms that promote justices and address the root cause of enmity before they can regenerate destabilizing tension. Crossing over the traditional, framed techniques of resolution of issues is very much necessary for achieving peace and so we should opt for a frame of reference that provides a focus on the restoration and rebuilding of relationships. All sections of society must participate in the building of peace and that the entire systematic and sub-systematic concerns of a conflict should be addressed while the resolution process is going on. A more people oriented, democratic, wider, ambitious programmes for building peace is the urgency of time. Instead of considering peace building as a theoretically bound, trained exercise, it should be practised as a mass oriented, participatory endeavour (Lederach,2006).

States really have limits to what they can achieve on their own in the field of building peace. This limit or gap can be filled only by the nongovernmental organisations through their activities in different fields ranging from microfinance to emergency relief supplies and it opens up the scope and importance of nongovernmental organisations in the process of making, building or maintaining peace. Success stories of different initiatives of the nongovernmental initiatives in volatile regions like Kashmir, Somalia, Argentina, West Africa, Jamma, Nagaland, Nigeria, Cambodia, Lebanon, Uganda, and Nicaragua makes one thing clear that the presence of such initiatives strengthens the legitimacy, accountability and transparency of intergovernmental decision-making. In

this process "... traditional practices are not only of historical significance, they can be of great practical value to all who are dealing with conflict" (Annan, 2005).

Current models, practices and analyses of peacebuilding tend to focus on changes at the leadership level and neglect what happens to the people in streets. Benefits of peace process should be shared by all; otherwise it leads only to uneven peace. Process of peace should involve the entire society which is found to be frequently neglected in the recent initiatives. The phase of transition of violence to peace begins only when different factions enter into the process. So, it can be assumed that more and more engagement and participation of common people is the basic prerequisite of a sustainable peace process and so, the traditional institutions, enjoying a mass support should be brought into the scenario. "Building a stronger bridge and narrowing the gap between academic research and practical approaches can deliver what to make a positive difference in people's lives (Atashi, 2009).

Building strong interpersonal and intergroup relations throughout the fabric of society, making an ongoing commitment to people and to processes, respecting the cultural wisdom of all the parties and welcoming the creative interaction of different cultural ways are some major principles for making a peace process successful. In this context, we can refer to the existence of those social institutions or customs which practices all these elements. These social institutes are grounded for empowerment of the groups they are associated with and work on the principles of facilitation, mutual trust and engagement. Terminologies used in multi track diplomacy are actually already available in most of our traditional societal practices which opens up possibility of restructuring them in accordance with present day needs (Siver, 2005).

While discussing the pros and cons of mechanisms of Peacebuilding, Volker Boege (2006), clearly states that traditional approaches only are applicable in specific circumstances and in confined niches. Such an approach challenges today's fashionable mainstream discourse on fragile/failing states and its practical political fallout: conventional state-building and institution-building as the one and only avenue for nonviolent conduct of conflict – an approach which has reaped only poor results so far. The conventional western perception which equates an absence of state-induced order to

a complete absence of order is much too narrow. This commonly held western view fails to take into account the actual situation on the ground in many regions of the Global South. Beyond the state there is a host of actors and institutions, customary ways and means of maintaining order, controlling violence and resolving conflicts. The western perception of the weakness or fragility of state institutions as a problem and an obstacle to the maintenance of order is far too short-sighted. Boege has posited that it is necessary to change the perspective: not to think in terms of fragile states, but hybrid political orders in which pre-modern, modern and post-modern elements mix and overlap (Ibid, 2006).

The concept and practice of Peacebuilding has constantly been called into question due to its alienation from the common people's understanding and participation. Lived experiences of the conflict zone and the virtual world of peace building created by the peace building narrative are completely different. Hence peace building initiatives often experience failure. Tobias Denskus (2007) argues that peace building may turn out to be a cosmopolitan concept if they cannot be brought into the ground level. In this regard, the writer calls for the integration of traditional and modern practices as well as of parallel co operation of national, local and ground rooted institutions. Such social institutes can listen to the people of the periphery, the real experiences and need which can help the policy makers to introspect the issue more closely and to think for a more sustainable resolution system.

Multi and inter-disciplinary approaches to peace building are essential, including interaction within and amongst the fields of conflict prevention, human rights, development economics, governance and democratization. Until recently, the sectors within the humanitarian community have been working, largely, independently of each other. Representatives of the fields of human rights, development and macroeconomics, and governance and democratization have all worked independently on their own initiatives, using their own methodologies, approaches and even mutually exclusive vocabularies. This gulf does not serve communities in trouble and in need. There are large number of regional and sub-regional structures and venues for dialogue, mediated negotiation, conflict prevention, resolution and training, but they are underfunded, lack

adequate information technology mechanisms and are not linked. There are numerous ways that a network of such structures could be developed in a manner that would be highly effective and not terribly costly, and which could be electronically linked so that regions could support and strengthen each others' conflict prevention best practices databases. Possibility and need of a futuristic model is required what the present research is aiming at (Dress, 2005).

1.2.2. Traditional organisations and Mechanisms

There are traditional methods of conflict resolution and peacebuilding that can still be used in appropriate situations. Even amidst the presence of new, modern techniques of conflict resolution, the surviving traditional systems can also be of great importance. Traditional mechanism is not merely a matter of reverting to ancient traditions. What may specially be propagated, therefore, is the development of new homegrown practices in which the best current practices and compatible traditions are integrated. But it should only be used in "appropriate situations" - situation in which the descendants of the people who developed the method are still loyal to the same cultural context (Malan, 2005). This point is of great importance for the present research as attempts have been made to integrate the prevailing practices of a particular social setting with modern practices, where the people are still loyal to the traditional institutes (*Satra /Namghar*).

The issue of local ownership does gain critical attention in the vocabulary of peacebuilding, but there still remains gap in its proper understanding and implementation. In most of the cases call for local ownership runs counter to the nature of implementation. Though academicians and policy makers call for local ownership relatively little attention has been paid to specifying what precisely the concept means or how it might be implemented. Ownership is ultimately about agency, and understanding how the, combined agency of international and domestic actors can produce better, more peaceful outcomes in conflict affected spaces is arguably, the most crucial question facing contemporary peacebuilding. Prioritising local capacities in the peacebuilding requires an attitudinal shift on the part of international actors towards embracing the notion of peacebuilding as a genuine partnership across the international-local divide, in which the

resources, knowledge, and priorities of outsiders must be creatively combined and reconciled with the resources, skills and priorities of locals. Legitimacy of the actors and activities should be clearly realised by the local actors .To resolve this issue of legitimacy from the side of the interveners, requires greater attentiveness on the part of international actors to both political and cultural realities as well as to the material needs of the people they seek to assist. Working for peace should not be founded on what should be rather should be grounded on what really is, on the existing parameters of the locality (Donais, 2012).

Naga women of the North Eastern part of India have been playing an exemplary role in reconstructing a conflict tor society and putting their efforts in building peace. Using a variety of traditional approaches, Naga women capitalize on cultural and tribal tradition of women's peace activism to play a critical role in the Indo-Naga peace process. Conducting inter –community and inter-tribal events and ceremonies, Naga women cross conflict divides to promote peace and reconciliation and are routinely relied on as interlocutors, mediators or negotiators. UN,s increasing importance upon the role of women in peacebuilding activities has been best exemplified in the initiatives of these brave women. In tribal societies and in the North Eastern part of India, women have been enjoying a liberal position and they possess knowledge of traditional dispute settlement mechanisms (Manchanda, 2005). More and more representatives of the ground fields, villages, and conflict areas should be engaged in peace initiatives as they experience the reality in the very naked stage.

Afar who share a common boundary with Tigrayan highlanders in northern Ethiopia has followed their own institutional practices for resolution of conflict. The latter constitute a separate ethnic group and they have a slightly different means of subsistence. The study aimed to examine the types of disputes in historical perspectives and to understand local ways of handling conflicts ranging from intra-clan to inter-ethnic levels. Changes in the environmental, social, political and economic areas change in the nature and degree of conflicts the community faced with. When conflicts occur at various levels, the Afar generally rely more on their own local dispute settlement forums than the government legal machinery. Within their own group, clan elders as well as kinship and

domestic groups maintain peace through sanctions following mablo assemblies. Relations with the highlanders are also regulated via a jointly established institution called Gereb, which enforces order based on written customary laws. In both Mablo and Gereb assemblies, a group of prominent elderly personalities involve in a chain of negotiations and arbitration processes to resolve conflicts in an orderly and transparent manner. At present, government institutions also starts co-operating with the indigenous systems at different stages. Governments administrative and legal organs may occasionally directly involve in the actual conflict resolution process (in an intra-clan context) or may act as facilitators by creating favourable conditions for resolution through the indigenous system (in an inter-clan and inter-ethnic context). This institutional support from modern legal set-ups along with the internal integrity of the indigenous institutions itself has contributed to the effectiveness and continued strength of the latter (Tafere and Haile, 2004).

Tribal communities of North East India have been practicing their own set of mechanisms to deal with local conflicting issues. Conflict resolution in tribal societies, governed by traditional law, conflict resolution is within the context of a restorative and reparative system rather than an adversarial and punitive system. In a criminal case, the goal is to heal and restore the victim's well being and to help the offender to retain dignity while in a civil case the parties involved are tried to be made all winners. Societies of North East India are centered on the villages and social organisations play pivotal role in dealing with resolution of the internal conflicts. Though the methods may not be completely identical to each other, they share common characteristics like collective wisdom, reliance on experience and perspectives of the elders, punishment in the form of reduction of social space, oath taking etc. Administrative bodies within the village settle most of the internal issues with the help of customary laws where elders, due to their experiences and knowledge over the local circumstances, take the most active part. Healing and restoration of harmony act as the guiding principle of such resolution tactics (D, Souza, 2011).

1.2.3. The Specified Area –*Satras* and *Namghars*

Namghars stand for the vibrant Assamese culture. It is an institute with huge mass support which popularises the democratic, participatory culture among the common mass. *Namghars* were the institutes that introduced the Assamese mass to the decentralized and participatory mechanisms of democracy. As an agent of community development, practicing effective popular participation, the village *Namghar* can contribute immensely to building a vibrant group of citizens who by playing their part in the planning and implementation of respective development strategies relating to their own areas ,contribute to the overall process of national welfare starting from the village level (Bhuyan;2007).

The origin, evolution, activities, role and impact of *Satras* and *Namghars*-the two basic institutes of Assamese society is associated with the rise of Bhakti Movement. These institutions were set up by Sankaradeva to disseminate the philosophy propounded by him. But, *Satras* and *Namghars*, though primarily aimed for dissemination of the Vaishnavite philosophy, they have also been strong platform to practice cultural heritage of the Assamese society. In the social sphere, both the institutes follow democratic principles by liberal participation of people of all castes and creeds. Democracy, even without the least knowledge of the beneficiaries, has been practiced in the utmost manner in these institutions. Conflicting issues of smaller scale or social disputes are settled in democratic manner in these institutions. “Strong bonding with the villagers and their loyalty to these institutions help them to retain their place in the Assamese society (Neog, 1967).

Satras and *Namghars* are two integral institutions of Assam and the daily life a common Assamese cannot be narrated without their association with these institutions. Both these institutions have been promoting cultural practices (dance, music, handicrafts etc) throughout the ages. *Namghars* in the village level (micro) and *Satras* in the regional level (macro) work for cultural development. In this process cultural capitals are found to be used as mobilisers of harmony and unity among the villagers (Rajguru, 1997).

Satras of Assam are more than single functioned institutes. Activities of *Namghars* and *Satras* have been extended up to the social, cultural and even political spheres of the state. Even the structural division of duties of the *Satras* itself stands for a decentralized, democratic model. The structural division of responsibilities among the members and the equal importance to all of them and their contributions help these two age old institutions survive. Festivals (*Rashleela*, *Tithi of Mahapurusha*, *Palnam* etc) celebrated in the *Satras* promote not only the cultural heritage but also promote democratic ideals of inclusive participation of more and more people as well as cultivation of teamwork. Most of the dramatic programmes enacted in the *Satras* celebrate victory of goodness, women empowerment, and mass participation (Devagoswami, 2002).

New Vaishnavism, propounded by Sankaradeva, cultivates a culture which is rooted not only upon religious teachings. Rather through its inception in “the elevation of human nature and the stoppage of its course towards degradation, the formation of human character on a strong rational foundation, the improvement of the general form and tone of society, race and civilization, the cordiality of human relations, the refinement and dignity in human behaviour, the liberal and sound education of all, the release of all higher energies towards the cause of culture and humanity, in short, the propounding of higher ideals of life” –this philosophy contains a wider social significance and hence, Now Vaishnavism is still influential in the Assamese society. Dimbeshwar Neog (1998), in his *Jagat Guru Sankardew*, reveals the universality of this philosophy also by pointing out the scientific elements associated with it and the creed free open environment which attracts people of any generation. It indicates the bright future of this philosophy. *Satras* and *Namghars* are the age old custodians of this philosophical tradition.

Satras of the Majuli Island, inspite of being located in a rural setting, often proves their progressive outlook in different social and political matters. In this aspect, special mention should be made of the Garamur *Satra* and *Satradhikar* Pitambardeva Goswami. Pitambardeva Goswami was bold enough to abolish celibacy in the *Satra* and to welcome householder life for the inmates. He was a visionary social reformist who had taken

active role in the national movement, fought against the business of opium, supported widow remarriage, prevented child marriage and expressed his stern view on the question of Assamese vs Bengali language .His opposition against traditional social hierarchy was reflected in his public criticism of the life of the *Satradhikars*, arrangement of *Byabasthapak Sabha*, plan for an ideal *Satra* which were scattered in his writings. Developmental plans and progressive outlook often mark the identity of the institution of *Satras* and they have always been vocal in conflicting issues (Nath, 2012).

Study on the available literature proves that Peacebuilding is an inclusive process; it calls for integration of both existing and new mechanisms. In modern Peacebuilding initiatives, there is the need of inclusion of traditional knowledge, practised by the existing institutions. But while studying the contributions of *Namghars* and *Satras*, researchers are found to concentrate more on the cultural or religious aspects and their impact on Assamese society. Hardly anyone looks into the mechanisms of Peacebuilding, which have been practised in the institutions throughout the ages. We find little literature which examines the potentiality of these institutions as a futuristic model for initiating peace. The present research will try to look into this area to fill the gap. Moreover documentation of these institutional mechanisms is also not initiated. This study would also be an attempt to fill this gap and to contribute to the existing branch of knowledge of Peacebuilding and its mechanisms.

1.3. Rationale and Scope of the Study

Building peace is the immediate urgency of the present day world. The entire world has been passing through conflicts ranging over numerous issues hindering the developmental process. Scholars, policy makers, international organisations consider peacebuilding to be the foremost priority of the present world and engage in multifaceted strategies to make their peacebuilding approaches successful. Here lies the emerging importance of studying on peacebuilding and the possible scopes of integration of the traditional and modern practices and up gradation of the current practices. For reconstructing subsequent developments, we can build on the traditional institutions practicing peacebuilding. Traditional knowledge on conflict and a conflict resolution mechanism is of great value as they are rooted to the ground reality, promote relational

independence and are oriented toward consensus. Though conflicts share some common characteristics, they at the same time vary in local levels. Hence, universally proposed mechanisms of responding to conflict are frequently called into question. Experts, therefore, call for more integrated, grounded methods to address conflict. The branch of Peace and Conflict studies witness the growing importance of looking into the traditional ,collective branch of knowledge on the issues of conflict and peace which have been preserved in the forms of institutions ,practices, rituals, customary laws etc .An objective investigation of this area may help contributing to the existing peace related branch of knowledge.

Namghar and *Satra* are two major socio-cultural institutions of the state of Assam. Both these institutions enjoy immense mass support and hold impact over the entire race. Throughout the ages, both the institutions have been playing influential role in the public sphere of this conflict prone state. The institutions promote those social capitals (mutual respect, equality, participation, secularism) and nurture them in the right way which is the basic ingredient of any peace initiative. *Satras* and *Namghars* were the institutions that introduced the Assamese folk with the democratic *Panchayati Raj* system. Majuli is the only place where the major *Satras* have been situated and they are known for their cultural practices (*Satriya* Dance, *Borgeet*, *Bhaona*, mask making, *Rashleela*, Publication of the second news paper of Assam etc)-collectively known as *Satriya* culture, throughout the world. Sankaradeva himself established many of the *Satras* of Majuli. Moreover, *Satras* of Majuli have a glorious history of participation in social movements like Freedom Movement of India, the Assam Movement and the Language Movement of Assam. These institutions have also been raising their voices in issues like Flood and Erosion, Deforestation, Corruption and Misutilisation of public money in Majuli.

Unfortunately, there is hardly any study on the role of these two institutions in this particular area. Large numbers of works have been done on the cultural and religious aspects of these social institutions. But the possibility/role of *Satra* and *Namghar* –as a model institute for peacebuilding still remains unexplored. These two institutes know the cultural context of the conflicts of the region and their practices are simple,

comprehensible hence easier for more people to participate. The proposed research would try to fill this gap by exploring their prospects and documenting them. Considering all these, the present research concentrates on the role of traditional institutions in the process of peacebuilding with emphasis on *Satra* and *Namghar*. Moreover the research is also necessary as scientific and systematic documentation of these institutional practices are not yet done.

The proposed research looks into the concepts of Peacebuilding in its wider context and concentrates on the traditional institutions –their practices and future potentialities with specific examination of the *Satras* and *Namghars* of Majuli. Both these institutions, even in the twenty first century, serve as effective agents of social control and healthy corporate existence in this region. Hence, the research would try check out the possibility of using these two institutes as peace constituencies by looking into their use of the social capitals (loyalty, trust, teamwork culture, participatory ideals). They can be used as unique mobilisers and motivators for peacebuilding activities in this region. Besides, Majuli, due to its scenic natural beauty and holy environment is a popular tourist destination and centre of academic interest. It is one of the proposed international heritage sites of UNESCO. Hence, *Satras* and *Namghars* of Majuli have been chosen for the proposed study. Outcomes of the study may enhance the academic significance of this region.

1.4. Research Questions

1. To what extent, traditional institutions and their practices contain the elements of Peacebuilding?
2. What are the nature and characteristics of the different peacebuilding mechanisms of *Satras* and *Namghar*?
3. Whether the strategies practised by *Namghars* and *Satras* to address the issues of structural violence and conflict are relevant in addressing the present volatile issues?
4. Do *Satra* and *Namghar* bear the potentiality of futuristic models for peacebuilding methods for the state?

1.5. Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the relevance and importance of inclusion of traditional institutions and their methods in the modern Peacebuilding mechanisms.
2. To explore the possibility of a new, sustainable and specific mechanism of conflict transformation/ building peace with integration of local and global.
3. To examine the components of peacebuilding in the practices of the *Satras* and *Namghars* and to explore the possibility of using them as futuristic channels for building peace.
4. To investigate and document the traditional knowledge preserved through these institutions for future research and dissemination.

1.6. Hypothesis

The peacebuilding mechanisms of *Satras* and *Namghars*, if preserved, nurtured and developed in right direction, seem to add new dimensions to the available modern peacebuilding paradigm.

1.7. Research Methodology

This study is primarily theoretical in nature and is supported by empirical investigation. There are three basic areas- the understanding of the general mechanisms of Peacebuilding, the traditional institutional practices and study on the institutional practices of *Satras* and *Namghars* of Majuli. Regarding the theoretical part, the study addresses peacebuilding in the broad sense of the term and the other relevant areas. It is based on secondary sources (books, journals, articles, reports of International/national organisations, NGO publications, working papers etc) .For the latter part, interviews and questionnaires are used in local (Assamese) language. Respondents are not much comfortable in English language and so the vernacular language has been used for the investigation purpose. Interviews with prior information and consent and focused group discussions are also used through the process. The targeted sample includes respondents of three categories of the specified area .These three categories include- common Assamese mass, persons associated with the two institutions and the youth. Questionnaires are of mixed pattern of open and close ended nature. Most of the *Satras* of

Majuli are covered while *Namghars* have been selected randomly. In case of the *Satras*, materials have been mainly collected from ten major *Satras* of the island- Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur, Uttar Kamalabari, Natun Kamalabari, Bengenaati, Bihimpur, Natun Chamaguri, Prachin Chamaguri and Bhogpur *Satra*. *Satradhikars*, *Bhakats* and the officials have been interviewed extensively with their prior consent. In case of the *Namghars*, the demographic structure, caste distribution and geographical location were the basic points of selection. During the selection process, *Namghars* from four Mishing and two Deori villages are included. The Mishing villages are - Karkichuk, Jengrai Mirigaon, Ratanpur Mirigaon and Molual Miri. The Deori villages were the Majar Deori village and Deori Pam village. The complete list of the existing *Satras* and the list of villages under the field study of the present research have been enclosed in respective chapters.

Besides interviewing the people specifically associated with the institutions, formal discussions on the issues were also held with writers, social scientists, college teachers' administrative officials of different offices of the island. In this process, interviews and discussions were conducted with groups of teachers from Majuli College, Jengraimukh College, officials of Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority, Office of the Sub Divisional Officer (Civil), Office of the Statistical Officer, Office of the Sub Divisional Librarian, Kalabhumi Majuli, Abakash Majuli (NGOs working in Majuli), Tribeni Sahitya Sabha etc. Three groups of college going and university students were covered within the research through interview and questionnaires. The groups consisted of students of Majuli College, Jengraimukh College, Pub Majuli College, Dibrugarh University, Gauhati University and Assam Women University, Jorhat.

For the proper historical, analytical understanding, the research relies on secondary sources (books, magazines, news paper, reports, working paper, research papers, journals etc in both Assamese and English. In this process archives and libraries were visited. Libraries of Gauhati University, Dibrugarh University, ICSSR- NERC Shillong, Institute of Development Studies, Kolkata, Mahanirvan Research Group, North East Social Research centre, Guwahati, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Indian Council of Historical Research- Guwahati, North Eastern Hill

University, Law Research Institute, Assam, Vivekanda Kendra- Guwahati, Majuli College, Sikkim University, Jakir Hussain Library-Jamia Millia Islamia, Central State library Guwahati were visited in this process. Many *Satras*, like Auniati, Garamur and Dakhinpat *Satras* have their own publications (Sanchi manuscripts, books, monographs, articles and souvenirs on different occasions) and these are also used for the research. Collection of articles and souvenirs published on the eve of *Rashleela*, *Sadou Asom Nam Samaroh*, *Sadou Asom Bhaona Samaroh*, *Shisya Sanmilan*, *Palnam* , golden jubilee celebration of academic institutions of Majuli have also been used to collect respective information for the research.

Interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGD) have been conducted with the *Satradhikar* (The chief of a *Satra*), *Bhakats*, (Resident members of *Satra*), *Gaobura* (Village chief) and other relevant persons. For a better understanding of the rituals, activities and functions of the *Satra*, participatory observation method has been followed where the researcher stayed in the *Satra* and observed the functions closely. In this process, four *Satras* (Garamur, Kamalabari, Auniati and Dakhinpat) and the major festivals and public functions of four *Satras* (*Rashleela*, *Palnam*, *Mel*, *Bihu*, and *Tithis*) are covered up. The researcher stayed in the *Satra* premises during the festival of *Palnam* and *Maghbihu* of Auniati *Satra* in 2014, *Rashleela* of Dakhinpat *Satra* in 2014, *Doulyatra* of Garamur *Satra* in 2014 and *Sadou Asom Bhaona Samaroh* organised by Auniati *Satra* in 2015. The participatory observation method, in case of the Namghars, was applied in annual *Barsabah*, *Bhaona performances*, *Shakam*, *Bharasha* and observation of events like *Tithis*, *Shilpi Diwas*, *Bhupendra Sangeet* competitions, *Sankar Janmotshawav* and *Pachoti*. During the time period of June 2014 – September 2015, the researcher attended nine (9) *Bhaonas*, six (6) *Mels* and seven (7) *Barsabhas*. Most of the *Bhaonas* were organised on the nights of the *Barsabah* within the months of April to June in the years of 2014 and 2015.

1.8. Chapterisation

Chapter I- Introduction

This chapter introduces the concept of peacebuilding and the theoretical understanding, the research questions, the objectives, hypotheses, scope of the study and the methodology to be adopted. This is an introductory overview of the proposed research.

Chapter II - Traditional institutions and their practices in peacebuilding: historical perspectives

This chapter discusses different traditional institutions and their methods for building peace. It will be a narration on different traditional practices of peacebuilding and conflict resolution from different parts of the world, highlighting on the socio-cultural context of implementation and effectiveness.

Chapter III-*Satras* and *Namghar*- Traditional institutions of Assam

This chapter introduces the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* of Assam. It provides detailed description of their origin, development and mechanisms in a wider perspective of Assam. In this process, the chapter describes the origin, evolution and current status of the *Satras* and *Namghars* in Assam along with a historical analysis of the Bhakti movement propagated by Sankaradeva with its impact on the Assamese society.

Chapter IV-Mechanisms of Peacebuilding of *Satras* and *Namghars*

This chapter specifically deals with the different practices, rituals, activities performed in the *Satras* and *Namghars* of Assam, with a special focus on Majuli and examines the components of peacebuilding therein. Attempts will be made to examine them in the light of modern peacebuilding initiatives.

Chapter V - Rediscovering Traditional Peacebuilding Methods of *Satras* and *Namghars*

This chapter will discuss the *Satra* and *Namghar* as institutions celebrating peace mechanisms; characteristics of the mechanisms, will check out the possibility of the applicability of the conventional mechanisms in present context and the potentiality of the institutions as an alternative peacebuilding catalyst.

Chapter VI – Conclusion

This chapter will sum up the entire findings on the basis of the analyses and will suggest for probable innovations in the area of role of the *Satras* and *Namghars* in Peacebuilding.

CHAPTER 2

Traditional institutions and their practices in peacebuilding: historical perspectives

2.1. Introduction

Traditional institutions refer to the indigenous socio-political arrangements whereby leaders with proven track records are appointed and installed in line with the provisions of their native laws and customs (Orji & Olali, 2010). The fundamental essence of the institutions is to preserve the customs and traditions of the people, to manage conflicts arising among or between members of the community by the instrumentality of laws and customs of the people and bind the society in a harmonious manner. They are the active agents of maintaining the social equilibrium and building peace of the respective societies (Nweke, 2012). In this process, traditional institutions achieve this goal by opting for two methods. Firstly they use their societal influence borne out of the social capital they enjoy .Secondly they have their own set of customs and laws to maintain the equilibrium.

Traditional institutions enjoy unconditional validity and acceptability within a specific social or community setting. Traditional institutions are rooted in/by products of the broad social philosophy and cultural worldview of a specific community. The ontological paradigm of such communities consists of certain values and customs which they consider to be representative of their identity and useful to their social, political and ecological surroundings. In general, the knowledge carried forward by such institutions is known as the indigenous or traditional knowledge system. An Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) is defined as “systematic reference to the knowledge and practices of indigenous communities constitutive of their meaning and belief systems, as well as the substantive dimension of their practices and customs. Accordingly, IKS is about the knowledge, practices, values and ways of knowing and sharing in terms of which communities have survived for centuries” (Nel, 2005).¹ Though they are traditional, they

¹ See “Indigenous Knowledge system: Contestation, rhetorics and space” in *African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge systems* ,4(1). See also the definition of Indigenous Knowledge system (IKS) adopted by the

are flexible in the sense that they are constantly changing in response to the changing environment. Traditional Knowledge performs several functions including semiotic, that is, communications through symbols, art forms or crafts, institutional that is, providing rules coded in rituals and other cultural and social sanctions. Some of these rituals and cultural sanctions institutionalize incentive measures for the use of traditional knowledge. These sanctions could be material such as fines or penalties or ethereal such as the fear of God. Traditional institutions carry forward this large bunch of knowledge with due approval from its member communities.

Laws practised by traditional institutions may not strictly refer to procedural formalities of judiciary. Rather the concept of customary law and customs better suit this context. Custom is a usage and a practice, which may or may not have social recognition, and whose violation may or may not result in any sanction. On the other hand, customary law is a usage and a practice which is socially sanctioned, and the contravention of this leads to some penalties. When a custom is practiced over a period of time and found to be helpful in maintaining harmony in a society, it becomes established as customary law (Vitso, 2003). Customs grow spontaneously with the growth of a community under the guardianship/supervision of the traditional institutions. Customs and customary laws come into existence as a community is accustomed to following a particular course of conduct over the years dating back to an immemorial antiquity. Sanction behind the customs and such institution is thus, common consent and consciousness (Naolekar, 2007). This way customs and customary laws acquire validity and enforceability within the particular social context. Such traditional legal traditions also include mechanisms for acknowledgement, truth telling, accountability, healing and reparations etc.

Among legal scholars, there has been an elaborate discussion regarding the status of customary law. Since customary law is not written, but passed on from generation to generation orally and allegedly lacks the clarity and certainty of enacted law, some scholars have relegated it to a secondary status vis-a-vis statutory law. But others hold

University of the Free state(2007) according to which IKS is the knowledge system distinctive from the ‘international knowledge systems generated through universities, government research centres and private industry, sometimes incorrectly called the Western Knowledge systems’

that customary law provides “practical guidance for daily interactions and effective solutions for problematic situation in a more satisfying manner than that provided by the formal legal system” (Leon: 2000) .Custom too is important, as according to Lloyd, custom is not inferior to law. “Broadly speaking, however, the vital contrast between primitive custom and developed law is not that the former lacks the substantive features of law, or that it is unsupported by sanctions, but simply that here is an absence of centralized government” (Lloyd,1996). Lloyd does not relegate custom to mere practices of a community. He finds custom imbued with the characteristic features of law and substantially as powerful as law. This is a major departure from the mainstream bias against custom as lacking the certainty, clarity and legitimacy of enacted law.

In most cases, selection of persons into the offices of traditional institutions is hereditary or by selection or election by the instrument of relevant traditional methods. The mode of selection of the occupant of traditional institutions varies from ethnic groups to ethnic groups or communities to communities. But in general, institutions worldwide seem to follow democratic methods to select or elect their dignitaries. Common consensus on the matters of seniority, expertise over social, political and economic issues, experiences over worldly matters play the determining role in such process. Knowledge over the customs and their proper process of implementation are primary requisites of such officials. Objectivity is another major condition in this process. The capacity to examine and evaluate any issue in an objective and impartial manner is a determining factor in such selection. Interestingly, the same institutions have mechanisms of punishments for these officials if they are found to violate the given codes. The entire system is found to be guided by a certain value system founded upon specific context. Political and economic conditions of the respective societies demand for specific context based mechanisms to solve certain issues. So, the traditional institutions being the symbols of indigenous peoples’ rights, privileges, laws, customs and traditions, are always important and significant for the inhabitants.

In a common traditional setting, the traditional institutions are charged with legislative, executive and judicial functions. They make laws, execute them and interpret and apply the fundamental laws, customs and traditions of the people for the smooth

running of their communities. For the centuries, such institutions have been working as the custodian of traditional knowledge. Traditional knowledge refers to the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities around the world. Developed from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment, traditional knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation. It tends to be collectively owned and takes the form of stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language, agricultural practices including the development of plant species and animal breeds. Traditional knowledge is mainly of a practical nature, particularly in such fields as agriculture, fisheries, health, horticulture, and forestry.

Traditional institutions have different approaches to conflict management and peace building. Boege Volker agrees with this issue when he argued that traditional approaches vary considerably from society to society, from region to region, from community to community. Boege further affirms that “there are as many different traditional approaches to conflict transformation as there are different societies and communities with a specific history, a specific culture and specific custom even in the global south” just like any other(Boege:2006). A strategy of resolution suitable for one community may not be acceptable for another. The understanding of conflict and peace varies from one community to another. Geographical locations, nature of ecology, perception of culture, religion and perceived worldview are some seminal issues to determine the resolution methods of conflict and working for peace. Boege states that traditional approaches are always context specific and are not universally applicable as modern or conventional methods are. Rather they are more effective in local /traditional context as they depend on relationships that are rooted in a common view of the world and a shared acknowledgement of customary institutions. So discussion on traditional institutions and their role in peacebuilding demands proper investigation into the issue of context.²

² Context in general, refers to the specific set of facts or circumstances that surround a situation or event. In this discussion, the term ‘context’ is used to talk about local context which means that peacebuilding activities should be needs-based, and the priorities, sequencing and pace of delivery need to be informed by the dynamics of the host system, not by external systems.

This chapter deals with different traditional institutions and their special ways to resolve and transform conflicts and build peace. In this process institutions from different parts of the world are brought forth for the discussion. It outlines the respective techniques of the institutions to address and resolve the diverse conflicts. It is important to mention in this connection that, properly documented literatures on traditional institutions except for African countries are hardly available. Each of the institutions has its own mechanism to address the existing social conflict. They all are rooted to the specific socio-cultural context of the region and the community.

2.2. Institutions and their Mechanisms

The traditional institutions in the Nigerian context is inclusive of the chiefs-in-council, elders-in-council, title holders who may be appointed based on their contributions to the growth and development of their communities with little or no executive, legislative or judicial powers. Among the Niger Delta communities³ specifically, the traditional approaches to conflict management and resolution vary from community to community, especially when viewed from the multi cultural or multi ethnic composition of the region. However, most of the Niger Delta communities share common traditional approaches, especially the *Igbo* and *Ijaw* speaking groups in view of their common historical antecedents - oil exploration and exploitation (Nweke,2012).

There existed two major types of traditional institutions in the pre-colonial Nigeria. These include centralised authority structure and decentralised authority structure. The Hausa/Fulani pre-colonial society falls within the centralised structure whereas, the Igbo society/South-East, was a decentralised system. However, the Yoruba pre-colonial society had a combination of both. In Nigerian traditional societies, there were a plethora of structures and values in place, for example, there existed centralised political systems with strong monarchies. Furthermore, just like other Nigerian traditional societies, governance was carried out within the framework of communities, such as the

³ The contemporary geo-political region of Niger Delta comprises the nine states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. All communities in these nine states are part and parcel of the Niger Delta. All the communities of these nine state share the commonality in matter of oil exploration and exploitation activities as all of them suffer almost the same level of deprivation, injustice, marginalisation and environmental destruction in the hands of the Nigerian state and oil multinationals.

Arochukwu community, compounds which were a decentralised structure in local governance within local communities, such as the *Agbo-ile* among the Yoruba; and 'house' which were a unique institution in local governance in the Niger Delta communities such as the Canoe Houses of Bonny and Kalabari in Rivers State (Roberts, 2004). These kingdoms were, however, presided over by strong traditional institutions corresponding to the geopolitics of tradition. Before colonialism, traditional rulers were the sovereign authorities within their respective jurisdiction. They were selected by common consensus and conflicting issues were resolved through customary practices (Nweke: 2012).

In the Niger Delta, most of the kingdoms were highly decentralised to lower units of governance from traditional rulers to smaller or compound/village chiefs, elders-in-council, age grades and the like (Roberts, 2004). In a traditional setting in the Niger Delta communities, a council of kingmakers was responsible for selecting the successor to a dead ruler or most elderly or village head. *Amanyinabos*, (Ijaw kingdom), *Okan-Obolo* (Andoni), *Obara-Yok* (Yok-Obolo), the national deity, *Nye-Nwe-Alis* and *Owho*-holders (Ikwerre Ethnic Nationality) *Eze-Ogbah* (Ogbah of Northern Niger Delta) were some of the influential traditional institutions all in the Niger Delta which had very strong influences in their respective localities in conflict management and controlling peace. They exercised as the custodian of their people's customs and traditions. This extended to other ethnic nationalities of Ekpeye, Ndoni, Etche, Ogoni, among others. Traditional institutions had own innovative measures to control conflict over issues like land clash, hostility over natural resource management, inter-community conflict etc.

Traditional methods of social control such as communal solidarity, traditional oaths, rewards, vigilantes, informal settlements, checks and balances, decentralization, effective communication and good governance remain strong and have been informally used successfully for conflict management by these communities in Nigeria. Such institutions opted for oaths for the offender and even declared prize (generally in the form of material objects) for one who admitted it. In matters of larger issues of inter community and intra community clashes, opinions of the elders and the experts (for instance in case of war like situations, opinion was asked from experts in warfare) were

taken (Akinwalle, 2010). If the traditional head or the rulers were found guilty or corrupted, there were even evidences of self-exile, suicide or resignation from the post as it was against the group he/she belonged to. The group/collective identity mattered the most and anything disturbing the peace and harmony was considered crime. In such instances punishments varied from fiscal fine to physical punishments. Transparency in the use of power and the provision for the public to question the leaders marked the uniqueness of such mechanisms .To maintain social solidarity and collective identity were the basic objectives in matters of resolution (ibid,2010). It thus helped building a sustainable peaceful existence. Contemporary scholars criticize the strategic obliteration of such institutions by the imperial power as one of the major factors of failure of peace and prevalence of protracted conflict in the Niger Delta.

Frozen in the history as the Pukhtoon (also known as Pakhtuns, Pashtun etc) nation froze, *Jirga*⁴ is an old customary institution working for conflict resolution and transforming relations in the Pukhtoon belt of Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁵ *Jirga* stands for the traditional institutional mechanism, in which a Pukhtoon society operates, to undertake issues between individuals and between communities, to address concerns, to look for solutions acceptable to all stakeholders and to create and sustain peace. In the operational level, it is a local institution of dispute resolution that incorporates prevalent customary law, institutional rituals and village elders whose collective decisions are binding both morally and socially. *Jirga* consists of elders or representatives of the families, members of religious families and religious figures of note. Though one cannot take part in the formal decision making process, every member of the Pukhtoon household is also the member of the *Jirga* . The decision making process is maintained by the designated officials. As a representative body of Pukhtoon life, *Jirga* is best summarized as a strategic exchange between two or more people to address an issue through verbal communication .The exchange may or may not result in an agreement on the issue, but the process itself leads the parties, including the interveners, to maintain a

⁴ “*Jirga*” is a term found in Pashtu, Persian (and Dari), Turkish, and Mongolian that appears to be related to the word “circle,” the formation used when a *Jirga* meets. It is also pronounced as *jargah*, *jirgah* and *jarga*.

⁵ *Pukhtoons* inhabit the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan as a major ethnic group of the populace. The tribal area in Pakistan – officially called Federally Administered Tribal Areas - lying between the administered districts of NWFP and the Durand Line is spread over an area of 10,510 square miles. In this mountainous tract live over 2,500,000 people who speak Pushto or Pukhto and call themselves Pukhtoons.

certain level of formal communication, thus ensuring peace. *Jirga* is classified into the following types- *Sankari*, *Olasi*, *Loya*. While the *Sankari Jirga* comprises of representatives of the administrative bodies, *Olasi Jirga* consists of elder members of every household (Yousfzai and Gohar, 2005).

Whenever a conflict arises, *Jirga* is convened. The issues *Jirgas* deal with include material disputes, family issues, theft, inheritance issues, alleged violation of honour or inter tribal/intra/tribal killing, community clashes. The *Jirga* listens to both the parties, examines all the evidences within the framework of the issue framed, gathers more evidence from their own side, analyse the issue and announce the verdict. The *Jirga* may take time or may hold as many sessions to examine the issue or even may send delegation to the parties in the conflict. It may even announce interim decisions, call for volunteers as workforce, make new rules for issues like water rights and grazing rights etc. *Loya Jirga* focuses on larger issues of vital national importance like selection of a ruler, declaration of war, adoption of a new constitution and regional issues. Property and inheritance issues, land disputes, fraud and theft, marriage related issues like forced marriage, kidnapping-are different issues *Jirgas* deal with. Being a true representative of the Pukhtoon life, *Jirga* deals the matter in Pukhtoon way (*De Pakhtu lar ba neesu-I* Want to see the issue as a Pukhtoon). Parties with the presence of the elders come to a consensus regarding the mode of settlement arbitration. There is always a moderator in a *Jirga* usually a leading figure sitting a little forward in the formation. He encourages and applauds all the views but his aim should always be reaching at compromise. There has been seldom any voting in *a. Jirga*. In *a Jirga* there are some arm bearing members guaranteeing the safe conduct of affairs. Keeping in view the volatile nature and heavy armament of the Pukhtoons, this is truly a triumph of tradition over instinct (Sultan, 2006). The *Jirga* may mete out punishment to an offender by imposing heavy fine (in the form of money or material) and even may opt for measures like expelling the individual from an area, confiscating, destroying the property etc.

Jirga, unlike the modern judicial system, ensures a faster and less cost-effective justice to the people. Indigenous to Pukhtoon tribal communities, *Jirga* is alive even in the areas now influenced by formal legal system and is used for interpersonal dispute

resolution. *Jirga* may be noted as an informal institution as there is little documentation involved, and its processes are primarily flexible, delicate and inclusive. *Jirga* has enormous impact on the lives of Pukhtoos, particularly those living in the tribal areas, mountains or inaccessible areas where government's influence is low. When seen in practice in those independent areas of Pukhtoon belt, writers have identified its operation as a reflection of the state of liberty and independence present in the Pushto-speaking world. Author Syed Abdul Qudus describes it in this way: "The *Jirga*, by which most community business, both public and private, are settled in the North West Frontier Province (and also Baluchistan) and Afghanistan, is probably the closest approach to Athenian democracy that has existed since times immemorial" (Quddus, 1990). Syed Abdul Qudus also relates *Jirga* to democracy by saying,

"The *Jirga* represents the essence of democracy in operation under which every individual has a direct say in shaping the course of things around him. Practiced this way, democracy operates as a spiritual and moral force instead of becoming an automation of votes" (Quddus, 1990).

The *Jirga* is also thought of as a customary judicial institution in which cases are tried and rewards and punishments inflicted. From the outset, the use of the *Jirga* is limited not only to trials of major or minor crimes and civil disputes, but it also assists in resolving conflicts and disputes between individuals, groups, and tribes. From these and many other definitions of *Jirga*, one can see that *Jirga* is not only a dispute resolution body, but it has many faces depending on the purpose and nature of these *Jirgas*. There is, however, little distinction in name between these different *Jirgas*. To Pukhtoos, the context in which a specific *Jirga* operates gives a clear and undoubted understanding of the role and responsibilities of that particular *Jirga*.

Afghanistan's peace structure in context of traditional institutional machinery is surprisingly strong. Harnessing a long tradition of tribal mechanisms for dispute resolution involving councils of the traditional elders of the villages, *Shuras*⁶ are now

⁶The word "*Shura*" is often confused and used interchangeably with the word "*Jirga*". *Shura* is an Arabic loan word which means consultation or council. The word *Shura* came into usage with the arrival of the Arabic influence after the Arab conquest of Afghanistan.

important mechanisms for peacebuilding in Afghanistan (Report by Infrastructure for Peace, 2012). Here, *Jirgas* and *Shuras* are often confused and both the names are used interchangeably. The term *Shura* came into prominence after the Arab conquest over the region. *Shuras*, like the *Jirgas*, are usually a temporary or ad-hoc group of respected elders, influential persons, religious leaders that convenes when necessary to resolve disputes. A *Shura* is a group of local elders or recognized leaders in different levels, starting from village level who convene regularly to make decisions on behalf of their community. The term *Shura* often creates confusion as it has been used extensively by tribal leaders to describe an organised body of participants, administrative body, tribal council, or meditative process or consultative activity. In general, *Shura* can primarily be defined as an institution that follows the consultative tradition. Afghanistan's formal justice system and institutions, including police and court systems, suffer from limited capacity and widespread perceptions of corruption and inefficiency. As a result, it is estimated that 80 to 90 per cent of Afghans, particularly those living in rural areas, continue to look to informal, non-state institutions to provide justice (Report of CPAU, 2012). These institutions of *Peace Shuras* are often preferred to the formal court system because they are generally led by experienced elders who have earned a reputation for fairness, who understand the local community, reach decisions on locally accepted values and norms, and focus less on punishment and more on maintaining community relations. The influence of religion in the region also matters a lot in the importance of the *Shuras*.⁷Islamic scholars consider decision making via *Shura* as either obligatory or recommended. These scholars consider *Shura* obligatory who choose to emphasise the Quranic verse: "...and consult with them on the matter" (3:159) and those consider it recommended who follow the Quranic verse: "...those who conduct their affairs by council are praised."(43.38).One cannot undermine the religious context when requesting for a *Shura*.

The practices of *Shura* believe that the resolution of conflict cannot be done by a singular method, so they opt for mixed methods. It is a combination of Sharia, '*Maraka*'

⁷The international network infrastructures for peace publish report on local peace initiatives of different countries. These information are used from their case report on the *Peace Shuras* of Afghanistan published in their website [www. i4pinternational.org](http://www.i4pinternational.org).

customary law and *Pustoonwali*⁸ in areas where it is practised. In matters related with Water management, pastureland management, Forest management, Schools or hospitals, *Shura* officials take help of concerned persons like Mirab, Village shepherds, forest guards associated with the respective areas. In some instances, Mullahs are also invited to offer his opinion on the issue. In such cases, the undisputed religious authority of the Mullah plays a crucial role. Agreement-and thereby peace is reached through consensus by using the institution of *Shura*. Elders in the *Shura* use the local *urf* (Arabic term referring to the custom, knowledge of a given society) referring to old cases in combination with Sharia law, and apply them to new cases to find a socially acceptable solution(Favre, 2006). *Shuras* are perceived as being more effective than formal state mechanisms: in the Asia Foundation 2007 survey, over 75 per cent of respondents agreed that *Shuras* were fair and trusted, followed local norms and values, and were effective at delivering justice; whereas just 57–58 per cent believed the same of state courts⁹. Consistent with these findings, research commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) suggests that when *Shuras* address disputes, the most common outcomes are peace between the disputants and compensation for the victim.¹⁰

The popularity and influence of the *Shura* institution inspires the policy makers and the civil society organisations to collaborate with them. *Shuras* in Afghanistan turn out to be an example of successful integration of local/traditional and formal mechanisms of building peace and solidarity. Two important NGOs aiming for community peacebuilding, Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU)¹¹ and Sanayee Development

⁸ Sharia is Islamic law. Maraka refers to the practices of Maraka-a smaller form of *Jirga* or *Shura* where people sit together, solve a conflict or even make a proposal to bride's family. *Pustoonwali* is the tribal term used to unwritten but well-defined and well-known customs, norms, codes and rules that regulate the society of the Pustoon-the most populous ethnic group of Afghanistan.

⁹For more details see Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission. Similarly, in The Asia Foundation survey, 40 per cent of people said that formal courts were not administering justice well (p 60).

¹⁰A UNDP-commissioned survey suggests that 80 per cent of cases handled by *shuras* always or sometimes result in peace, and 50 per cent in compensation for the victim.

¹¹Cooperation for Peace and Unity (CPAU) is an NGO established in 1996, working in the field of peacebuilding, conflict transformation and cultural sensitivity in Afghanistan. Through its coaching, training, awareness programmes, it works in the district and local levels to build up the skills and capacities of local community leaders and representatives of ethnic background by using participatory methods. It has been working in the innovative collaboration of formal and informal justice system of the country. For more details visit the official website-www.cpau.org.af

organisation (SDO)¹² have been trying to establish the traditional mechanisms of *Shuras* in modern scenario. CPAU has facilitated the development of a network of peace *Shuras*, mandated not only to respond to requests for support in resolving conflict but also to address proactively emerging conflict before they become violent (such as heading off a violent response to the publication of the now-infamous Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohemmad in 2006).

They have established several hundreds of Peace *Shuras* in Afghanistan. CPAU mentions to have established some 500 Peace *Shuras* and works for the promotion of knowledge and awareness of peace, social justice and human rights as the foundation upon which the nation-building efforts in Afghanistan should be based. Through its ongoing training and coaching programs, CPAU works at district and local level to build up the skills and capacities of local community leaders and representatives from diverse ethnic backgrounds, strengthening the role of community institutions. The community-based peacebuilding programs of SDO aim to strengthen the social structures that can enable the constructive transformation of conflicts. By addressing the root causes of conflict, they promote stability, justice, goodwill and cooperation among members of the community. SDO has established some 530 Local Peace Councils (LPC) within 13 provinces.¹³

CPAU reaches out in villages to local elders and Community Development Council (CDC) members to begin the process of forming Peace *Shuras*. All community members are invited to participate in selecting the members of the new Peace *Shuras*. The villagers elect some 25 male elders to join the new Peace *Shura*. Membership of the Peace *Shura* tends to overlap with that of CDCs, a government-supported *Shura* that makes decisions about local development projects. Continuity and overlap with other existing institutions positively affects the local legitimacy of the Peace *Shuras*. Most

¹² Sanayee Development Organisation is an NGO in Afghanistan, established in 1990. It works in the field of peacebuilding, health, education, community development, advocacy etc. For more details visit the official website-www.sanayee.org.af.

¹³ Information collected from the respective official websites of CPAU and SDO.

disputes are over land/property; access to water, inheritance, family, marriage and financial compensation.¹⁴

Since June 2010, CPAU has been implementing development projects in Takhar and Kunduz provinces and also in Ali Abad Takhar, Khan Abad and Baharak regions to strengthen links between the formal and informal justice sectors. The overall objective of the project is to improve the provision of justice in Afghanistan. The specific objective is to provide linkages between formal and informal justice mechanisms through innovative programming in the targeted districts. By linkages, we refer to the cooperation and communication between the two systems, including the referral of cases and the sharing of information and legal advice. These linkages are created by carrying out trainings, workshops and other activities designed to increase knowledge and build connections between the formal and informal systems. These Peace Councils are Shuras created to resolve local disputes and therefore improve access to justice. To establish these Peace Councils, CPAU consulted with the provincial governors and relevant District Development Assemblies (DDA) to identify target villages. Based on these consultations, CPAU then reached out to local elders and Community Development Council (CDC) members to begin the process of forming the Peace Councils. In each of the target villages, all community members were invited to participate in selecting the members of the new shuras. They gathered in a public space, such as a school or a mosque, where CPAU's trainers explained the purpose of the Peace Councils and the procedures for selecting Shura members. The villagers then elected approximately 15 or 16 male elders to join the new Peace Council. CPAU staff oversaw and monitored the process in attempt to ensure transparency and fairness and therefore encourage wider legitimacy for the Shuras.¹⁵

Where male Peace *Shuras* were created, some 25 women were also selected by female community members to participate in a women's Peace *Shura*, addressing family disputes especially when they involve female disputants. Peace *Shura* members estimated that they resolved 80 to 90 per cent of their cases. Consensus has emerged within the

¹⁴ For more details visit the official website of CPAU.

¹⁵ *Opportunities and Challenges for Justice Linkage: Case studies from Kunduz and Takhar* (2012), Report by Cooperation for Peace and Unity

development community that non-state/local justice and security networks are often more accountable, efficient, legitimate and accessible providers of justice than the agencies and institutions of the post-colonial state. Peace *Shuras* do not solve the overall conflict, but are important in solving many day to day conflicts and stop them from escalating into violence in this volatile country. Peace *Shuras*, well trained in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, seem to be able to reduce the gap between communities and formal governance structures. (Report by Infrastructure for Peace: 2012).

A National Solidarity Program (NSP), operated out of Afghanistan's Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development,¹⁶ helps identify, manage and monitor development projects and resources. Under the NSP, local NGOs, religious institutions and other development organisations are provided financial and infrastructural help to dedicate more for the strengthening of the village level development. In this process, with the help of village based institutional mechanisms (specifically *Shuras* and the officials) village level councils are created .NSP programmes take special care to increase the participation of women in such development activities. A total number of 31 agencies (including national and international NGOs, farm,UN agency etc) are supported by NSP.The NSP provides direct block-grant transfers to democratically elected Community Development Councils (CDCs) at 200 dollars per family. The CDCs improve local governance, making it more accountable and inclusive; they alleviate poverty and provide jobs. There are some 34,000 CDCs in existence, covering 80 to 90 per cent of rural Afghanistan.¹⁷ All such CDCs, especially those that are well established, have been contributing a in lot conflict resolution, capacity building and peacebuilding tasks.

¹⁶ The National Solidarity Programme (NSP) was created in 2002 and being implemented in 2003 by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development to develop the ability of Afghan communities to identify, plan, manage and monitor the development projects. Through the promotion of good local governance, the NSP works to empower rural communities to make decision affecting their own lives and livelihoods. It builds Community development councils and strengthen them by linking with NGOs and civil society organisations. The NSP receives funding from four primary sources: the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA), the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), the Japanese Social Development Fund (JSDF) and bilateral donors.

¹⁷Information collected from the official website of the National Solidarity Programme, Afghanistan-www.nspafghanistan.org.

Until the introduction of the Ethiopian Codes in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Eritrean¹⁸ communities used to settle their disputes on the basis of customary law. They have an age-long tradition of local dispute resolution and building peace in accordance with their respective customary laws, most of which are codified and date back to the 15th century. This tradition is considered part of the day-to-day life of the community and is a reflection of the desire to maintain peace among all of its members. All litigation hearings were open to the public (hence judges were accountable) and were conducted in front of a village Judge. The village judge is chosen on the basis of common consensus of the villagers. The litigations followed procedures that reflected fairness, secured representation of women and guaranteed the presence of the parties and the swift execution of judgments. Litigants enjoyed the freedom of questioning the partiality of the judges and witnesses who testified under solemn oath. The village paid the so-called ‘blood money’ if one of its members had killed a person from outside the village, and inter-village marriages were conducted as a means of settling murder disputes (Andemariam, 2011).

Eritrean communities believed in the changing nature of human needs and values and so had the practice of amending and revising their laws. Eritreans are one of the people in sub-Saharan Africa to have had codified or written customary laws. The preambles of most of these customary laws claim that the laws were enacted as far back as the 15th century (ibid, 2011). For example: the preamble to the 1910 amendment to the Customary Law of *Loggo Chwa* (the name of a district in the Eritrean highlands) claims that the first version of the law was enacted in 1492 AD during the reign of Emperor Eskindr of Ethiopia; the second version in 1658 during the reign of Emperor Fasil of Ethiopia; the third version during the early days of the Italian occupation of Eritrea (1900); and the final version during the British Military Administration of Eritrea in 1943. Similarly, in a September 1991 interview, Reverend Haile Hadera, an Orthodox Christian priest, one of the elders involved in amending the customary law of *Adkeme-*

¹⁸ Eritrea forms part of the Horn of Africa. It is bordered by Sudan to the north and west, the Red Sea to the east Djibouti in the southeast and Ethiopia to the south. In 1962, Ethiopia, under Emperor Haile Selassie, declared an end to Eritrean autonomy and proclaimed Eritrea a province of Ethiopia. Eritrea was awarded formal independence after a referendum vote in 1993. The Eritreans have an immigration history to countries like Canada, Kenya, other parts of Europe etc. The national language of Eritrea is *Tigrinya*. A large proportion of Eritrea's Muslim population speaks Arabic.

Mlga'e (coined after the two alleged forefathers of the district in the Eritrean highlands within which this customary law applies), claimed that the *Adkeme-Mlga'e* law was over 800 years old.). The law of Adkeme Mlga'e evolved during the reign of Emperor B'edemariam (1467-1477), also underwent modification to fulfil the changing needs. It was modified in 1873 during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia. In 1940, the law underwent its final amendment: in 1944, and was published in the *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici journal*. Both parts of Tigrigna version were published in single edition in 1944. Moreover, according to a tradition, the customary law of *Adgna-Tegeleba* (a name indicating the two villages of *Adgna* and *Tegeleba* in the Eritrean highlands, where this customary law applies), was first codified with the name *The Order of M'em Mhaza* (*M'em Mhaza* indicating a region in the southern highlands) during the reign of the Tigrayan ruler Ras Welde-Slassie (1750-1770). It was later amended in 1873, again in 1904, and finally published in its present form in 1946. This code combines the various previous codes known as *Mai Adghi*, *Serao*, *Enda Deko*, *Enda Fegrai* (Tigrigna families in the southern highlands), in addition to *The Order of M'em Mhaza* (ibid,2011).

When the customary law was recorded or amended, all the villages where it was applied were proportionally represented in the assembly of elders, who would deliberate on the law making/amendment process. These elders would sit in a quiet, isolated place and debate the law in pious solemnity for weeks and often for months or years before they would return to their community and make all the contents of the law publicly known. The public was notified of any amendments to the law and thus their awareness was raised on individual rights and duties, and the legal procedures needed to implement them. The striking similarities among Eritrean customary laws tend to show that there has been constant interaction between and among the various communities of Eritrean society. The transparency maintained in creating and amending a law or any legal mechanism shows that the community believed in the principle that peace is a public concept and so the common mass should be made an integral part of this process.

Traditional institutions are playing important role in managing conflict over natural resources and their management. Ownership of natural resources like water, forest and land is always a conflicting issue and conflict over the distribution, enjoyment and

ownership of such resources always lead to disputes among communities. Communities throughout the world have their own mechanisms to deal with such issues which have insisted on peaceful, non-violent resolution of such issues. Among such approaches, special mention should be made of the *Gadaa* system of the Oromo groups. The Oromo people constitute the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Their original homeland, Oromia, included most of what is now Ethiopia and stretched into northern Kenya, where some Oromos still live. Ecologically and agriculturally, Oromia (Oromo country) is the richest region in the Horn of Africa. Livestock products, coffee, oil seeds, spices, mineral resources and wild life are all diverse and abundant in the region. The migration of the Oromo people, due to the oppression to the United States began in the early 1980s and peaked in 1989-90, with the largest numbers of people settling in Seattle in 1989-93. The traditional Oromo language is Oromiffa, the written form of which has recently changed to use the Roman alphabet. In Oromo culture, the father is the head of the household but the practical leader of the family is the mother. The daily life of the family is dependent on the mother. Traditional Oromo religious belief centers around one God, *Waaqa*, who is responsible for everything that happens to human beings. Though Oromos adopted Islam or Christianity, they still believe the concept of *Waaqa* and incorporated their beliefs into the new religions. The majority of Oromos in Seattle practice Islam, reflecting a Muslim majority within Ethiopia (Omura, 1994).

Oromo ethnic groups were pastorals and semi agriculturalist, and their social organization was based on an egalitarian socio-political and cultural institution called *Gadaa*. *Gadaa* is a wide traditional institutional arrangement to regulate the social, political, economic and cultural life of the Oromos. It is “the totality of the Oromo civilisation” and is built upon a complex socio-cultural process. *Gadaa* has three interrelated meanings: it is the grade during which a class of people assumes politico-ritual leadership, a period of eight years during which elected officials take power from the previous ones, and the institution of Oromo society. *Gadaa* system was a system of an age-grade classes (*luba*) that succeed each other every eight years in assuming military, economy, political and ritual responsibilities. Each *Gadaa* class remained in power during a specific term (*Gadaa*) which began and ended with a formal power transfer ceremony. The *gadaa* system has the principles of checks and balances (through

periodic succession of every eight years), and division of power (among executive, legislative, and judicial branches), balanced opposition (among five parties), and power sharing between higher and lower administrative organs to prevent power from falling into the hands of despots. Other principles of the system have included balanced representation of all clans, lineages, regions and confederacies, accountability of leaders, the settlement of disputes through reconciliation, and the respect for basic rights and liberties (Baissa, 1971, 1993). There have been five *miseensas* (parties) in *Gadaa*; these parties have different names in different parts of Oromia as the result of Oromo expansion and the establishment of different autonomous administrative systems (Lepisa, 1975; Ibssa: 1992). The *Gadaa* system spread with the migration and integration of the Oromo ethnic group and following their permanent settlement the system began to shade its traditional egalitarian socio-political character (Jalata, 2012)

Before discussing the Oromo traditional method of managing conflict over natural resources, it is necessary to know about their understanding of nature. Oromo use three concepts to explain the organization and interconnection of human, spiritual and physical/natural worlds. These three concepts are *ayaana* (spirit), *uuma* (nature), and *safu* (moral and ethical order). The Oromo believe that through *ayaana*, *Waaqa* (God) creates and regulates human and physical worlds in balanced ways. This *ayaana* also maintains the connection between the creator and the created. Hence violation of natural laws equalizes laws of the God. *The ayaana* is a major organizing principle of Oromo cosmology through which the concepts of time and creation are ordered. *Ayaana* as a system of classification and an organizing principle of Oromo cosmology establishes the connection between *Waaqa* (the Creator/God) and the created *Uuma* (nature and society) by differentiating and at the same time uniting the created things and the Creator (Kassam, 2007). The Oromo believe that *Waaqa*, the Supreme Being, created *ayaana* and uses it to organize scattered things into order. As Gemetchu Megerssa (1993) explains, “*ayaana* is the mechanism by which the creator propels itself into becoming its own opposite, and dwells in that which it creates. This is then transposed to explain the basic principles that embed themselves in the diverse Oromo institutions, since there is no distinction between the laws of thought, the laws of nature, history and society.” The concept *uuma* includes everything created by *Waaqa* including *ayaana* worldview.

Under this worldview, *Gadaa* maintains control over water bodies and other natural resources like the pasture and forest. The water management system under the *Gadaa* is an example of democratic use of water as a common property. Watson (Watson, 2001) describes the role of *abbaa Gadaa* in natural resources conflict resolution as follows: The *abbaa Gadaa* is seen as the figurehead of the whole of Boran, and is often described as the President. As well as performing rituals, matters are referred to him and his council when a decision cannot be reached at a lower level. Management of water, as a common property, in Boran remains relatively intact to date (Tache and Irwin, 2003). The region has different sources of water- hand dug small ponds, wells, natural ponds, rivers and rain water. *Gadaa* administration has control over all these sources. Hand-dug ponds and wells are regulated by the *Gadaa* and they are the most important sources of water as they are the most reliable and labor-intensive types. *Gadaa* strictly maintains the norms of cleanliness regarding these sources. Wells cannot be dug after 30 metres and violation of this length is punishable. The wells are managed by a council of the clan group which includes a retired *hayyuu* (special counsellors or individuals who hold ritual authority to judge (Watson, 2001), the *Jallaba* (a local lineage of clan elder or special messenger (Homann et al, 2004), the *abbaa Konfi* (trustee of each well), the *abbaa herregaa* (the coordinator of water use and maintenance) and other members. An officer responsible for the day-to-day supervision of watering procedures, including the maintenance and cleaning of wells, enclosures and environs, is assigned at a meeting of clan group council known as *Kora eelaa*. Different rules are followed for water use in different seasons (wet, dry, monsoon, during drought etc). Similarly strict codes are followed for water usage for the animals. During dry season, herds are shifted to more distant ponds so that nearer ones can be used by the clan members. In general cattle are restricted from entering the water sources by fencing-off the sources and making them drink water hauled into troughs made from clay and cement (*naaniga*). Any violation of the customary rules of water use and maintenance is referred to and discussed by the *Kora eelaa* in the presence of the culprit.

Gadaa has another set of laws called the *aadaa* and *seera* in which it is forbidden to deny someone access to water or to ask payment for it. The *aadaa* and *seera* (Boran laws) are rehearsed at a meeting that is held every eight years in Boran. This meeting is

known as *Gumii Gaayoo* (meeting of the multitude). The underlying principle is that though *Gadaa* maintains strict codes for usage of water; it still respects the human needs and the community ownership of natural resources, especially water. By maintaining the rules, *Gadaa* rather distributes the right to water in an egalitarian and fair manner so that conflicts can be avoided and peace is sustained. In general, the ideology and social relations of Boran society are based on *Nagaa* Boran (the peace of the Boran). Oromos define peace not as the absence of war but as a proper relationship within the localities and with God, *Waaqa*. The relationship between different clans, villages and households or any other social group is based on cooperation and mutual respect (Desalegn, Mukand, Ashim and Seleshi, 2005)

Mezard is another traditional institution that has been contributing a lot to peacebuilding among the Raya¹⁹ people in Rural Alamata wordea. The Raya community is one of the various ethnic groups of Ethiopia, living in the southern part of the regional state of Tigray in Alamata. The Raya people have their own varieties of customary practices. Among these practices they have traditional conflict resolution mechanisms under institutional guidance like the *Mezard*, which are more than helping the people to build solidarity and peaceful coexistence among them. In Raya, offices of elderly are known by variety of names, but they do have common goal i.e. resolving the conflicts especially personal and family peacefully through mediation, conciliation, and arbitration mechanisms at local level customarily. *Mezard*, *Zewold*, *Kefco*, *Gebremedhin*, *Mergeta*, *senayseged* are some of the most known indigenous mechanisms with local judicial jurisdiction. Members of *Mezard* perform their duty permanently at least two days a month but without any allowance and budget from both the people as well as the administration for the activity they conduct. Whenever an *erq* (request for resolution) is made to the institution, the members gather and start looking into the issue. Women play significant role in the administrative mechanism of *Mezard*. It is the *Duberti* –the group of women in the community who beg the conflicting parties to come in to negotiation then to arbitration. With regard to enforceability, the decisions passed by the institution are found to be high in being accepted by the community (Berhe, 2013). Legalising their

¹⁹Raya is also used to refer to the area. Both the region and the residents are known as Raya.

role and more engagement of the youths can make *Mezard* a sustainable institution of peace initiatives.

Possibly as early as 2000 years ago, ancestors of the Maori left southeastern Asia and settled in the Society Islands located particularly Raiatea, near to Bora Bora and Tahiti. The people were Polynesian, ethnically similar to other indigenous peoples of the south pacific including those of the Hawaiian Islands. When fishing expeditions had discovered “new lands” to the south, centuries of warfare in a struggle for space, power, and food influenced the less successful chiefs to lead their people to the Aotearoa, the North Island of modern day New Zealand. Thus, in giant, sea-faring canoes called *waka*, capable of holding up to one hundred passengers in addition to plentiful supplies, Maori ancestors arrived on Aotearoa as early as 800 A.D. When the bulk of the Polynesian settlers arrived in the fourteenth century and found other people already inhabiting the North Island, they mostly absorbed, but sometimes enslaved them into their culture. All of the modern day Maori are descended from this mixed group of earlier Polynesian travelers (Howard, 2003). Every Maori village has some number of randomly patterned “rectangular dwelling-huts” of approximately ten by twelve feet, constructed out of a variety of materials including, poles, thatch and sometimes timbers, usually lined with reeds or ferns to ensure warmth. In addition to dwellings, each village has a social gathering building, communal underground storehouses and pits for food, communal cooking sheds, a common latrine, a sacred alter or *tauahu*, and a public square or *marae*. The *marae*, a large open space or field in the middle of the village was the center of Maori life, a playground and meeting-place and dining center of the village.²⁰

The general mechanism of dispute resolution of the Maori community can be described in the following manner-if a dispute arose or a crime committed in a village which involved or impacted on many members of the village, a *hui* (meeting) would be

²⁰ According to the oral tradition, Maoris had been present in Aotearoa for at least 1000 years prior to European contact and lived with their own laws and legal processes in a kinship-based society. The term “Maori” as a collective noun means “normal”, and came into use after European contact to distinguish the peoples of Aotearoa from the later arrivals, whom the Maoris called “pakeha”. Prior to pakeha contact, there was no real concept of Maori as a national people; day-to-day life was conducted at the level of extended family or whanau, while legal and political affairs were dealt with at sub tribe or tribal level — hapu or iwi.

called and all those who wished to be, or should be involved, gathered at the *hui*. No time frame is set for the duration of the *hui* but all those involved know it would keep going until a consensus was reached, no matter how long that took. The key to the process was the method of dialog (the process can probably best be described as dialog) and how ‘issues’ are spoken about. When all were gathered the *korero* (talk) would begin. The speakers would speak one at a time and each would know that their opportunity to speak a second time might wait until all others had had the opportunity to speak. The first speaker, knowing full well what the issue, which had caused the need for the *hui*, would be careful to avoid talking directly, or even indirectly, about the ‘issue’. Each speaker in turn would first accept what has gone before still avoiding talking directly about the issue would ensure in his/her *korero* he/she would add to what the previous speaker has said, (Whiti Love, 2007). In this process, where speakers do not stand to contradict the previous speaker and avoid speaking directly about the issue, that as the dialog goes around the group commonalities are found rather than enhancement of the original conflict. In this process speakers need to listen very carefully to all previous speakers, rather than jumping up to counter points throughout the discussion. In this process a speaker must be able to capture their thoughts and then try to add something to the total dialog. Their opportunity to speak in the dialog may only come once and the opportunity needs to be carefully taken. Respect is given for those who could remember the entire discussion and the very best speaker would wait for the end to demonstrate their prowess, not only at oratory but also, at being able to recall all of what has gone before. Maori was an oral culture and the society put high value on those whose oral and memory skills were well honed (Whiti Love, 2007).

In Maori society a leader of the community was called a *rangatira*. This is a word made of two parts with its root being ‘*tira*’ meaning to knit together and ‘*ranga*’ meaning to uplift. Combined then a *rangatira* is someone who can uplift the people, while binding them together. This is a difficult combination of skills to attain and use. *Rangatira* could lose their status if they failed in their skills. *Ariki* on the other hand would be born to that status and would maintain it no matter what – lineage as everything for them and not their ability in leadership skills. In the process of effectively skirting around the issue rather than confronting it effectively avoided confrontation but allowed the matter to be aired in

an indirect fashion. All of the issues around the matter at hand could be addressed by raising the hand having subsequent speakers add to the issue in turn. Eventually a consensus is arrived at, often without the matter causing the dispute having even been spoken of directly. Today this mode of dealing with serious issues is still used by older Maori brought up in this way. It often infuriates younger Maori brought up in much more confrontational ways and for some this way of working is mistaken as weakness, vagueness or sometime just as stupidity. The cultural shift from the confrontational style to the indirect consensus building style is probably extremely difficult, but perhaps is no more difficult than the shift required for lawyers and the like, in the shift from adversarial litigation to mediation.

Utu is the principle in Maori culture for maintaining balance, harmony, and equality, and as such operates as a form of restitution, aiming to restore the parties involved to their former position or to bring both parties to equally better relative situations (Strong, 2006). The Maori word *utu* has been used only to mean revenge, however a much more accurate meaning for *utu* is reciprocity. The principle of reciprocity or *utu* was (and probably still is) of prime importance in Maori society and it governed many transactions. One of the ways in which *utu* creates serious obligations on the part of an individual or group is when the *mana* (respect) of an individual or a community depended upon an action of *utu*; it seems that to restore *mana*, an *utu* response had to represent more than simple reciprocity, requiring some gesture greater than an act of restitution. Depending upon the situation, a proper *utu* response could entail a vengeful action, but otherwise could be a reward, an exchange of goods, an exchange of services, or even an insulting, offensive song. Further, different situations required different timelines; *utu* could be necessary immediately or over generations, so long as eventually a balance was restored.

Among the *Utu* rituals of the Maori society the gift exchange was the most important and effective means to restore harmony and build peace. Gift exchange took primarily two forms: one for economic gain, the object being to obtain a needed or desired item of practical function from the exchange; the other for ceremonial purpose, a social gesture of goodwill being the primary function. In fact, the gift exchange was the

most common type of Maori contract, in which a gift giving necessitated a return of equal or greater value. The actual items exchanged varied a great deal and could range from physical gifts such as tools, ornaments, and building materials to the exchange of services or hospitality or meals. Typically, the economic exchanges were for food items whereas ceremonial gifts were most often greenstone heirloom, particularly at funerals. And, just like other processes governed by *utu*, gift giving was a cycle, a never ending attempt to achieve a balance and equilibrium between individuals, groups and even with the natural world. Another aspect of *utu* that varied with the situation was the method of determining the exchange rate: in determining the value, price or amount needed for an appropriate expression of *utu*. It seems that aside from practical value, aesthetics, social usefulness and tradition offer certain comparative standards by which exchange value was determined. In addition, *utu* was commonly understood to require a response of greater value than the harm or gift done to or for the imbalanced party. Failure to assess an exchange or revenge of greater value could result in a lowered *mana*, though it was up to the receiving side to judge whether justice had been done.²¹

One specific *utu* protocol is called *murū*. A very explicit and ritualized way to attain *utu*, *murū* could only be made by those of a fairly close relation to the offender and seems to be reserved for situations involving people of consequence, and actions that were sufficiently relevant to the tribe as a whole as to necessitate intervention. Actions constituting *murū* ranged from hand or stick beatings for serious crimes such as accidental death to compensation in property. For most offenses, a plundering party was formed and to raid and take away the entire offender's moveable property and that of his or her family. And, while such punishments could be harsh and leave the offending parties with no belongings, the *murū* was accepted as a way to nullify the guilty and restore their *mana*. For that reason, and because reciprocal response would have meant bringing harm to one's own tribe, *murū* were close ended (Strong, 2006, Firth, 1929).

The Muru Protocol: Before a *murū* was instituted, the offense was the subject of a detailed discussion and debate called a *whakawa*. *Whakawa* proceedings are analogous to

²¹ Information regarding this area has been collected from diverse sources and write up on Maori Society. For more details, visit www.nzhistory.net.nz, www.maori.info/maori_h.htm etc.

a trial and involve a great deal of formality. Further, the process involved an accusation of guilt and an investigatory phase out of which a decision or judgment is determined. Factors affecting the outcome of the *whakawa* included the status of transgressor, the status of the injured party, relationship of the parties, the customs that were offended (*tikanga*), the nature of the offense (intentional or accidental) and the involvement or intervention of the elders (*Kaumatu*a).

Some *whakawa* are small meetings between the parties to the conflict and their immediate *whanau* in which an agreement is reached to end a dispute. More often, however, *whakawa* involved much of the village, and quite frequently are intervened in by the *Kaumatu*a or respected elders of the tribe from whom the parties draw on for wisdom, guidance and usually a judgment in the case. The community involved is expected to take part in dispute resolution process and to defer to the *Kaumatu*a's judgment. Once the decision to go forward with a *mur*u has been made, the *whakawa* must determine what size 'plunder party' to send; the larger the party, the greater the honor of the offender since the party size was directly correlated to the community's assessment of the transgressor's *mana*. In some cases, the plunder took place more as a voluntary set of gifts from the offender's tribe to the offended party: one case involving a *mur*u to the *whanau* of an adulterous woman was described as follows. "Our leaders made fiery speeches accusing the local tribe of sexual misconduct... punctuating their remarks with libidinous songs" and after the chiefs admitted fault on behalf of their tribe, individuals came forward "to lay ... before us in payment... jade ornaments, bolts of print cloth... money (in pounds)... horses and cattle" (Strong,2006). Apparently the end of such an exchange could be concluded by the parties rubbing noses and the transgressors hosting a large, entertaining feast.

The effectiveness of *mur*u depends upon community respect and acknowledgement. The deterrent potential of a *mur*u derives from the fact that the punishment applies to the whole kinship group and not simply the individual transgressor. Further, even if *mana* were not considered important, the threat of *mur*u would probably deter transgressions because of the potential material loss of violent punishment inflicted upon the transgressor. And, despite the lost property or

physical punishment, *murū* was seen as the natural consequence of many actions, even those that were unavoidable. For example, a leader of a war party might be subject to a *murū* of beating as consequence for those of his own party who died during the battle and as an expression of the grief of their relatives. In much the same way that other *murū* were met, such a war party leader would accept the beating as an honorable consequence of his position, a restoration of balance and equilibrium for the deaths under his watch.

To ensure that *utu* was followed, various mechanisms operated by virtue of Maori *tikanga* or custom. The most influential constraint on the system was the notoriety imbued upon those who did not make the *tiki* or correct response. Such dishonor would affect the individual and family reputation creating a disincentive to do any future exchanging with that group, a severe consequence when certain items could only be attained through trade. Another method for maintaining the reciprocal balance of *utu* was belief that supernatural punishment, particularly in the form of physical handicap or illness, would find those who did not reciprocate. Finally, although many of the supernatural punishments could be warded off by particular witchcraft precautions, the damage to reputation by failure to comply with *utu* was immediate and had no magical remedy.

Afar who share a common boundary with Tigrayan highlanders in northern Ethiopia, constitute a separate ethnic group and they have a slightly different means of subsistence. In the past, the Afar led a predominantly nomadic life in which livestock husbandry was the dominant source of economic subsistence. This form of economic performance dictated a particular social organization within the Afar and it shaped their relations with neighbouring ethnic groups particularly the Tigrayan highlanders. For example, within the Afar community, there seemed to be strong mutual support networks among kin groups usually expressed in the form of resource sharing and strong clan solidarity. Within the Afar, whenever a conflict arose, it was resolved within the community by following the customary laws. In this aspect, their own social structure and value system was the determining factor. The Afar people have a strong sense of respect to the legendary traditional rules and guidelines that descended to them from their

predecessors. When a breach of conduct or misbehavior is detected reference is quickly made to such unwritten customary laws the basis of which is the normative framework and values systems entrenched in their culture from time immemorial. One such fundamental norm is the fear of and respect for elderly personalities in the respective villages. Elders are believed to have the wisdom and insightful thought accumulated over long period of time. They are considered instrumental for the transfer of traditional knowledge and custom to successive generations. Elders provide informal education and teach younger generations on preventing violent conflicts. The Elderly are also believed to have a spiritual link to supernatural forces in the conviction that living longer on earth is a gift from God signifying some purpose. Gerontocracy is therefore at the center of traditional patterns of behaviour and social action (Haile, 2004).

The Afar believes that all disputes within their ethnic group should be settled peacefully and according to the long standing customary laws (*Mad'aa*). *Mad'aa* consists of specified guidelines and rules on how to handle dispute cases. This is a tradition followed from the time of Hamadu Sirat, whom the community identified as their apical ancestor and the father of all Afar in the area. The Afar customary law has distinctly made categories of crimes and their punishment measures. So, according to this law, the amount of compensation depends on the type of the offence and its context (Reda, 2011). In case of a minor wound, there are special steps to follow before reconciliation can be achieved through the involvement of clan leaders. A wound is considered minor by a traditional healer if the bones are not exposed. In such a case, the person who caused the injury has to give the wounded a goat in order to “wash his blood.” Then after a day or two he again offers another to “heal the wound”. This payment is called *Maldino*. Finally, there will be a compensation payment (*Morrusso*) ranging from 12 Birr to a camel depending on the seriousness of the injury. In case of bodily injury, The fine and compensation y depend on which part of the body was harmed. In finger injuries, for example, the Afar considers damage caused to the little finger, pointing finger, and ring finger as serious. This is because the first is considered the most peaceful, the second viewed as important for indicating locations, and the third regarded essential for marriage. The front and back parts of the body also differs in value. A damage caused to the forehead is considered grave because it is easily exposed to onlookers whereby the

victim may be liable to constant humiliation. The laws regarding compensation payment are elaborate and detailed. Virtually every offence has a corresponding compensation payment. Even nail injury has its specified compensation. An exhaustive list of all the provisions of Afar customary law concerning compensation is virtually untenable. In principle, the Afar claims that all compensation payments are fixed by customary law. In practice, however, payments are negotiable. For example, according to the law, the payment for murder is 100 heads of camel; but following bargaining less than half may actually be paid. Furthermore, Afar customary laws are said to be dynamic. They not only undergo some changes over time, but also vary from place to place keeping in mind the geographical location, availability of certain products and animals etc (Reda, 2011).

This seems to be the norm no matter how long it takes the elders to process the dispute and reach a settlement. In this regard the modern legal principle that ‘justice delayed is justice denied’ does not hold true among the Afar. On several occasions, conflict processing takes a reasonably long time before mutually acceptable outcomes are proposed and a settlement is finally reached. It is astonishing to observe the type of decency and good manner people exhibit in the assemblies as the “big men” try to resolve the conflicts in a ritualistic manner following specific orderly procedures. Turns are made almost automatically and an outsider would be caught by surprise with the complete absence of chaotic and haphazard conditions. The type of rhetoric used and the extent of humility exhibited by conflicting parties are important factors that shape what comes out of the conflict resolution process. In hearing a dispute case, no one is allowed to show contempt to the judges (*Mekabon*). Failure to have patience and tolerance will lead to an immediate fine. The Afar demonstrates the need for patience and perseverance in one of their proverbs that reads: "*Amo Ara'ba yot Ane Wana'ya Agi'rauk manani'yo Enta Eyan* (All trouble comes from the tongue). “If the tongue was not in me”, the head said, “I would not have been cut off”. It is required that proceedings take place in good order with person. Offence against another member of the Afar community is usually resolved upon the payment of some compensation both in livestock and cash. In this regard, an entire clan or sub-clan is said to be responsible for a crime committed by one or some of its members. The money and livestock to be paid in compensation is thus usually contributed by clan members regardless of their place of residence (Pankhurst, 2008).

Gradually, changes in the natural and social set-ups have had significant impact on the Afar's mode of living. Ecological disasters causing huge livestock loss have forced the Afar to diversify their means of income to cope up with the situation. There were increased inclinations towards the agricultural mode of production and movement to permanent settlement areas near urban centres. This took the form of wage labour migration and trade relations. This shift in the means of livelihood had its own effects as far as the traditional institutions and value systems are concerned. With a shift from nomadic based economy to cultivation, the pastoral attitude of communal ownership of land altered and conflicts taking the form of land disputes and water diversion rights became rampant. Urbanization and wage labour migration had also weakened kinship obligations and clan solidarity, which had their own influence on local dispute settlement (Report of Ethiopia National Workshop, 2001).

On the highland-lowland dimension, past experiences reveal that raids triggered by resource competition, loss of stock and the quest for social honour had been common. This was particularly seen in the southern part of the ethnic boundary where the Wajirat community in the highlands presented the biggest challenge to the Afar. Such violent and persistent conflicts between the two groups resulted in loss of life and property wreckage as they entered into cyclic moments of confrontation and feud in the form of retaliations and counter-retaliations. When conflicts occur at wider level within the community, the Afar generally rely more on their own local dispute settlement forums than the government legal machinery. Within their own group, clan elders as well as kinship and domestic groups maintain peace through sanctions following mablo assemblies. Relations with the highlanders are also regulated via a jointly established institution called *Gereb*, which enforces order based on written customary laws. Traditional Way of Managing Inter-communal conflict, particularly between Afar and Wejart, *Gereb*, which has a long history in the land of the Wejerat, is of great significance (ibid,2001).

The origin of *Gereb* is related to a form of public struggle towards democracy and self rule from time immemorial. However, the exact time of *Gereb* expansion to include neighboring communities is not found in literature. Yet, some studies suggest that the Wejerat *Gereb* was established almost a century ago to embody neighboring

communities. The very objective of the *Gereb* was to resist the then government suppressions. It was a symbol of reaction to chaotic democracy, violation of rights and the existing bad governance. Different local communities of the former weredas of Wejerat, Enderta, Seharti-Samre and Bora-Slawa met in Hintalo for the first time to develop a common agenda on how to run self-rule and challenge the government. Thereafter, the term *Gereb* Arena, which literally means, “we are equal under the umbrella of *Gereb* administration,” became a common stand of the participants. The people drafted common articles like women should have equal rights as men; don’t consider Emperor Haileselassie and other government officials as God, they are humans like us; stop theft and raid; every adult citizen of our locality should be ready to struggle against any external enemy; the embas of Wejerat should be governed by *Gereb* Wejerat; and *Gereb* is the identity for our next struggle for liberation (ibid).

Through time, *Gereb* became a joint institution which functions as an indigenous court run by a council of elders from the Afar and the Wejerat. The *Gereb* consists of councils composed of representatives of both cultural groups. Representatives from the two ethnic groups are referred as abo-*Gerebs*. The role of the abo-*gerebs* remains a fundamental affair in resolving inter-ethnic conflicts including homicide between the two groups. The abo-*Gerebs* have full power to impose sanctions on offenders in resolving conflict. Usually blood price imposed on wrongdoers is decided by the abo-*Gerebs* from the conflicting parties and all decisions are practical and binding. In a nutshell, abo-*Gerebs* are active actors in resolving inter-ethnic conflict timely, economically, and effectively. They developed a symbiotic relationship to maintain peace and security.²²

There are two such councils within the *Gereb* institution: one for Afar disputes with Tigrayans along the border with Didiba-Dergajen, the other for Afar-Wejerat conflict. *Gereb* members are elected by the entire adult male population of the locality and are entrusted with the responsibility of restoring law and order. *Gereb* differs from the Afar institutions because it was basically aimed for the resolution of intra-clan

²²For more details on the role and power of Abo-Gereb, see *INSIGHTS INTO AGENCY AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT EXTENDED CASE STUDIES FROM NORTHERN ETHIOPIA*, dissertation submitted to Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, by Lutgart Lenaets 2013.

conflict, being based on rules written in Tigrigna. The *Gereb*, functions according to well established guidelines, rules (*Sirit*) and procedures. These rules are drafted with the mutual consent of elders from both Afar and Wajirat groups and are under constant revision to accommodate new realities. The *Gereb* develops its own rules and regulations which serve Anthology of Peace & Security Research as *sirit* (traditional law) in its localities. When necessary, with full justification of the *Gereb* members, the regulations can be modified.

The mandate of *Gereb* is confined to serious cases. There are some minor inter-community conflicts in which the *Gereb* does not intervene. Minor cases often relate to disputes over the shares between Tigrayan farmers and their Afar partners who own the land. In such circumstances, elders related to the disputants may suffice to settle the dispute. Only when such a dispute leads to physical offence does the *Gereb* intervene. *Gereb* members hold regular monthly meetings to review conditions in their joint territories. Under emergencies they assemble twice a month. The gathering is held at varying places. When an offence is committed by a Tigrayan, the Tigrayans have to send their representatives (*Abo Gereb*) to Ab'ala for the meeting. If the crime is committed by an Afar, the meeting will be held in a Tigrayan locality. In an offence involving murder, the procedures of punishment include different mechanisms aiming at confession, humiliation, repentance, repair etc. When the *Gereb* is appealed to solve the case by the family members or the relatives, the entire *Gereb* council would then be called for an assembly in the locality of the victim (Reda, 2011). At the assembly the accused murderer is brought before the council wearing a thick black apron (*Gula* in Afar and *Wocho* in Tigrigna). A sharp sickle with its blades pointed at the throat of the accused is tied round his neck. The piece of black cloth symbolises humiliation for what the person has done. Since this type of clothing is common among women only, a male individual appearing in it is considered feminine. It is one mechanism to punish individuals for their wrongdoing. In fact it is claimed that it is also a mechanism by which the criminal is allowed to appeal for forgiveness since by wearing female clothes he would be considered feminine (ostensibly weak and helpless). On the other hand the sickle round his neck symbolises that the criminal has now fallen into the hands of the law. It also denotes that he has submitted himself to justice and will accept any verdict including

death. The criminal is requested to lie on the ground and the family of the victim is asked whether they wanted him dead right away. The family normally replies negatively, saving the victim's life. A typical response by the family is to state that "we do have children who might in the future do the same by mistake. We don't wish a death sentence to our blood and flesh in case that happens." All relatives of the victim at the assembly would then queue up and say, one after the other, "we forgive you for God's sake". A previously selected *Abo Gereb* would then stand and address the family by saying "It is good for us to learn that you [the family of the deceased] are God's people. From now on, let the bygones be bygones. Let what is of the past be taken away by the winds in the highlands and the floods in the lowlands". To avert reprisal killings before the conclusion of *Gereb* proceedings, all relatives of the victim are required by the council to remain under an oath not to attempt retaliation. The oath is taken by touching the Bible (for Christians) or the Koran or *Kitab* (for Moslems). Where either the Bible or the *Kitab* are inaccessible, the oath is performed by touching the ground or grass. As the initial preliminary procedures are conducted, including oath-taking, a feast is arranged. Often two cows are slaughtered: one for the Christian highlanders and the other for the Muslim Afar. Sometimes up to five goats maybe brought along with a cow. Local residents bring bread, *injera*, *sewa* (a local alcoholic drink for Tigrayans) and *Hilwa* (an alcohol free beverage for Afar). All these are consumed together to signify that peace has prevailed in the end. A compensation date is then fixed and payment effected accordingly. Unlike the situation within the Afar themselves, all compensations in an inter-community context are currently paid in cash (ibid, 2011).

In both mablo and *Gereb* assemblies, a group of prominent elderly personalities involve in a chain of negotiations and arbitration processes to resolve conflicts in an orderly and transparent manner. At present, government institutions also co-operate with the indigenous systems at different stages. Governments administrative and legal organs may occasionally directly involve in the actual conflict resolution process (in an intra-clan context) or may act as facilitators by creating favourable conditions for resolution through the indigenous system (in an inter-clan and inter-ethnic context). This institutional support from modern legal set-ups along with the internal integrity of the

indigenous institutions themselves has contributed to the effectiveness and continued strength of the latter.

In Quebec Cree²³ and amongst other northern Canadian native communities, forestry conflicts often center on wildlife harvesting and management. Disputes over forest resources have intensified in recent years due to population growth, competition between native and nonnative hunters, and the impacts of hydroelectric projects, forestry, and mining. One response of Cree communities has been to strengthen and in some cases modify indigenous resource management systems, which include mechanisms for dispute resolution. There has also been a wider attempt to incorporate such local systems into state structures for resource management (Castro et al, 1996).

The "traditional" Cree resource management system (which has emerged from three centuries of fur trade involvement as well as ongoing subsistence activities) is based on family hunting groups and territories. Recognized hunting leaders or "tallymen" hold decision-making rights and obligations for individual family territories or "traplines." These includes the right to invite or exclude others from using the trap line, as well as setting quotas for harvests and controlling specific activities such as goose hunting. Tallymen rely on kinship ties, reciprocity and personal influence to control activities on their trap lines. While the position of tallyman is largely hereditary, respect and "legitimate" authority is gained only through a proven ability to manage and share the resources of one's trapline, and to "create cooperation as opposed to conflict" (Feit, 1991). Tallymen act "as intermediaries in a complex chain of unequal social reciprocities," (Feit, 1991) and because of this play a critical role in managing conflicts related to resource use on their own trap lines and, increasingly, throughout the region.

Historically, a tallyman's actions in a dispute would generally be limited to the realm of social intercourse, either as a disputant or as mediator or arbitrator for others. As Cree communities value ideals like cooperation, respect and social harmony, few disputes

²³ Cree are the most populous and widely distributed aboriginal people in Canada. Cree live in areas from Alberta to Québec at the Subarctic and Plains regions. The name Cree originated with a group of Indigenous people near James Bay whose name was recorded by the French as *Kiristinon* and later contracted to *Cri*, spelled Cree in English. Most Cree use this name only when speaking or writing in English and have other, more localized names. *Nehiyawak* is the Cree name for the Cree people. There are sub-divisions within the Cree and all use different dialects, but comprehensible to each other.

reached the stage of open confrontation. Most were resolved through informal negotiation, or simply by indicating (often indirectly) one's knowledge of and displeasure with someone else's actions. In cases where stronger measures were needed, the tallymen usually had sufficient authority to decide what actions were needed and to take them. This is often the case even today, although tallymen frequently complain that their status has been eroded by social changes.

As the scope of forest conflicts expanded due to increased pressure on resources and access to them, more formalized mechanisms were needed to manage such disputes. In the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA), a negotiated out-of-court settlement, the formal institutions were established to deal with conflicts over wildlife and other forest resources at various levels. As one example, the Cree Trappers Association was established "to assist in solving all problems affecting the welfare of the Cree trappers of Quebec," and is often responsible for moderating disputes between trappers, especially when they are from different communities. The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, and subsequent land claims settlements, are innovative attempts to control conflicts over land use and resources by delineating the rights and obligations of various parties and incorporating local needs and perspectives into state-level decision-making processes. The JBNQA recognizes the authority of traditional resource managers within Cree communities, while extending Cree influence over regional resource development. On paper at least, the JBNQA changed the Crees "from being complete outsiders to the resource decision-making process, to being co-equals with government resource managers in a formalized institutional structure" (Berkes, 1989). While it has flaws and limitations, the Agreement has shown that it is possible to develop structures which respect local systems of resource management and dispute resolution while responding to changing social, economic, and political circumstances. There is also evidence that elements common to indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, such as an emphasis on negotiation and consensus building, can be applied to a wider stage, including intergovernmental conflicts. One example of this is co-management committees, where Native (or local) and non-Native (or state) representatives work together to find solutions to complex resource management problems. In Quebec such an entity, called the Hunting, Fishing and Trapping

Coordinating Committee (HFTCC), was established by the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement .Other examples of co-management bodies in northern Canada, such as the Caribou Management Board, appear to be rather more successful in achieving their goals (Osherenko, 1988). This may be due to having clearly defined goals (protecting a specific population of animals), plus ethnic compositions more conducive to Native input and control over decisions.

In the context of Nepal, indigenous or traditional mediation practices are continuing for countless generations. The country has a long history of traditional institutions and local mechanisms to resolve conflicting issues and build peace. The Gram Parishad (Village Council) used to organize a discussion to mediate conflict. They used to take the perspective of all conflicting sides, find identity of interests, construct a solution and legitimize this by sacred dharma (institutional duties) interlinked with custom and morality. In the Lichhavi regime (300 to 1200 AD), these traditional practices were institutionalized into Panchali system--a public place for meeting and adjudicating disputes. Arya Samaj (association of civilized persons) and Birtawal (landlord having some form of authority to collect land tax and settle disputes) were also given some powers to mediate local dispute. The Malla regime (1200 to 1769 AD) evolved institutions such as Praman (chief administrative officer) and several tiers of Panchayat to mediate local disputes. The Shah regime (beginning of 1769) legitimized various traditional arrangements-- Pancha-Kachhahari, Pancha, Birtawal and Mukhiya and *Amal Kot-Kachahari* (the village court consisting of elites of various factions) -- mediated conflict at community level. All these methods negotiated consensus through dialogues and community mediation (Dahal and Bhatta, 2008)

Even in the present time, In Gandak region, Tamudhin (Gurung-ghar previously led by Mukhiya), *Magar-Samaj* (Magar society) and Thakali *Samaj* continue to settle kinship and family friction and provide an environment within which the level of trust and sense of community bind the society for a durable peace. In eastern part of Nepal Limbus developed *Chumlung* (an assembly to discuss and decide local issues) and several communities in Tarai have evolved *Chaudhary* (community leader) to mediate community disputes. Likewise, *Mukhiya* system in lower Mustang and Raja system

(principality) in upper Mustang are old institutional arrangements which provided local governance and resolved local conflict on the basis of customary laws, standards and values. These characteristics are the product of long transactions—negotiation and interactions of families and communities. The level of trust among Thakalis is so high that only a few cases go to the court for resolution and their overriding concern is the conservation of society's dominant institutional practices (Dahal, 2002). In the far-western region of Nepal, *Mukhiyas* are influential in mediating all sorts of local conflicts. There is also provision of constituting a group called *Bhaladmi* (gentlemen) who define a code to build trust and communication between the disputants, utilize historical precedent, seek common ground, make proposals for compromise, initiate public deliberation over common problems and seek joint solutions of conflicts

Traditional mechanisms in Nepal are localized, caste-and ethnicity based – specific, and shaped and guided by traditional norms, values, customs and religions. Indigenous elderly people, considered to be the treasure house of practical knowledge, often work as mediators to deal with conflict, though they have no legal status. Villagers commonly accept their settlements as it relates amicable discussions. Such informal conflict management practices are blend of local customs, a sense of justice and religious feeling rather than official procedures. Elderly and socially reputed people, traditional landlords, teachers, *Jhakri* (faith healers), Purohit, and Mukhia are principal actors in resolving a wide range of local conflicts. The criteria to resolve conflicts were not legal evidence and documents, but religious faith (*Dharma Bhakaune, Tamo-Tulsi and Saligram samaune*), historical considerations and practical realities.

Disputants from ethnic groups such as Gurung, Mangar, Tamang, etc. strongly prefer conflict resolution from their own ethnic group. They only approach others if it is not possible for their ethnic leaders to resolve the conflict. The importance of informal conflict resolution practices is reflected by the local following saying: “*deskalagi rajyako niti chahinchha tara gaonko kam ma prajako riti thiti ko badi mahatto chha*” (state’s policy is needed for the whole country, whereas local values and customs are more important for managing village resources).

Other several conflict management activities carried out at local level are traditionally based on their values and customs (riti-thiti), which play a powerful role in binding people together for collective actions. Local custom-based method of resolutions of conflict called *Sagun Garne* (reconciliation). The conflict is declared as settled when both parties accept the gift (*sagun*). Then there is small celebration where all people take some Jaad (a type of fermented liquor). However, there are no written documents of such settlement. Many of the conflicts resolved in villages are verbal, based on faith and not supported by written documents. When powerful people reactivate these cases, the weaker party usually loses when the case goes to the formal process of conflict resolution. The efficiency of the local procedure is context specific and mixed, in some cases it is effective and in other exploitative and ineffective⁹. Apart from the traditional mechanism of conflict resolution, cultural tolerance, religious diversity and celebration such as *Dashain, Tihar, Chhat, Phagu Purnima*, New Year day etc. also provide a public occasion to reconcile relations by visiting each other's houses, exchanging gifts and good wishes, receiving blessings from elders, and assuming local responsibility. These are also existing practices which are strong in terms of promoting peace and social harmony within communities (Dahal & Bhatt, 2010).

In the context of Bangladesh, *Shalish* is one of the age-old traditional institutions to maintain social solidarity and sustainable peace. It is defined as a social system for informal adjudication of petty disputes both civil and criminal, by local notables. Two types of adjudication have been in place in rural Bangladesh from days immemorial. These were *Shalish* and state's judicial system. Generally the word 'Shalish' means mediation in Bangladesh society. *Shalish* as a social mechanism for informal adjudication of petty disputes both civil and criminal consists of village elders, local notables such as matbars (leaders) or *Shalishkars* (adjudicators). Sometimes Chairmen and elite members of the Union Parishad are invited to sit through the proceedings. *Shalish* addresses almost all type of disputes- civil, criminal or family. These often involve gender and family issues, such as violence against women whether within or outside marriage, inheritance, dowry, polygamy, divorce, maintenance for a wife and children, or a combination of such issues., oral divorce, land and criminal offenses such as rape, adultery. The process of a particular *Shalish* starts with interrogating the disputants to ascertain the facts. Then the

Shalishkars offer their solution and seek the opinions of the disputants before; finally, they come to a decision. A *Shalish* may involve voluntary submission to arbitration (which, in this context, involves the parties agreeing to submit to the judgment of the *Shalish* panel), or mediation (in which the panel helps the disputants to try to devise a settlement themselves) or a blend of the two. For delivering justice, *Shalish* mechanism uses no specific law but the notion of justice emanated from religious guidance and sense of social wellbeing, particularly of the Sharia law (Biswas, 2008).

Although this procedure is found to be uniform throughout the country, there are local variations depending on local customs and tradition. *Shalish* has no fixed dimension and its size and structure depend entirely on the nature and gravity of the problem at hand (Khair, 2002). The adjudicators (*Shalishkars*) of a *Shalish* do not have any legal authority, but they get social authority from their seniority, wisdom, economic and religious status or by way of village politics. *Shalish* is an out-of-court settlement of petty quarrels or disputes in the rural society. Rural people in Bangladesh prefer *Shalish* as it costs less monetary expenditure and involves more open and participatory justice process. This conventional system of mediation is deeply rooted within the history, culture and humanities of Bangladesh. Social sanction and accessibility are the main reasons to prefer informal *shalish* first by the justice seeker. The accessibility is defined in terms of distance, cost and time, information, submission of documents, familiarity and uncertainty. In *shalish* anybody can file a case to *Dewani* (Elite) without any documents. Even for rape case only victim's statement and witness of the neighbour, despite falsehood, are enough to solve the problem. Here parties can elaborate their grievances in a familiar setting and in a fearless manner. Though punishment is often meted out in a monetary manner, the charge is often less than charges of the formal court (Ali and Omar, 2007).

To cope up with the popularity and easiness of the informal legal mechanism, Village Courts are created in Bangladesh 1976 with the objectives that poor village shall get easy access to justice without any cost. It is mentionable that the Village Courts are statutory courts and are composed of with local government (Union Parishad) representatives (as community leaders) and members from disputant parties. But these

courts are legally required to follow informal procedure of trial or dispute settlement, meaning thereby that the application of Code of Civil Procedure, Code of Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act has been barred. Also is barred the appointment of lawyers. The underlying argument is that the disputant parties will be able to discuss all their problems without any reservation or hesitation and can take an amicable and justifiable decision. However, decisions of these courts are as binding as those of any other formal courts of the country. In a word, both these forums are examples of accommodation of formal courts and traditional knowledge and wisdom.

Chakmas in Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh used to access justice and maintain peace under their own traditional institutional mechanism. Though governmental justice systems also existed in the region, Chakmas basically preferred to opt for their traditional system as it is more accessible, convenient and cheaper for them. The Indigenous Justice System in CHT is a three-tiered system-the *karbaris*, head and the Raja. (The *karbaris* are the bottom point of leadership in the system, headmen are the middle and the Raja (King/chief) is the top leadership authority in the system. confirmed the existence of *karbari* as the lowest tier of indigenous justice system. “The *karbari* is the head of a hamlet or village” (Roy R. D, 2004). The headman is the head of a mouza while the chief is the head of the circle. A village consists of several paras (small structural divisions) while a mouza consists of several villages. The main duty of this three-tiered justice system is to “supervise social functions and to administer traditional justice in accordance with customary laws” (Roy, 2004). However, according to the CHT Manual²⁴ they are entitled to administer the personal, social and family issues in the traditional court. The traditional justice system is also responsible for collecting taxes and to resolve the cases regarding natural resource management of their respective jurisdictional area.

²⁴Chittagong Hills Tract Regulation, popularly known as CHT Manual was passed on 1900 by the British government. The Manual had clearly defined the roles and duties of the civil and criminal administrative wing consisting of a Deputy Commissioners (DC), Sub-divisional Officers (SDO) and that of traditional administrative wing consisting of chief, headman and *karbari*. It was later amended in 2003. The manual delineated administrative structures of the region and the duties of the respective administrator. Thus the traditional justice institution acquired formal recognition under the manual.

The indigenous court consisting of chief, headman and karbari resolve social, family and personal disputes, and conflicts regarding natural resource management in their respective areas. The headmen are responsible for resource management, land and revenue administration, maintenance of law and order and administration of traditional justice in the *mouza* circle. Minor family cases such as elopement and their restitution, conjugal disputes, divorce and child custody, disputes over wild game and over customary laws are resolved in indigenous court. Roy (2011) also mentioned that besides the conducting disputes over customarily laws, the indigenous court of CHT also handles the disputes over untitled land. Social crime including *jhum* cultivation (traditional farming) in others' identified land, plundering, killing, stealing crops and domestic animals, destroying common peace, seizing natural source of water are tried in the indigenous court. A family case between a non-indigenous and an indigenous person can also be resolved at indigenous court chief, headman and karbari issue permanent residency certificate. Limited the power of the indigenous courts do not have power to deal with on crimes such as treason, offences against government officials, riot, uses of deadly weapons, murder, culpable homicide, wrongful confinement, rape, abduction, kidnapping, unnatural offence, extortion, robbery, dacoit, lurking, house trespass and forgery. Scholars writing on the Chakma justice system agreed on the role of elders, teachers, religious leaders and members of Union Parishad, the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh, in the traditional justice system.²⁵ Their role is most like of a mediator or negotiator before a case formally goes to the court of karbari, headman and the chief.

The punishment measures basically insisted on confession, repentance and forgiveness. Sometimes they also go for measures like balding head of the offender, ordering the offender to live with the pig, social boycott, garland of shoes for public shaming. Shaming plays a very crucial role in Chakma justice system. They have a word for shaming which is always positive. It is "*lojja*". They believe that this *lojja* or public

²⁵R.D.Roy, D.K. Kundu, Mangal Kumar Chakma Choudhury are some prominent writers frequently writing on the indigenous Chakma justice system. For more details see- *State of Justice in Chittagong Hill Tracts: Exploring the Formal and Informal Justice Institutions of Indigenous Communities* published by Dhaka: Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC (2011), *Traditional customary laws and Indigenous peoples*, Asia, Minority Rights Group International(2005) etc.

shame will lead towards repentance. Chakmas believe in repentance and repair and so insist that *lojja* or shame can inspire the victims to forgive the offender (Asadullah, 2012).

The Lao people, regardless of their ethnicity,²⁶ emphasise on the importance of maintaining social solidarity by their own mechanisms. Hence, Lao people have a strong bunch of traditional institutions and mechanisms to resolve conflict and maintain peace. These include the *Op-Lom*-problem solving methods which range from Parents Mediation (*Paw Mer*), Relatives Mediation (*Pah Loong / Pee Nong*), Elders Mediation (*Tow Gua*), Village Leaders Mediation (*Nei Ban*), village mediation Committee “*Neoy Gai Geer*” up to Village Court (*San Ban*). This historical institution has been working as the most effective peace building institution in Laos. E *Neoy Gai Geer*, which translates, Village Mediation Committee, is an important traditional institution of Laos each village (*ban*) has a *Neoy Gai Geer* whose mandate is to deal with conflicts in the community. This process does not use a single mediator or a co-mediator model of mediation. The *Neoy Gai Geer* consists of seven individuals who represent various groups within the village- village leaders, elders, informal mediators, women member etc. The days, to cope up with the changing time, the institution has also representatives from Women Union, Youth Organisations, Military and Police etc.. The composition of the committee reflects traditional third parties (e.g., village leader, village elder, and informal mediator) as well as contemporary third parties (e.g., Lao Women’s representative, young people’s representative, police representative, and military representative) consistent with the current socialist government. The committee is also representative of both genders. Apart from the Lao Women’s Union representative, women can also represent village leaders, elders, and young people’s groups.

In terms of the actual procedure, the mediation session is often informal and may take place at one of the disputants’ home or at the village leader’s home. Often the

²⁶Laos, officially the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is a small, landlocked country in Southeast Asia with an extremely diverse population of 6.6 million. Laos covers an area of 91,400 sq. mi. (234,804 sq. km). The government of Laos recognizes 49 distinct ethnic groups. They include- Lao Loum ,Ethnic Lao ,Leu ,Phuan ,Tai Dam ,Tai Deng ,Tai Maen ,Khammu , Katdu ,Oh,Pu Noi,Lao Soung ,Hmong , Hor etc.

participants sit on a bamboo mat on the floor in a circle. Sometimes, the village leaders and elders are given chairs to sit on due to their status and age. Normally, a mediation session can take between 1 to 3 hours. It is facilitated by the village leader as he/she is the official overseer of the village and responsible for social harmony in the community. Parents, family members, elders, and other individuals from previous mediation processes, as identified in the conflict resolution spectrum, can also be present at the *Neoy Gai Geer* discussion to provide information and be a support network for the parties in conflict. However, the final decision is made by the committee and follows a consensus decision making model. This process includes different steps- In the first stage of the *Neoy Gai Geer* process; the committee will meet individually with parties involved in the dispute to hear their perspectives on the conflict and to gather relevant information. Second, they will speak with the parties and their respective support networks together, asking each of them to discuss the conflict and what has happened. Third, the committee will have a discussion with the whole group on how best to resolve the conflict. Each person will have an opportunity to provide some suggestions for a resolution and advice will be given to the disputing parties. Fourth, the *Neoy Gai Geer* will meet privately and take into consideration all that they have heard. Through a consensus-decision making process, the committee will meet in a closed session to come to a unanimous decision about the outcome of the conflict. Fifth, the *Neoy Gai Geer* will go back to the whole group with their decision, based on their knowledge, experience, and discussions in the mediation session when everyone is in agreement with the terms of the resolution, the *Neoy Gai Geer* will write up an official agreement letter that is signed by the parties and the *Neoy Gai Geer* members. The decision becomes a written agreement that is endorsed by the committee. Often, these agreements can refer to customary laws (*got mai*), legislated laws, and other written documents, upon which any decisions and agreements have been based. A copy of the agreement is kept by the *Neoy Gai Geer* and other copies are distributed to the parties (Stobbe, 2011).

All types of conflicts- family conflicts (clash between husband and wife, theft within the family, intra family land dispute, divorce, spousal abuse etc), workplace conflicts (ego clashes among colleagues, unpaid debt, death or accident in workplace, difficulty to start a new business etc), community conflicts (over issues of distribution of

natural resources, land, clashes over the celebration of a festival, inter community marriage etc) are discussed in the institution. If the resolution is not acceptable or if an issue cannot be discussed in one forum, more forums are organised. To avoid complication, previous mediators are also invited which helps providing background information, scrutiny, transparency and a strong foundation. The inclusion of women in matters of peace and conflict is another significant point in this case.

In its resolutions, the institution always stresses on repairing the broken relationship than merely punishing the offenders. The Lao culture puts importance on avoidance of complication, whether in matters of relationship or resolution mechanism. Maintaining the dignity of “face” and “eye”- the image of the individual in public and individual level, is considered very essential for the Lao people²⁷. Hence, maintaining face-both individual dignity and community pride is placed the utmost importance. Solving any issue through open discussion, intense counseling and advice of the experienced elders help retaining the social status and sustainable peace.

The spread of cooperative forest-management committees in Orissa, West Bengal, and other parts of India, offers powerful evidence regarding the importance of felt needs and demonstration effects (Poffenberger, 1994). The forest protection committees give villagers an institutional setting for carrying out resource management based on their needs and knowledge. Many of the committees began as local self-help efforts, with leaders responding to severe degradation of nearby *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) forests. Community members set limits on local forest use, while setting up patrols to protect against outside encroachment. Often without official sanction, the committees exercised authority over selected forest patches. Encroachers were driven off or fined. Their efforts were repaid by the gradual regeneration of the forests.

This small-scale success served as a catalyst for other villages, which witnessed the transformation of the degraded woodlands, to try forest protection committees. In

²⁷ Lao folktales, folksongs, metaphors, proverbs contain numerous references of “face”-symbolic of the personal and public self image and image of the community as well. To save face of the individual and the community and consequently to avoid conflict as conflict is that leads to the loss of face-is the core of Lao philosophy. The Lao cultural concepts discourage open conflict, insist on avoidance of conflict and maintain etiquettes in conflict resolution. These values are taught at the young stage and are from generation to generation.

northern Orissa, for example, a single community in the early 1980s began a forest protection committee. With encouragement from sympathetic forest officers, a community leader initiated meetings with other villages. Through this exchange of information, the number of villages with forest protection committees rapidly increased in the region, from eight in 1987 to 79 by 1993 (Poffenberger,1994).The communities soon organized themselves into an apex body, the Budhikhamari Joint Protection Party, to coordinate their efforts. The party also acts as a unified interest group in dealings with the forest department, timber companies, and fuel wood contractors. The committees have resisted being incorporated into local administration, preferring to maintain their autonomy.

Experience in India suggests that the size of local forest management organizations is a crucial variable, with groups composed of 10 to 50 households most effective in carrying out activities, as well as settling internal disputes (Poffenberger, 1994). Linkages to apex organization can also contribute substantially to the success and sustainability of grassroots groups. Apex organizations offer benefits, including external linkages, support in preventing the capture of local organizations by elites, and mechanisms for resolving dispute.

2.3. Conclusion

The above description proves that methods practised by the traditional institutions are people centric, liberal, flexible and restorative by nature. Institutional mechanisms throughout the world are continuous processes to offer justice and bring harmony by simple, accessible and local mechanisms which at the same time are cost effective and time saving. This economic aspect matters a lot in the popularity of these methods even in the recent times.

Involvement of third party in significant numbers of the practices reveals the basic nature of mediation of these mechanisms. In these practices, the role of the mediator is to help parties reach a solution to their problem and to arrive at an outcome that both parties are happy to accept. Mediators avoid taking sides, making judgments or giving guidance. They are simply responsible for developing effective communications and building

consensus between the parties. The focus of a mediation meeting is to reach a common sense settlement agreeable to both parties in a case. Though there is no any legal compulsion to follow or disobey the suggestions, people, under sheer faith, group identity and cultural loyalty, follow these recommendations.

The importance on agreement, compromise, forgiveness stands for the basic features of the negotiation practices of the traditional mechanisms of conflict and peace. Study on the mechanisms proves that peace is considered to be a social effort where everyone has his/her own part. Though not structured in the proper term, mechanisms discussed above do follow a certain process to reach a desirable peaceful which include Preparation, Discussion, Clarification of goals, Negotiate towards a Win-Win outcome, Agreement, Implementation of a course of action. In this aspect, these mechanisms are found to share the same nature of modern negotiation methods. During situations when there is failure to agree, then re-scheduling a further meeting is called for. Attempts are made for more viable solution with more discussion. Sometimes it becomes more informal process of negotiation.

CHAPTER 3

Satra and Namghar- Traditional institutions of Assam

3.1. Introduction-

Satra and *Namghar* are traditional socio-cultural institutions of Assam, functional since the fifteenth century. *Sankardev*-the propounder of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam and later, his disciples selected some particular regions and established the *Satras* and *Namghars*. *Satras* are classified on the basis of celibacy. It is of four types – monastic, *grihasthi* (married or house-holder), semi monastic and admixture. Irrespective of class, caste and creed, *Satras* have been playing a vital role in the socio-cultural infrastructural arrangement of this multiethnic state by practising their own legal, cultural, economic and peacebuilding mechanisms. *Namghars* are village centred institutions sharing the same objectives. Along with their religious and cultural activities, both the institutions have also been practicing diverse mechanisms which contain elements of transforming antagonistic relationship, integrating the fractionalized society and strengthening the foundation of peace. Both the institutions practice their own resolution mechanisms to resolve local conflicting issues, ranging from land disputes, caste related conflicts up to incidents of physical violence. The proposed chapter attempts to explore these traditional mechanisms of the *Satras* and *Namghars* with special reference to the peacebuilding mechanisms and how they have been retaining their contemporary nature even amidst the global waves of changes.

3.2. *Satras* of Assam: A brief historical background:

3.2.1. Neo-Vaishnavism and the *Satras*-

Popularly considered to be a welfare institution; *Satras* are contributions of Neo-Vaishnavism. Neo-Vaishnavism was a regional expression of the national Bhakti movement – the religio- social reform movement that swept across India in between the 12th and 15th century A.D. *Bhakti* movement was based on the liberal doctrine of *bhakti* or devotion. The context of the *bhakti* movement is rooted in the societal degradation and cultural distortion that plagued many parts of India at that time. Under the corrupting

influence of power and wealth and the growing ritualism that had taken hold of the priestly and ruling classes of the Hindu society, various malpractices were going on in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure. These factors impelled the Hindu thinkers and reformers of the day to evolve a simpler and liberal faith that would be acceptable to all alike. This resulted in a new way of religious regeneration what subsequently came to be known as the *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement, originally started by *Alvars* of South India and which thereafter spread to northern India and then to the eastern regions of India (Bhyuan,2008).

The *Vaishnava Bhakti* movement thus encompassed the entire nation and thereby brought about resurgence in the religious, social and cultural lives of the contemporary Indians. The door of religion has been opened to all by propounding in general that divine grace could be achieved through devotion in simple and accessible ways. Moreover class and caste were rejected as determinants in devotion and religion. The movement meted out the principle of birth and caste, which hitherto determined access to salvation through knowledge and ritual. To that extent the movement initiated structural changes in the socio-religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationships. Leaders of the Bhakti movement as well as the followers belonged to all strata of the society and everyone enjoyed the liberty to express their feelings in respective forms including literature, songs, dramatic performances, group performances etc. Secondly; it was ensured that devotion to God is possible without any rituals. Access to God or the Supreme power is possible to all and it does not require any precondition- these new beliefs made *Bhakti* movement instantly popular throughout the nation.

In the context of Assam, Neo-Vaishnavism was the contribution of Srimanta *Sankardev*. A multi-faceted genius, Srimanta *Sankardev* was at once a spiritual leader, a social reformer, a prolific writer, a master playwright and composer. He is credited with providing the bedrock of Assamese culture, and creating a religion that gave shape to a set of new values and social synthesis. He was born in the month of *Ahin*¹ (September-October) in 1371 *Sakabda* (1449 AD) at Tembuani (Bordowa), in the present-day

¹ *Ahin* is one of the Assamese calendar months. It falls in between the months of September and October.

Nagaon district of Assam. Srimanta *Sankardev* undertook the difficult task of a progressive social reformer at a juncture of delicate crisis in Assamese society and polity. It was a society lost in complicated religious and ritualistic practices. Malpractices like animal and human sacrifices, magical spells and expensive ritualistic performances gripped the field of religion. The common mass could not find out the real path of devotion and was in the periphery due to their inability to cope up with the dominance of ritual based religio practices. Hierarchy in the name of caste, social status and wealth controlled the entire religious environment. The Neo-*Vaishnavite* movement initiated by Srimanta *Sankardev* in Assam in the latter period of the 15th century ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form, in literature as well as in the vocal and visual arts. The movement was unique in the sense that it ensured the importance of the common mass and revolutionary in terms of its rejection of traditional social ladder in the name of caste or class. The uniqueness of the movement also lay in the fact that unlike other contemporary cults in the rest of India, Srimanta *Sankardev*'s Neo-*Vaishnavism* rested not on a discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but its emphasis was more on ethnic integration, societal reforms and spiritual upliftment through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region, at a time when the society in Assam was in a mayhem fragmented and faction-ridden as it was (Bhuyan,2008) .Different dynasties ruled different parts of the state and there prevailed a diverse socio-economic and cultural structure. In such a situation, the simple and moderate philosophy of *Sankardev* was a ray of hope for the Assamese people.

It was revolutionary also in the sense that Neo-*Vaishnavism* in Assam was not only a simple religious faith but was also a way of life. Along with religion, it also embraced the social, cultural and religious spheres and brought about a change in very outlook on life and the world of the common masses. Religion was not projected as an alienated, superior set of dogmatic activities, rather as integrated lifestyle activities which can be performed without much formality and pre arrangements. Chanting of the attributes of the supreme power and offering of homely food was the simplest way to express ones devotion to God. There is no need of different dress code nor does devotion need a different space to be offered. The Supreme entity is omnipresent and a purer heart

is enough to express one's love to that power. Service to any living being is the service to God. Therefore nobody needs to belong to an elite ancestry nor should be an expert on the elite language. Neo-*Vaishnavism* rested on the principles of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy which helped it standing unique and innovative among the different *Bhakti* cults of India. It aimed to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values. *Sankardev* was well aware of the multi ethnic, multi cultural demographic structure of the erstwhile Assam and so he tried to integrate all possible elements so that it would be approachable by every sect of the society.

This new creed of faith borne out of the impact of the Neo *Vaishnavite* movement and started by Srimanta *Sankardev* is officially known as *Eka-Sarana-Nam-Dharma*. *Sankardev* preached devotion to a single God (*Eka Sharana*)-Lord Krishna or Vishnu, who can be worshipped solely by uttering His various names (*Nama*). The surrender to One and rejection of ritualistic formalities are the basic principles of this new creed of faith. Life once surrendered, given over to the Lord, can no longer be lived according to the desires and impulses inherited from old Adam. They are to be governed by higher laws and purer manners. For an *Eka-saraniya*, Vishnu is the ultimate expression of the eternal power and do not need the worship of other gods or goddess. It has been said by *Sankardev* himself that “a Vaishnavite should not worship any other God except Vishnu, he should not enter into any other god's temple, nor should he partake of the offering made to any other god. In so doing, bhakti would be vitiated”.² Srimanta *Sankardev* considered the *sravana* (listening) and *kirtana* (chanting) modes of *bhakti* or devotion as prescribed by the *Bhagawat-Purana* to be sufficient. They are accessible to the highest and lowest, men and women alike, irrespective of birth, caste or status and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the votary. Idol worship does not feature in Srimanta *Sankardev*'s system. The Radha-Krishna cult is not acknowledged in this system of *Vaishnavism*, nor is any *Shakti* (energy represented in a female form) of Lord Vishnu to be recognised. Devotion to one (*Eka Sharana*) and insistence on Nama as the method of bhakti (*Nama*) – are what make this particular form of religion known as *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*. It was the “strict monotheism as the central doctrine and the

²See “A New Life, Letters and a State” by Banikanta Kakati in *Sankaradeva: Vaishnava Saint of Assam-1921*.

recitation or remembering of the names of the One deity as the principal form of worship” makes the new ideology also popular as *Eksarana Nama Dharma* (Neog, 2008).

With an

“all-embracing religion of love, he carved out a new way for religious and social upheaval in Assam. He initiated a great progressive and democratic movement which laid emphasis on the unity of Godhead, stood against excessive ritualism, preached a faith based on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti fought against caste prejudices and stressed on the equality and brotherhood of man. Few saints in the world have so comprehensively molded and shaped the spiritual, social and cultural destiny of a race as Sankaradeva did for the people of Assam. He unified Assamese society and brought forth a glorious renaissance in the fields of literature, music, art and drama and gave to the people of Assam a distinct cultural Identity” (Chaliha, 2014).

The four fundamental elements of Neo-Vaishnavism are (i) *Bhagwan* (God) (ii) *Guru* (the religious preceptor) (iii) the fraternity of *Bhakats* (devotees) and (iv) *Nama* (prayer, chanting of the name of the Supreme power). Of the different attitudes of *bhakti*, Srimanta *Sankardev* advocated *dasya* or servitude to God. *Eka-Sarana-Nam-Dharma* is also known as *Mahapurushia Dharma*. One section of scholars opines that it is named so after *Mahapurusha* Srimanta *Sankardev*, who founded it. Among his contemporary preachers of India; particularly among the vaishnavite saints *Sankardev* is called *Mahapurusha*- the greater human being. Hence his religious cult is also called as *Mahapurushiya* dharma. But the other section of scholars rejects this view and says that the epithet *Mahapurusha* or supreme being is an epithet of Vishnu in the Bhagawat Purana (11-5,33-4) and Parikshita is called *Mahapurushiya* (2-1,10) for his devotion to *Mahapurusha* Vishnu. It is found to have been used in the context of Nam Ghosha by Madhavadeva, the most favourite disciple of *Sankardev*. So, the expression *Mahapurushiya* dharma implies the faith or devotion to *Mahapurusha* i.e. Vishnu. Then the principal deity Krishna, subsequently for his extra ordinary qualities is also called *Mahapurusha* by his devotees. But *Mahapurushiya* dharma is not the name of a religion like Buddhism or Christianity. It is a religion observing devotion to *Mahapurusha* God.

The epithet '*Mahapurusha*', in Assam Vaishnavism, refers to the Supreme Being (Narayana-Vishnu-Krishna).

The Neo-*Vaishnavite* movement commenced in Assam in the first decade of the 16th century and reached its climax by the middle of the 17th century. It started on a missionary vision by working for the upliftment of the backward classes and minimization of the inclemency of caste distinctions. The peripheral groups including the so-called untouchables and backward classes and tribes were openly accepted in the new fraternity (ibid, 2008). The earliest attempts to bring the backward tribes, castes and classes into the fold of *Vaishnavism* were made by Srimanta *Sankardev* himself who accepted Govinda belonging to the Garo tribe; Paramananda, belonging to the Miri (Mishing) tribe; Narahari, an Ahom man; Narottama belonging to the Naga community; Jayarama, a Bhutiya person and Chandsai, a Muslim person as his disciples. They all took part in the *Bhaona* performances and when required acted as guides to analyse the essence of *Eka Sharana Nam Dharma*. In his popular work, *Kirtana-ghosa*, Srimanta *Sankardev* announces: there is no caste differences in Bhakti.

Sankardev's Neo-*Vaishnava* movement in Assam aimed at reforming the erstwhile complicated ritualism patronized by the social elites and instituted a social reform programme targeted to teach the common people; the simple ways of living and belief, equality of men irrespective of their caste or tribe identity, and practice of non-violence. His major thrust was however, on the eradication of the complicated and elaborate systems of rituals and practices associated with propitiation of multitudes of gods and goddesses under which peasant and workers faced extreme exploitation from all powerful priestly class (Neog, 1968). *Sankardev*, therefore, introduced simple way of congregational prayer, *nama-kirtana*, to the Supreme God-Vishnu or Krishna –and propitiate him with simple devotion – *bhakti* (Nath, 2012). The two aspects of his teachings-belief and submission to one supreme God, and rejection of caste distinctions in the religious plan as an attempt to create a unified society of universal brotherhood, was not in consonance with the ideal of the Ahom feudal state (Nath, 2012). The Ahom state, therefore, closely observed the Neo- *Vaishnava* movement in a suspicious way and

planned to curb it down especially when *Sankardev* proselytized Madhavadeva³ (1489 AD-1596 AD) at Belaguri Dhuyahat, which was then within the Ahom territory. *Neo-Vaishnavism* of *Sankardev* in Assam, like other parts of India met with strong opposition from the Brahmin priesthood, as it was perceived to be a revolt against the excesses of the priest craft. They managed to gain the ears of the Ahom king of Assam. Thereafter *Sankardev* had to undergo a lot of troubles, which culminated in beheading of his son-in-law at the order of the Ahom king.

The trademark of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta *Sankardev* is the two distinctively unique institutions - the *Satra* and the *Namghar*. *Satra* and *Namghars* turn out to be the representative institutions of the Assamese race as they have been intimately associated with the social, cultural as well as the religious life of the Assamese society. The *Namghar* actually evolved as an offshoot, an extended wing or a diminutive replica of the *Satra* institution. Accordingly, while tracing the origins of the *Namghar*, a brief account of its parent body, the *Satra* becomes necessary. The institution of *Satra* was initiated aiming at publicizing and popularising the new philosophical creed of Sankaradeva. It was an effort to introduce the common people with the new, simple ways of single-minded devotion to God under the guidance of a teacher in a public space. It was an attempt to demystify the metaphysical complexities regarding the issues of religion and the deities. Gradually they grew out to be well organised channels of *Neo Vaishnavism* throughout the state. *Satras* owe their uniqueness to their public image of Bhakti and non conformist outlook.

3.2.2. The historical background of the *Satra*: -

Satras first came into existence as a formal institutionalised means to disseminate the ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism, propounded by Sankaradeva and his disciples. Etymologically the original Sanskrit word *Satra* stands for assembly house or meeting place of the righteous people. Sanskrit dictionary defines *Satra* as something that protects the righteous. The place worshipped by the gods and the devotees, the place where the

³ Madhabdeva is the most distinguished disciple of Sankaradeva and considered to be equally influential in religious and philosophical matters of *Ek Sarana Nam Dharma*. Like his master, Madhabdeva also composed a good number of songs, dramas and other religious texts. *Nam Ghosha* by Madhabdeva is a landmark literary work and enjoys immense respect among the Assamese.

favourite activities of God are performed is the *Satra*. All the nine types of Bhakti prevail in this place and all the residents of the *Satra* are loyal devotees of the Supreme being (Adhikari: 1967). Baikunthanath Bhagawata Bhattacharya has defined the *Satra* as, “that supreme place adored by gods and *Vaishnavas*, where ardent devotees perform duties satisfying god and where nine fold Bhakti prevail. *Vaishnavas* residing there are naturally prone to Harinama.” (Sarma, 1996). *Chandrakanta Abhidhan*⁴ defines *Satra* as “... (1) Sacrificial session and (2) vaishnavite monastery in Assam”. *Hemkosh*⁵-another Assamese dictionary defines *Satra* as “the residential area of the noble, religious people- A religious institution in Assam, a monastery”. Again *Satra* is also defined as the holy place of “Yagnya”- the Hindu ritual of worshipping and sacrifice. Eminent scholar Narayan Chandra Goswami said, “The word *Satra* refers to the holy place of performing “Yagnya”-so *Satra* refers to a holy place. In this holy place, devotees assemble to take the name of the Supreme Being and forget their material existence. This sacred place is thus turned out to be the *Satra*” (Goswami, 1984). Thus it has become clear that the word *Satra* basically refers to the public sacred place where devotees assemble to interact, discuss and disseminate holy matters. In the context of Assam, the word has been used to refer to the place where the master, disciples, followers, sympathizers and the common men assemble to discuss and disseminate Vaishnavite philosophy. Significantly, all the definitions restrict the meaning of sacrifice only to symbolic offering; do not stand for animal or human sacrifice.

Sankaradeva managed to develop a community centre for the religious and spiritual discussion in each of his residences and wherever he went, there developed a place for religious discussion. Sankaradeva used to migrate from one place to another and all those places have *Satras* or *Satra* like institutions. But at that time, it was not known as *Satra* nor were they well structured infrastructural arrangements of the present time. Though opinions vary about the origin period of the use of this particular term, all agree in their objectives. In the initial period, words like *Kirtana Ghar*, *Harigriha*, *Devamandir*

⁴ *Chandrakanta Abhidhan* is an Assamese dictionary compiled by Assam Sahitya Sabha, a leading literary organisation of Assam. The dictionary is named after Chandrakanta Agrawal, a pioneering figure of Assamese literature. The word *Abhidhan* stands for dictionary in Assamese.

⁵ *Hemkosh* is the first etymological dictionary in the Assamese language compiled by Hemchandra Barua. So the dictionary is named after him. The dictionary was published in the year 1900.

or *Than* were more popular than the word *Satra*. *Kirtanaghar* or the *Harigriha* was the primitive form of the present *Satra* institution. *Katha Guru Charita* contains how Sankaradeva established *Harigriha* in Alipukhuri to discuss religious matters. In Assamese language, all the initial words of the terms- “*Hari*”, “*Deva*” stands for God and *kirtana* stand for the practice of taking the name of God in Assamese. Places where name of God were taken regularly or discussions on God were going on were hence known as *Harigriha*. It is regarded as the pre-model of *Satras* of the present time. In this stage, the basic activities of the *Satras* were religious. Master and his disciples along with the villagers of the surrounding villages discussed religious matters by assembling in the *Harigriha*. Words like *Kirtanaghar*, *Than*, *Harigriha* are still used as equivalent to *Satra*. But, *Satra* is the most widely and popularly accepted term for this institution.

Damordeva-one of the major disciples of *Sankardev* initiated the extended version of the *Satra* institution. He established the first full-fledged *Satra* in Patbaushi in the present Barpeta district. This *Satra* was established in a donated land and it was a complete residential structure with all the elements of a *Satra*- the residences for the *Satra* habitants, storehouse, guest house, place of discussion and worship and entrance. Madhabdeva- the most loyal disciple of *Sankardev* followed the path of Damodardeva and established another *Satra* in Sundaridiya – a place 14 kilometer away from the present Barpeta town. Historical documents, including *Charitputhi*⁶ say that Sankaradeva was satisfied with the institutionalised mechanism of *Satra* and ordered Madhabdeva to establish *Satras*. Thus Damodardeva can be termed as the founder of the present form of *Satras*. Sankaradeva himself established a *Satra* in Bardowa. This historical *Satra* is said to have the largest *Namghar* or *kirtanaghar* in Assam.

In the beginning phase, establishment of *Satras* was basically confined within Lower part of Assam. During the reign of the Dihingiya dynasty in Assam, another *Satra* was established by Sankaradeva in Belaguri (also known as Dhuyahat) in Majuli, the river island of Assam. Responsibility of establishment of *Satras* in Upper Assam was

⁶*Charitputhi* refers to biographical writings on Vaishnavite masters, composed by their disciples. Biography of Sankardeva and Madhavadeva by Ramcharan Thakur, Daityari Thakur, Bhushan Dwija, Ramray falls under this division. Along with the details of the saint's life, customs and manners of the contemporary society are also recorded in *Charitputhis*. They are the first attempts of Biographical writings in Assamese language.

entrusted to Gopaldeva. He established the first *Satra* in Deberapar in Mariani, Jorhat. Establishment of *Satras* in Upper Assam was bit different from the process in Lower Assam as here it was blessed by the royal patronage of the Ahom kings (Sarmah, 1996). The erstwhile Ahom kings had to come up to defend their territory and the Hindu identity in the face of the eastward advances of the Mughals and the resistance of the eastern Koch dynasty. In such a crucial situation, Ahoms started supporting the religious institutions to retain their reign and dominance. Two Ahom royal officials - Bhandarigohain and Sundargohain helped Gopaldeva in establishing the *Satra* in Upper Assam. "...with the conversion to Vaishnavism of the Ahom Royalty, many *Satras* were established by the kings themselves with grants of enormous landed property ,*sabites*⁷ and other classes of workers"(Nath, 2007). Royal patronage, especially in the form of land grants, helped blooming the *Satras* in stronger way. Gradually the number of *Satras* increased. As the numbers increased, there came changes in the objectives and activities of the *Satras*. People of all castes, creeds and economic status started engaging with the *Satras*. Significantly *Satras* were and are never confined for the followers of the Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy. Rather it was considered as a holy place and people visit *Satras* on any important occasion of their day-to-day lives. It gradually started acquiring a more socio-cultural character than a mere religious one. Cultural practices, especially the practices of performing art contributed a lot in this process of transformation. More and more interaction with the common people helped *Satras* acquiring a more public shape and turned out to be the major socio-cultural institution of the state.

3.2.3. Introducing the *Satras* of Majuli-

Majuli- the inhabited river island in Jorhat district of Assam is said to be the hub of *Satra* and *Satriya* culture. Majuli used to be the largest inhabited river island in the world-its area is 584.38 sq km and population is 1, 67,245. It is located in the mid-reaches of the Brahmaputra in Assam, about 630 km upstream of the Assam- Bangladesh border. Majuli is located in the broadest part of the Brahmaputra valley, where the river divides the erstwhile district of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. The island is tucked into an

⁷ Servants offered as a token of respect

isolated block with Mikir hills on one side and Dafla⁸ hills on the other; both ranges are not too far from the river (Goswami:2001). Best reachable from the present town of Jorhat, a major centre for tea plantation and research, this used to be the last capital of the Ahom kings, via Nemati ghat - a small river port. From Nemati ghat, one has to catch a river ferry boat run by the Government or authorised motorboat run privately and reaches the Majuli Island. Literally, the word Majuli in Assamese language means “island in between”, hence Majuli has supposedly derived its name from its location between two streams, Lohit and Kherkatia.

According to the census data of 2011, Majuli is the home to 1, 67,245 people with the dominance of Mishing communities. They are one of the offshoots of Mongoloid stock while linguistically they are Tibeto-Burmans. There are 248 villages in the island (ibid, 2011).The structure of the villages is different from a traditional Assamese village as flood and erosion make most of the villages as migratory settlements who have been displaced from their original place. Secondly the villages of Majuli vary in the number of household, because most of the migrated settlements scatter here and there and lacks a permanent traditional village structure. Sometimes ten to twelve households also exist in a village. Settlements by the embankments and on the platforms often fluctuates in their demographic pattern .Agriculture is the basic livelihood option of Majuli while government jobs, weaving, pottery, handicrafts are substitutional occupations. Paddy is the dominating crop while wheat, pulses, jute, sugarcane, different kinds of vegetables are also produced in large quantity. The milk, curd and fish of Majuli are well known in the state. Majuli is also famous for its rich bio-diversity. It has been estimated that there are more than 110 species of birds, 20 species of mammals, 10 species of amphibians; numerous types of reptiles, various wild and medicinal plants are found in Majuli.⁹ It is a home to wide variety of migratory birds. The natural landscape of Majuli is very beautiful which makes it one of the most searched tourist destinations of the state.

Satras of Majuli had their historical origin in the fifteenth century. It is estimated that approximately sixty five (65) *Satras* were in Majuli. But due to severe flood and

⁸ Mikir hills belong to present Karbi Anglong plateau of Assam.Dafala hills falls under the territory of present Arunachal Pradesh.

⁹ Report by Assam Agriculture University on Majuli Island, 2012.

erosion, lots of *Satras* were washed away and were shifted to other locations of the state. During the field study, thirty two (32) *Satras* were found to be operational in the island.¹⁰ Of these *Satras*, some *Satras* are just *Satras* by their origin but hardly bear the structural characteristics typical to the term *Satra*. In many instances, the original *Satras* have been divided into new factions due to ideological differences and appear as a new *Satra*. The three divisions of Kamalabari *Satra* (*Purana* (old) Kamalabari, *Natun* (new)Kamalabari and *Uttar* (North)) and Chamaguri *Satra* (Prachin,Natun and Dalani Chamaguri *Satra*) are the examples of this phenomenon. Among the *Satras* of Majuli Dakhinpat, Garamur, Kamalabari, Auniati, Bengenaati *Satras* are the ancient and popular *Satras* of Assam. Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur *Satras* were respectively established by Niranjandeva, Banamalideva and Joyharideva. Establishment of Auniati and Garamur *Satra* was initiated by Ahom King Jayddhvaj Singha. All of them were famous disciples of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. These three *Satras* enjoyed immense Ahom patronage. Due to this regal connection, these *Satras* are known as *Raj Satra* or *Rajaghariya- Satras* enjoying royal patronage of the erstwhile Ahom kings. Among these three *Satras*-Auniati and Dakhinpat are monastic *Satras* .Garamur *Satra* follows the married tradition. Kamalabari *Satra* was established by Badula Ata-one of the most faithful disciples of Madhavadeva. Bengenaati *Satra* was established by Murarideva .It is situated in the middle position of Majuli. Besides these *Satras*, *Satras* of Majuli include – Chamaguri, Bihimpur, Alengi, Adi Alengi, Dighali, Bhogpur, Narashingha, Beleshidhiya, Natun Chamaguri, Dalani Chamaguri, Ahataguri, Rajgurubari, Oua etc.¹¹

Majuli is known as the central hub of *Satriya* culture. The island is described everywhere as the central hub, the holy abode, the soul force of *Satriya* culture. All the *Satras* of Majuli are very much active in cultural activities and have been contributing immensely to the cultural field of the larger Assamese culture. The basic essence of *Satriya* culture has been preserved by the *Satras* and *Namghars* of Majuli by training thousands of pupils in the art forms of dance, music, instrument recitation, dramatic enactment painting, mask making etc since their time of inception. Every resident of the *Satras* of Majuli is an expert at least in one field of cultural practices. The tradition of

¹⁰ See the list of *Satras* enclosed as the appendix.

¹¹ The complete list of the existing *Satras* of Majuli is enclosed in the appendix.

Satriya culture has been maintained by the *Namghars* in the village level. Artists of Majuli have been representing and showcasing their cultural talent throughout the world. Literally speaking, *Satriya* Culture and Majuli-become synonymous. Researchers, historians, academicians, cultural activists, writers, film makers consider Majuli to be the ultimate abode of *Satriya* culture.

3.3. Infrastructural Arrangement of the *Satras* -

Satra institution is spread in all parts of the state of Assam. Though numbers vary in surveys, it is estimated that approximately eight hundred *Satras* are spread throughout the state of Assam. *Satras* are large institutions situated in acres of land. During the reign of the Ahom kings, large quantity of land was donated to the *Satras*. Most of the *Satras* are blessed with such land grants and hence enjoy large compound. Large number of trees of various species, huge ponds and wide, open space are characteristics of the compounds of *Satras* of Assam. The greenery and serene environment attracts the visitors. *Satras* also have revenue free agricultural land donated by the Ahom kings. Economy of a *Satra* is based on agriculture and grants and donations of the disciples and the followers. Agricultural lands of the *Satras* are situated outside the permanent compound of the institution.

The permanent campus of the *Satra* is what the physical existence of the *Satra*. *Satras* follow their own architectural design which basically includes the following structures- *Namghar*, *Manikut*, *Guru Griha*, *Bhnraral*, *Baishnava Griha*, *Karapat*, *Athithishala*, *Natyashala* and *Bhogghar* (Devagoswami, 2001). *Namghar* and *Manikut* are the places of all major activities situated in the centre of the *Satra*. The residents of the *Satra*, devotees and visitors sit in the open space of the *Namghars*. *Nam* refers to the practice of taking the name of God and *ghar* refers to house. So the house or space for taking the name of God is *Namghar*. *Namghars* of the *Satras* have wide, open space for sitting arrangement. In his description, B.C Allen talked about the *Namghar* of the Garamur *Satra* in the following way, “The *Namghar* is a huge structure, the roof of which is supported on huge wooden pillars and the great floor space is entirely bare save for one or two lecterns on which the sacred writings are reposing...Here everything is fresh, neat and well-to-do” (Allen, 1905). It is the centre of the main activities of a *Satra*

which faces the east. It is a large open hall with gabled roof having an apsidal facade in the western side and over which is a *tope* or the dome on the roof. The apsidal roof has an elaborate structure in wood which is very typical of *Namghar* construction. The interior is a simple nave and two aisles with pillars. These pillars are in the number of 5, 7 and 7 pillars (*khutas*) usually, which divide the area loosely into chambers. They are erected with wooden beams supporting an architrave over which rests the roof. These wooden beams are known as the *chati* and are either carved with motifs or painted. The central pillar of the *Namghar* is known as “*Laikhuta*”. *Satradhikar* takes his place near this pillar. The false ceiling which is made by joining the *chatis* is used for stocking the large bamboo masks and accessories of the drama performances.

Satradhikar, *Bhakats* and the visitors can sit on the *Namghar* premises to discuss any issue. Particularly designed mat made of cane are used for sitting in the *Namghar*. *Namghar* is the place where the daily religious functions of the *Satra* are performed. The *Prashanga* is the major activity which is performed fourteen times in a day. In this process, certain chapters from holy texts or devotional rhythmic compositions about god are chanted by the followers by sitting in the central open space of the *Namghar*. In the past, roof of the *Namghars* were made of haystack and walls were made of bamboo or wood. Now-a-days, there are concrete walls and tin roofs are commonly used in the *Namghars* of *Satra*. Sometimes, walls are decorated with local decorative motifs, paintings of mythological characters; projections of dance steps etc. The sculptured reconstruction of the mythological characters and religious motifs in the walls of the *Namghar* of Dakhinpat *Satra* are great source of attraction for the visitors.

Manikut is a small room, situated in the front portion of the *Namghar*. It is regarded as the most sacred space, attached to the east of the *Namghar*. *Manikut* is where the *Guru Asana* (sacred throne) is located. *Bhagawat*- the main holy text and the idols of the worshipping deities are placed with special arrangement in the *Manikut*. *Manikut* literally means ‘house of jewels’, where *Bhagawat* is referred as the jewel. *Manikut* is also the site where other valuables such as wood carvings, metal works, ancient manuscripts etc are kept. It is a sacred area and beyond a certain boundary lay masses are

not allowed to enter. Only specially trained persons are allowed to enter inside the Manikut. Particular persons are assigned the duty of maintenance of this sacred room.

Guru Griha is the residence of the chief of the *Satra* –popularly known as *Satradhikar*. *Satradhikars* are the chiefs of the institution. Generally the *Gurugrihas* are situated near the *Namghars*. He has been assisted by selected residents of the *Satras*, known as *Aldhara*. There is the provision of wide space in the front portion of the house where visitors or devotees can sit and interact with the *Guru*.



Pic 1.1. The entrance to the *Namghar* of Auniati *Satra*

Source- Photograph taken during field study, 23/11/14

Bhnaral is the store house of a *Satra*.The institution need different material for its maintenance ranging from food materials, donated items, historical materials, books up to materials used in cultural programmes. All these materials are stored in the *Bhnaral*. The person in charge of the *Bhanral* is known as *Bhanrali*. *Baishnava Griha* refers to the residence of the *Baishnava* or the *Bhakats*- the residents of a *Satra*. They are known as *Hatis* or *Bahas*, spread in the four directions of North, South, East and West of the *Satra*.The word *Hati* refers to a row of huts and *Baha* is derived from the Assamese verb

“*bah*”-to sit or reside. Most of the huts are of equal size, having a common verandah joining the length from one end to the other, except the ones on the eastern side which are much larger being the quarters of the *Satradhikar*. The *Bahas* were once made of bamboo and thatch, but these days most of *Satras* are having concrete or semi-concrete *Bahas*. In the monastic *Satras*, 5 to 6 unmarried *Bhakats* reside in one *baha*. In the *Grihasthi* (Married) *Satras*, one family resides in one residence. The senior *Bhakat* is addressed as *Ata* (derived from the Sanskrit word-*Atma*-the soul) by the juniors. Specified household and institutional activities are distributed among the residents according to their age and expertise.



Pic 1.2. *Hatis*- the residence of *bhakats* in Dakshinpat *Satra*

Source – Photograph taken during field visit, 12/6/14

Karapat is the chief entrance of the *Satra* while *Athithishala* refers to the guesthouse. As large number of people visits the *Satras*, they are accommodated in the guesthouses. *Natyashala* is the place of rehearsal of cultural activities. Different kinds of cultural activities are practised regularly in a *Satra*. Therefore *Natyashala* is the basic space of preparation of all such cultural activities. The *Bhogghar* can be termed as the place where the particular food items for the worship is prepared. Visitors are offered the

Bhog. Another particular recipe is also prepared as the *Prashad* (offerings) of God. The ingredients of this preparation vary from one *Satra* to another.

Residents of the *Satras* are provided with educational facilities. *Satras* have Sanskrit *tols* ¹²where Sanskrit education is provided to the residents. Such *tols* have classes up to ten and they are under the State Education board of Assam. Apart from Sanskrit, such *tols* teach regular subjects like mathematics, science, social studies, English etc. With the spread of modern education, residents of the *Satra* started attending formal educational institutions like schools, colleges and universities of their surrounding localities. Out of eighty five *Bhakats* of Dakhinpat *Satra*, forty of them are attending respective educational institutions in different levels. The present *Satradhikar* of Auniati *Satra* himself is awarded with Doctorate degree by Dibrugarh University, Assam. *Satras* like Auniati, Bengenaati, Bhogpur have large number of *bhakats* attending schools and colleges. Many of them are also engaged in government and non-government jobs.¹³ Now-a-days, *Satras* have started constructing museums and libraries to preserve the precious historical materials and books. Most of the *Satras* of Majuli are blessed with historical materials like old religious texts, coins of different metals, artefacts, wooden decorative items, ivory crafts, tusk of animals ,rare musical instruments and utensils, royal materials like the sword, outfits worn by the Ahom kings etc.Hence *Satras* of Majuli have started constructing museums to preserve them scientifically. Similarly, the ancient books of the *Satras* are preserved in their libraries. These books include Sanchi manuscripts, text of ancient medical science, Sanskrit texts, endangered religious texts composed by Sankaradeva and his followers, letters from Ahom kings, letters of the colonial officials etc. Trained residents of the *Satra* are appointed for looking after these initiatives.

3.4. The internal Management system

Satras are full-fledged residential organisations. Therefore duties of different areas have been systematically assigned to the residents. The *Satradhikar* is the parental

¹² *Tols* refer to ancient residential educational institutions, operated during pre colonial India, where Sanskrit was the major area of learning. *Tols* were the educational institutions where the teachers teach Sanskrit to the resident learners. Sanskrit *Tols* still exist in the *Satras* of Majuli.

¹³ Information provided to the researcher by residents of the respective *Satras* during the time of interview.

figure and under his supervision, the other residents perform their respective duties. He is the religious teacher, pontiff, preceptor, preacher, administrative controller and the spiritual leader of the institution. Devotees and followers consider *Satradhikar* as incarnation of God and address as *Prabhu Ishwar, Tera, Adhikar*- honorific words similar to God in meaning. In the absence of the *Satradhikar, Dekha Satradhikar*- junior chief looks into his activities. *Bhakats* or *Baishnava* are the general residents of the *Satra*. *Bhakats* in the *Satras* come in the early stage of their lives. *Bhakats* are brought in the tender years so that they can be properly trained in the particular life style. The senior resident of the *Baha* can bring someone from his family or sometimes parents themselves offer their children to a *Satra*. In this process, the offering should be spontaneous and should not be forced or under compulsion. They can visit their families whenever they want. All the residents within the *Satra* put on particular outfit- Dhoti- Kurta. *Gamosa*- the traditional hand weaved Assamese cloth is used with this outfit.¹⁴ On special occasions, *Cheleng Sadar*¹⁵ and Kurta made of Assam silk are also used by them.

Several designations are created to supervise the internal mechanisms ranging from store keeper, public relation officer, manager, adviser, accountant etc. In some places, *Satras* are maintained by a management committee which consists of a president, a secretary, a treasurer and respective members. Villagers from the surrounding villages also have places in the advisory boards. Religious and cultural duties are also assigned according to the expertise and seniority of the residents. Though *Satradhikar* is the central administrative authority of the institution, duties are distributed accordingly for the smooth running of the *Satra*. There are two categories of duties - religious and public duties. Religious duties refer to the typical daily religious activities like cleansing the *Namghar* and *Manikut*, Lighting the lamps, the reading of holy texts, taking and managing the donated materials of the followers and visitors, preparing the special food, accompanying musical instruments during *Nama Prashanga*, performing specified duties during the religious and cultural activities etc. Specified religious designations within the

¹⁴ It is generally a white rectangular piece of cloth with primarily a red border on three sides and red woven motifs on the fourth (in addition to red, other colors are also used). Although cotton yarn is the most common material for making/weaving *Gamosa*, there are special occasion ones made from Pat silk. A reverent symbol of Assamese culture, *Gamosa* is considered equivalent to Assamese identity.

¹⁵ Assamese form of white or off white shawl, generally made of cotton yarn, also available in silk. Sometimes traditional motifs or designs are used. The usual length of a *Cheleng* is 3 metres.

Satra include *Bardeuri, Palideuri, Bhagawati, Pathak, Gayan, Bayan, Sutradhar, Pujari, Namlagoa, Namghariya, Bagish etc* (Devagoswami, 2001). Public duties include receiving and offering hospitality to the visitors, attending the religious and other social functions of the nearby areas, organising functions and festivals, collecting tax from the disciples, attending different meetings as representatives of the *Satra*, taking and keeping account of the expenditure, writing and copying letters etc. *Medhi, Rajmedhi, Barmedhi, Dhan Bharali, Satola, Pasani, Muktiyar, Kakati, Lekharu, Khataniar* are designations based on the assigned public duties. Such officials are the linkmen between the *Satra* institution and the common mass. *Satras* of Assam are also known for bamboo crafts, masks making, cane craft, paintings and other handicraft materials. *Satras* produce necessary cultural materials like statues, masks, bamboo made artefacts within their own premises. Most of the *Bhakats* are expert artisans. Now-a-days, NGOs, youth organisations, literary organisations also take part in the decision making process of public activities organised by the *Satras*.

3.5. Activities of the *Satra*

This is an accepted fact that *Satras* are primarily religious institutions. It has already been mentioned earlier that *Satras* were conceived as a means to publicize the core teachings of Neo-Vaishnavism among the common mass. *Satras* and *Namghars* were the social space used by Sankaradeva and the later preceptors to introduce the Assamese mass with the ideology and core values of Neo-Vaishnavism. Hence activities of the *Satra* are basically religious. Since the time of inception, *Satras* have been playing the role of the messenger of the Neo-Vaishnavite legacy in the state. In this process *Satras* have been executing this role through two major types of activities- religious and cultural.

3.5.1. Religious Activities

Satras have their own worshipping procedures according to their *Sanhatis* (Neog: 2005). *Sanhati* –in simple terms can be defined as a particular way of religious beliefs and rituals which define the basic religious nature of the respective *Satra*. There are four *Sanhatis* and *Satras* fall under these four *Sanhatis*- *Kal Sanhati, Nika Sanhati, Brahma*

Sanhati and Purush Sanhati. But in spite of having differences according to the *Sanhatis*, *Satras* share a commonality in their objectives and activities. To spread the teachings of Sankaradeva and his disciples is their main purpose. Hence, all *Satras* have similarities in their basic religious activities. Among them, taking the name of God-Lord Krishna in the form of recital of holy texts is the primary activity of the *Satras*.

Sankardev propagated the idea of *Sravana* and *Kirtana*- listening to and taking the name of the Supreme power as the most effective means to attain salvation. So, *Satras* regularly chant the name of God by reciting and explaining episodes of holy texts like *Bhagawat*, *Kirtana*¹⁶, *Dasham*, *Gunamala*, *Nam Ghosha* etc. Devotional songs like *Borgeet*, *Bhatima* are also performed in this process followed by discussion between the devotees and the preceptor. The practice is known as *Prashanga*. Importance of Guru, monotheism and aesthetic practices of the new creed lead to the popularity of these “small concourses” which were also known as *Hari-Prashanga* or *Nama-Prashanga* (Neog, 2008). It can be defined also as a form of collective prayer by the residents of a *Satra*. *Satras* generally follow the custom of fourteen “*Prashanga*” in three times a day, though the number has been reduced and varied in some *Satras* for different reasons¹⁷. But, the practice of fourteen *Prashanga* is maintained in the month of Bhadra in all *Satras*. *Satras* have different designations (*Namlagoa*, *Bhagawati*, *Pathak*, *gayan - bayan*, *oja* etc) to conduct this practice. They have their own divisions of duties like lead singer, instrumentalist, narrator, reader etc. All of them are well trained experts of the *Satriya* tradition of musical forms. *Satriya* musical instruments are accompanied with claps in a *Prashanga*. Though some *Satras* have particular numbers of listeners, anyone present in the *Prashanga* can be termed as *Shravani* (Listener or audience). In Bengenaati *Satra*, women also conduct *Prashangas* twice daily in a separate *Kirtanaghar*¹⁸. The idea behind *Prashanga* is that love and devotion towards God can be best expressed by taking

¹⁶ *Kirtana* in this dissertation is used in two meanings. In one context it refers to the activity of taking or chanting the name of Good. In the second context, it refers to the book authored by Srimanta Sankaradeva.

¹⁷ Tirthanath Sarma in *Auniati Satrar Buranji (1975)* has said that the number of *Prashangas* in Auniati exceeds fourteen. In Garamur the number is fourteen. The number is reduced to twelve in *Satras* under Brahma sanghati. During the field visit, the present *Satradhikar* of Prachin Chamaguri Satra said that there are only four *Prashangas* in his Satra. But fourteen *Prashangas* are conducted in all *Satras* of Majuli during the month of Bhadra.

¹⁸ Information collected from Mr. Ramen Hajarika during the field visit to the *Satra*.

and listening to his name, stories and activities. Uniqueness of *Prashanga* lies in the fact that it neither demands any worshipping rituals nor any donations.

Prashanga consists of different items of singing activities and prayer. Selected portions of the *Bhagawata* (both Sanskrit and Assamese versions), Nam Ghosha, Bhakti Ratnawali, *Borgeet*, *Bhatima*, *Tatoy*, *Chapoy*, *Ghosha nam*, *Boragi nam* and *Pachatiya nam* are chanted during the *Prashangas*. In specific sessions, the congregational prayer activity is assisted with *Gayan –Bayan*, *Oja Pali*, *Uthanam*, *Bhortal* recital etc. *Prashangas* aim at reminding the meaninglessness of material pleasures and the importance and significance of pure devotion in human lives. *Prashangas* create a divine atmosphere in the *Satras*.

Offering Puja in the Manikut and *Namghar* is another major regular activity of the *Satras*. After cleansing the rooms, *puja* is offered to the respective deities in their own alters. These persons are known as *Pujari*. They chant mantras and complete the process. Knowledge of religious Slokas, holy texts and formal procedures of worshipping the deity is necessary for performing this task. After Puja, *Prasad* and *Bhog*- the edible religious offerings are distributed. Preparing this *bhog* is also another assigned duty for some residents. Devotees from different parts regularly offer *Sharai*- material or edible substance¹⁹ offered to God. Assamese people believe that offering something to God before any good or new initiative is healthy. Hence *Sharai* is regularly offered to the *Satras*. Managing these *Sharai* is also a major duty of the particular officials.

Satradhikar of a *Satra* is a religious, spiritual leader. *Satras* enjoy huge number of devotees and followers within and outside the state. Auniati *Satra* of Majuli has more than ten lakhs of devotees scattered over the state and outside. Dakhinpat *Satra* too enjoys the devotion of more than six lakhs of devotees.²⁰ People from different parts of the state and the country visit the *Satras* to discuss different religious matters with him and the residents of the *Satra*. Devotees seek opinions and measures to solve their problems in religious matters, Hence, *Satradhikars* and experts discuss these issues by

¹⁹ It generally includes green gram or mung beans, fruits like banana, coconut, apple, orange etc. After symbolically offering in the alter of God, it is returned to the donor .

²⁰ Information provided by the *Satradhikars* of the respective *Satras* during the interview.

sitting in the residence of the *Satradhikar* or in the *Namghars*. Rituals to be maintained in wedding ceremonies, funeral systems, birth related functions are prescribed by the *Satras*. In the past even the household activities like starting the plough in a new season, starting of new harvesting, eating of new rice, naming a new born child were also conducted under the advice of the *Satra*. *Satradhikars* and the chief dignitaries of the *Satras* often visit different places to preach and propound religious teachings. They are often invited to public functions and festivals for delivering speech.

Organising and celebrating the religious festivals also falls under the religious activities of a *Satra*. The main objectives of the religious festivals of the *Satra* can be defined as follows- to increase the love and devotion towards God, to establish the relation between the soul and the Supreme power, to maintain basic religious practices, to teach religion through merriment and festivity and to maintain the social harmony. Religious festivals of a *Satra* include festivals having religious significance for the devotees. *Rashleela*, *Palnam*, *Fakua*, *Janmastami*, *Nirmali Loa Utsav* are some major festivals celebrated regularly in the *Satra*. *Palnam* is a very influential and popular festival of the *Satras* where different types of songs, prayers, hymns are performed in groups by the *Bhakats* and the devotees. It lasts for two or three days. Devotees offer lamps and material substances to their God with diverse wishes. *Palnam* of Auniati *Satra* is very popular and devotees consider a visit to the *Palnam* a sacred duty of their lives. *Rashleela* falls in the month of September-October where the life and activities of Lord Krishna are enacted through audio-visual performances.²¹ This festival is celebrated for three days. The celebration of *Rashleela* in the *Satras* of Majuli is famous for their beautiful dance forms, songs, costumes and use of puppets. The birth and death anniversaries of the Gurus (preceptors) are also performed in the *Satras*. It includes two types of anniversaries- the birth and death anniversary of Sri Manta Sankaradeva and Sri Madhavadeva and the birth and death anniversaries of the former *Satradhikars* of the respective *Satras*. Activities performed in the celebration of a *Satra* includes the Vedic offering of *Pinda*, recital of holy text and devotional songs, offering Prasad

²¹ *Rashleela* is also celebrated in different parts of Uttar Pradesh, Manipur and known in different names. Childhood events and the eternal love story of Radha and Lord Krishna are enacted through dance, songs and dramatic performances in *Rashleela*.

etc. Sometimes the dramatic enactment of *Bhaona* is also organised in such activities. Except these festivals, the common Assamese festivals like the three *Bihus*, Holi, *Rashleela* are also celebrated with grandeur in the *Satras*.

Sharan is another important religious activity of the *Satras*. It is said that, Mahendra Kandali- the teacher of Sankaradeva was so impressed by his knowledge that he himself requested *Sankardev* to consider him as his disciple.²² In this process, Sankaradeva avoided the customary practice of giving initiation at the Preceptor's feet and asked the followers to come the next morning. Advising prostration before it, gave initiation to this first batch of his celebrated disciples inclusive of his early teacher and his family priest, Ram Ram. This prostration before the rendering of the *Bhagawat* by the proselytes combined oaths of allegiance to God (Krishna) about whom the work was written and to the Guru (Sankardev) by whom it was rendered. Thus it is that the *Sharan* (initiation) ceremony of *Sankardev* has the unique practice of prostration and taking solemn oaths by proselytes before the sacred scriptures by the great Founder of the faith. This has been in vogue for the last half millennium years and is expected to thus continue for all times. Also on all occasions the *thapana* (Vedi, altar) of a Mahapurushia institution is scrupulously clean by the absence of any image or picture including that of Krishna Himself, and has only the *Kirtana* or any other Mahapurushia scripture instead for adoration. This unique practice of adoration of a holy book, against idols or images, is now paralleled only by the reverence paid by the Sikhs to their *Granth Saheb*. *Sankardev*'s use and application of it was his own innovation. It is as appropriate as it is unique. His Mahapurushism has four *Sharan*, but it is really one in four. It is the Guru (Preceptor) who comes first and sets the ball rolling. He acquaints the *jiwa* (life) with its own hunger of the heart and thirst of the soul. The Guru shows the *jiwa* its own wretchedness and tribulations it is always undergoing. He says that *tri-tap* (three sorrows) are there - material, super-natural and spiritual, and affirms that there is a remedy, a panacea, against all these evils. This panacea is nothing else than taking shelter in the Feet of God, as everything else is ephemeral and ever-changing. With a grateful heart the

²² Originally this story is available in the biographies (*Charitputhi*) of Sankaradeva composed by Ramcharan Thakur, Dyatari Thakur, Ramananda Dwija which are considered as the most authentic ones. For more details see *Jagat Guru Sankardeva* by Dimbeshwar Neog, 1963.

proselyte then moves to *Dewa* (God) and offers all the entreaties at His Feet. But God denies that He may be more potent than His Name: for has it not been said. So the proselyte now asks God to grant him the privilege of seeking shelter in His Nam, for he knows God does not part company with His Nam (Name). Know it for certain that where Nam is there God is also. When the proselyte thus approaches Nam for shelter, Nam denies that it has any position without Bhakats (Devotees) that contain it. Bhakats are considered more important than anything else, even more important than God Himself. The great *Nam Ghosha* was written by Madhabdeva as asked by the great master, Sankardev. Madhabdeva started with the invocation to God having the ten incarnations as it stands now in the third verse. But Sankardev Himself is said to have taken the pen from Madhabdeva and to have written the first half of the present first verse of the *Namghosha* which was thus completed by Madhabdeva. *Mahapurushia Sharan* is a ring where the four are one as the one showed itself in four. It is a cult of Love which seeks direct communion with God being purged of all formalities and ritual ties. So it is Mysticism which is “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order”. It is not only an intellectual speculation, but an investigation of it entails “a definite preparation, a purging of the intellect” (ibid, 2011). This practice is still continued where couples before or after marriage come the *Satra* and undergoes *Sharan* to be committed to their new lives. The couple has to maintain fasting the previous night. *Satradhikars* teach them the lessons of restraint and devotion and prepare them for a new life with words of commitment and togetherness. This practice of *Sharan* is regarded as a very significant event in Assamese society.

3.5.2. Cultural Activities of the *Satras*

Satras are devoted to the discussion and dissemination of the philosophy of Neo-Vaishnavism and are the interactive community centres of social issues. While promoting the religion and the philosophical teachings, *Sankardev* insisted on the incorporation of cultural elements of the erstwhile Assamese society. Culture is the most direct, alluring and rooted expression of one’s aspiration and feelings. Hence cultural mediums attract more than straightforward propagation of religious and philosophical teachings. *Satras* of Assam has a rich bunch of cultural practices and this comprehensive bunch is popularly

known as *Satriya* Culture. *Satras* are the most fertile platforms of cultural and social activities, which constitute the basic foundation of Assamese culture. *Satriya* culture includes a vast range of dance forms, dramatic enactments, musical forms, local instruments, mask making, handicraft including bamboo and cane products etc. *Satras* have been promoting classical and semi -classical dance forms (*Satriya* dance including *Jhumura*, *Natua*, *Chali*, *Nadubhangi*, *Behar Nach*, dance forms used in *Bhaona* etc), classical songs (*Borgeet*, *bhatima*, *totoy*, *chapoy* and songs performed in festival like *Janmastami*, *Rashleela*, *Holi* etc), musical instruments (*Khol*, *Tal*, *Manjira*, *Daba* etc), dramatic enactment (*Bhaona*) and cultural festivals.

A. *Satriya* Dance

The dance form promoted by the *Satras*- *Satriya Nritya* (dance) - is an unique cultural innovation of the *Satra*. Sangeet Natak Akademy of India has conferred classical status on this dance form. Like the other seven schools of classical Indian dance, *Satriya* Dance, popularly known as *Satriya Nritya* encompasses the principles required of a classical dance form: the treatises of dance and dramaturgy, like *Natyashastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, and *Sangeet Ratnakara*; a distinct repertoire (*marg*) and the aspects of *nritya* (pure dance) - *nritya* (expressive dance), and *natya* (*Abhinaya*). *Satriya* dance consists of three distinct parts *Guru Vandana*, *Ramdani* and *Geet Abhinaya*. The first two is performed without any music and to a great extent still remains unaffected by changes. It is only in the third part, based on the childhood tales of Lord Krishna, that the dance form now gets a facelift.

The core of *Satriya Nritya* has usually been mythological stories. This is an artistic way of presenting scriptural stories, mythologies and religious teachings to the people in a simple, immediate, and enjoyable manner. Devotion towards god is expressed through dances. Traditionally, *Satriya* dance was performed only by *bhakats* (male monks) in monasteries as a part of their daily rituals or to mark special festivals. Today, in addition to this practice, *Satriya* dance is also performed on stage by men and women who are not members of the *Satras*, on themes not merely mythological. Recognition from the concerned authority, increasing scholarly and popular discussion and love and attention from different media help *Satriya* dance to enjoy inter extensive status. Enriched

with original dance steps, costumes, song and musical instruments, *Satriya* Dance deals with spiritual teachings. It is an integral part of the cultural activities of the *Satras* and regularly practised in the institution.

The grammar of *Satriya* dance is governed by strictly laid down principles in respect of *Hastamudra*, footwork, *Aharya*, music etc. *Satriya* dance is classified into two types on the basis of their contextual performances (Quora.com). Dance forms used in daily religious activities of the *Satra* and performance based dance forms, in festivals or cultural events, especially in *Bhaonas*. Ojapali and Gayan (singers)-bayan (instrumentalist) belongs to the first category of the dance forms. The second category includes independent dance forms like *Jhumura*, *Natua*, *Chali*, *Nadubhangi*, *Behar Nach*, *Apsara*, *Goshain Pravesh*, *Jhumura*, *Sutradhari* etc. Significantly, this category of dance narrates stories of the mythologies or holy texts. Childhood activities and stories of different ages of the life of Lord Krishna are narrated through these dance forms. CCRT - Centre for Cultural Resources and Training defines *Satriya* dance as a form of dance accompanied by music, songs, dramatic elements and narrations.²³ Costumes of these dance forms are completely traditional and local. The dresses are usually made of *Pat*²⁴ - a particular type of silk produced in Assam, woven with intricate local motifs. The ornaments, too, are based on traditional Assamese designs. The instruments used during a performance are khols (drums), taals (cymbals) and the flute.²⁵

In the second half of the 19th century, *Satriya* Nritya emerged from the sanctum of Assam's *Satras*. It moved from the monastery to the metropolitan stage. The *Satras* had maintained certain rigid disciplines and austerities within their walls, and until the first half of the 19th century this dance style was performed in a highly ritualistic manner by male dancers alone. The classical rigidity, the strict adherence to certain principles, and the non engagement of academic research on the dance form all contributed to the delayed recognition and acceptance of *Satriya* Nritya as one of the eight classical dance

²³ For more details visit crtindia.gov.in- the official website of Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, Government of India.

²⁴ Particular type of Silk produced in Assam. It is also known as Assam Silk. It is derived from mulberry worm (scientific name-Bombyx Mori).

²⁵ For more details see *Satriya Nritya Geet Baidyar Hatputhi* by Jagannath Mahanta, 2012 and *Satriya- Classical dance of Assam*, by Sunil Kothari (ed.) Marg Publication, 2013.

forms of India (Satriya Kirtan, 2010,2011). On 15 November 2000, the Sangeet Natak Akademi²⁶ finally awarded *Satriya* Nritya its due recognition as one of the classical dance forms of India, alongside the other seven forms. In the past this dance was performed by the male monks who used to live in *Satras* only for ritualistic and other purposes. Latter as this dance form gained popularity, it is now presented by men and women who are not the members of *Satras*. Now-a-days, there are large numbers of governmental and non-governmental organisations, cultural centres and dance academies under the supervision of trained Satriya experts provide training of this form. Workshops and institutionalised training programmes are also being organised to disseminate this dance form which provide training of this dance form. Properly designed academic course of Satriya dance is also included in the school curriculum of the state. Large numbers of scholarship are provided from state and central government agencies for the development of this dance form. But all the trainers or the teachers should be properly trained under the supervision of a *Satra*. The *Satras* itself also provide proper training of such dance forms to the outsiders and the train masters to teach it to the other students. Now-a-days modern musical instruments like violin, harmonium and tabla are also used in the performances. The *Satras* of Majuli, especially the Uttar Kamalabari and Natun Kamalabari *Satra* have distinct identity for their expertise over Satriya dance. *Satras* of Majuli is the hub of Satriya dance for learners all over the world.

B. Musical Forms of the *Satras*

The musical forms of the *Satra* are also vital treasures of Assamese culture. The comprehensive bunch of this musical tradition is known as Satriya Sangeet as well as Sankari Sangeet. These are classical; raag based songs with spiritual and devotional subject matters. Among these songs, *Borgeet* is the major genre. *Borgeet* is the oldest trend of music of the region that overwhelms the people's mind and soul over the ages, that transports the listeners to the utmost spiritual depth that enchants them with its divine tone. *Borgeets* are acknowledged to be special trends of song and music pioneered by *Sankardev* (1499-1568). *Sankardev* composed his first *Borgeet* '*Man Meri Ram Saranahi*

²⁶ Established in 1952 the academy functions as the apex body of the performing arts in India to preserve and promote the vast cultural heritage of India.

Lagu' in Badarikashram during his first pilgrimage .Following the foot step of his *Guru Sankardev*, Madhabdeva (1489–1569) earnestly tried to spread the spirit of *Bhakti* through his *Borgeets* among the common people. Very often, he used common household, yet sweet sounding words in his composition. The sights, scenes, metaphors and similes he used were also very commonplace and easily recognizable for the general people .*Satras* are the places where this unique musical form has been preserved and been practised from generation to generation.

Borgeets deal with the themes of devotion towards God, the value of devotion, renunciation of the material world, narration of the activities and life stories of Krishna etc. Sublime thoughts accompanied with grand, poignant poetic artistry mark the specialty of *Borgeets*. *Borgeets* were composed to spread the religious teaching of the Neo –Vaishnavism. They are considered to be mobilizing songs, songs mobilizing the Assamese mass for a new, refined life. Scholars consider *Borgeets* as Noble Numbers or Songs Celestial due to their graciousness of thought and musical originality (Dutta, 2001). The inspirational thought and exquisite expression of *Borgeets* touch everyone's soul and awaken the latent spirit of *Bhakti* in him or her. *Borgeet* has its own unique spiritual divine-melody, fertile self revealing diction and very magnanimous sublime thought and theme. Strict dress code is followed in performing *Borgeets*.

Sankardev and Madhabdeva never used the term *Borgeet* for their songs; they called them Geet only. However, in the later period their disciples and followers used the term *Borgeet* (i.e. grand song) because of the songs' sublimity and grandeur in different aspects (*Ibid*: 62). Through these grand *Borgeets* *Sankardev* and Madhavadeva have shown the possibilities and potentialities of indigenous Assamese music. Besides the *Borgeets*, *Bhatima*, *Totay*, *Chapoy* are also devotional compositions frequently used in any holy phenomena. *Bhatima* refers to hymns in praise of the Preceptor or God. Songs sung in *Bhaona* performances and in different festivals like *Janmastami*, *Holi*, *Rashleela* and songs sung in dramatic and dance performances also belong to the category of Satriya songs. The first category of songs is more like prayers and hymns composed of grave, spiritual themes. Songs of the festivals are comparatively light hearted and deal

more with the day-to-day lives of ordinary people in a light spiritual manner (Neog, 2006).

Apart from the *Borgeet* and the classical songs, *Diha Nam*, *Hira Nam*, *Thiya Nam*, *Utha Nam*, *Ghosha* are some other forms of musical varieties which also fall into the greater variety of Satriya musical forms. They do not have classical nature; rather they contain more elements of folk musical traditions (Devagoswami, 2014). Such musical forms are performed religious and cultural activities in *Namghar* and *Satra*. The Assamese women are experts in this semi-classical form of music. Among these forms, *Diha Nam* and *Ai Nam* are very popular and singularly performed by the Assamese women. Songs are always accompanied by musical instruments. The Satriya form of music is dependent on four traditional native musical instruments-*Tal*, *Khol*, *Mridanga*, *Negera* and *Daba*.

C. *Bhaona*-the Dramatic art form

Drama is one of the most popular audio-visual forms of literature and entertainment. Since time immemorial, dramatic art forms have been enjoying immense popularity in India and contributing to the enrichment of Indian culture. Drama is a form of composition where a story is performed by the actors with the help of acting, dialogue, music etc.

Bhaona or *Ankiya naat* or *Ankiya Bhaona* is one of the distinctive cultural assets of Neo-Vaishnavism as well as of the *Satras*. Srimanta Sankaradeva realised that dramatic enactment would be a more viable and effective means to propound his basic teachings among the common mass. Due to the illiteracy of the majority of the Assamese mass, literature in the form of books or write ups was not a popular medium to disseminate the Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy. So, Sankaradeva started disseminating his devotional and spiritual teachings with the help of visual enactments /theatrical performances of mythological, devotional or religious stories or popular episodes of holy texts. In this process, *Sankardev* incorporated the elements of traditional Assamese folk

art forms like *Ojapali*, *Dhuliya Nach*, *Putala Nach* (puppetry)²⁷ and created the tradition of *Bhaona*. *Bhaona* is the term used for the performance of the dramatic composition, known as Ankiya naat. The word Ankiya refers to the “Anka” or an act of a drama. *Chihnayatra* was the first Ankiya naat (play), composed by Sankaradeva. Though it might have other objectives, “it is agreed by all that Chihnayatra was the pioneer of the dramatic tradition” of *Bhaona* in Assam (Devagoswami, 2014). *Chihnayatra* was the story of the *Boikuntha*- the heaven, which was presented with the help of dramatic acting, dance and music. Moreover, painting was an integral part of this endeavour. Gradually, more and more dramas were composed by Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and his disciples. As time passes, there were additional incorporations of costumes, make-up, musical instruments etc. It is to be noted that, the particular word “*Bhaona*” was not used during the time of Sankaradeva or Madhavadeva. Rather *Yatra* was more popular, “The word *Yatra* is used in some later versions of the six dramatic compositions of Sankaradeva. The Guru (*Sankardev*) himself also used the word “*Yatra*” (ibid, 2014).

Bhaona is the theatrical enactment of mythological or devotional stories with the morale of victory of the good forces over the evil ones. Stories are generally taken from texts like The Mahabharata, The Ramayana, The Purana, Kirtana etc. Originally Brajabuli/ Brajawali was the language of these dramatic compositions. Brajawali was a mixed version of Assamese and Maithili- the vocabularies and idiomatic expressions of Brajawali were local (Assamese), while the inflectional forms were Maithili. Gradually dramas were started to be composed in Assamese language. The tradition of composing plays or dramas for *Bhaona* has been well maintained by the *Satradhikars* and other experts of the *Satras*. These stories are put into a dramatic form by adding dialogue, dance steps, fight sequences, songs etc. *Bhaona* always propagates the victory of moral values like truthfulness, loyalty, honesty, devotion etc (Goswami: 1991)

The performance of *Ankiya Naat* starts with benediction in Sanskrit followed by a eulogy to God in *Brajavali*. The play usually starts with the prelude, or *Purvaranga*.

²⁷ Folk art forms of Assam. *Ojapali* and *Dhuliya Nach* are traditional dance forms since 12th century accompanied with songs and music. Locally made puppets are used in *Putala Nach* –string puppets. This form is more popular Lower Assam. All art forms are based on devotional contents. For more details visit puppetindia.com or see *Asomor Loka Sanskriti* by Birinchi Kumar Barua Baruah, 1967.

Playing of the traditional percussion instruments is accompanied by the big cymbal by the singer and musician duo (*Gayan, Bayan*) in a group. The instruments are played with exaggerated hand movements and in two paces called *Saru-Dhemali* and *Bor-Dhemali*. After the prelude, the narrator, or *Sutradhar*, enters the stage and begins the actual performance. *Ankiya Naat* was intended to be viewed by common folk in medieval Assam, majority of who were expected to be illiterate. *Sutradhar* –the anchor of the *Bhaona* narrates the details of the performance. He informs the content of the story, the time of entry and exit of the characters along with their names, the source and theme of the story and thus controls the entire atmosphere of the performance. Thus *Sutradhar* manages the roles of the anchor, announcer, dancer, director and presenter of a *Bhaona* (Saikia, 2014). The characters of the main dramatic parts include kings, generals, court officials, prince, queens, subjects, soldiers, demon, messengers etc. Elaborate use of locally made masks is a significant aspect of this dramatic activity. All such masks are produced in the premise of the *Satra* using locally available resources like bamboo, wood, jute, clay and organic colour. The female characters of the *Bhaona* are also played by male artist. But now-a-days, females also start taking part in *Bhaonas*. Even in some places, the entire team of the *Bhaona* consists of female artists. But while performing within the premises of the *Satra*, the practice is still confined among the male artists. Songs are sung by trained experts and traditional musical instruments (*Khol, Tal, Daba, Flute, Mridanga* etc) are played.²⁸

Bhaonas are generally organised annually during festivals of the *Satra* like the birth and death anniversaries of the Gurus, Janmastami, and Doulyatra, the *Nirmali loa anusthan* (The formal sworn in ceremony of a new *Satradhikar*) etc. Residents of the *Satra* and villagers from the surrounding villages take part in the acting. Sometimes, *Bhaonas* in the *Namghar* are organised as it is sponsored by particular individuals or families which they offer under some holy wish. In the village level, *Bhaonas* are generally organised in the autumn season when harvesting is over. The performance is organised in the central position of the *Namghar* and audience sit in both sides. Even while organising *Bhaona* in public stage, a temporary *Namghar* is set and the Bhagawat

²⁸ Musical instruments made out of locally available raw materials. Bamboo, wood, horns of buffalo, cow skin, copper are used for making such instruments.

is placed for the time being. There is a small room called *Choghar* in the *Namghar*, where the artists use their make-ups and put on the costumes. Now-a-days, *Bhaonas* are also organised in public spaces and competitions are organised to popularise this dramatic form. *Satras* of Majuli like Auniati and Kamalabari are constantly trying to keep this tradition alive by organising annual competitions and workshops of *Bhaona*. The bi-annual *Sadou Asom Bhaona Samaroh* (All Assam *Bhaona* Competition), organised by Auniati *Satra* and *Ankiya Bhaona Samaroh* by Natun and Uttar Kamalabari *Satra* turns out to be major initiatives in this context.²⁹

3.6. *Namghar* s of Assam

3.6.1. Introduction

Ekanta Bhakata Save Nirguna Krishnar guna

Gawe Sada Bashiya Jathat

Baikunthak Parihari Yogiro Hriday eri

Thaka Hari Sakhate Tathat

(When the loyal devotees chant the name of Lord Krishna by sitting on a particular place, the Lord prefers to be in with them than being in the heaven or with the stern Yogis)

(*Nam Ghosha*, Stanza- 5, p 596-597)³⁰

The word *Namghar* derives its origin from two words-*Nama* and *Ghar*. In general *Nama* stands for the name of a particular object or an individual and *Ghar* stands for the house or the residence. *Nama* in Assamese and in many Sanskrit origin languages also refers to the process of chanting or singing of holy, devotional texts or lyrics as well. This

²⁹ Organised since 2006, *Sadou Asom Bhaona Samaroh* is a bi-annual event organised by Auniati *Satra*. This event holds competition of *Bhaona*, seminars and discussions on various aspects of *bhaona* and training cum workshops on this theatrical art form. This bi-annual event is considered to be a major initiative in popularising the dramatic form in a wider platform and also regulating and documenting the actual procedures of the *Bhaona*. The souvenirs of the event contain valuable articles on different aspects of this form.

³⁰ The stanza has been extracted from the original text of *Namghosha*, 7th edition published by Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha: Nagaon. Though English translation of the *Namghosha* is also available, the extract here used has been translated from the original Assamese text.

second meaning of the word is associated with the origin of the word *Namghar*. *Namghar* as an institution is typical to the state of Assam, so the etymological reference of the word should be made with the Assamese language. In Assamese *Nama* refers to the activity of taking ,chanting or singing the *Nama* of the Supreme being by reading holy texts like The Bhagawata, Kirtana, *Gunamala*, *Dasham*, *Nam Ghosha*, *Borgeet* etc. Though this reading can be done in any place, generally it is done publicly in a common place where everyone can sit, listen and participate. From this point of view, the place where this activity is organised is called *Namghar*. In Assam, the place or the institution where this practice of Nama as a means of Bhakti, is done publicly is simply called *Namghar*. It exists in each and every Hindu village of the state. *Namghars* also exist with the same influence in the urban areas of Assam. Certain things regarding *Namghar* are clear =*Namghar* is always a community/public institution, it is always associated with religio-spiritual activity, it is democratic in nature.

3.6.2. The Bhakti tradition and *Nama*-

The Bhakti movement and the Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy rejected ritualistic formalities of expressing devotion or worshipping God. Rather the ideology encourages simple, informal ways of Bhakti to attain salvation. Literature on and writings of the Bhakti movement show that the simplest and most effective way to attain God is nothing but taking or chanting the *Nama* of the Holy power. Pure love and complete surrender to God is the ultimate means of devotion and it can be done by the practice of taking *Nama*. Though the Holy power was venerated in different names in different sects of the Bhakti tradition, all the leaders of the Bhakti movement throughout India, repeatedly insist the significance of *Nama* as the purest means of Bhakti. Kabir said-

If there is a gramme of the *Nama*

in the heart and a thousand

grammes of sin.

Half a gramme of *Nama* in the heart

burns all sins to ashes.

By repeating the *Nama*, the dark
spots of desires are washed away.

Just as a spark burns up a hay-stack (Narang, 1998)

Chaityana(1486-1533)³¹ from Bengal too propounded *kirtan* and *samakirtan* - as the best way of expressing devotion which refer to singing and chanting God's *Nama*, accompanied by dance,. According to this sect of Bhakti movement, during the course of kirtana and samkirtana one could reach the state of ecstasy, and feel the presence of God near him. *Adi Granth*³² also corroborates this very point, and one of the hymns of *Rag Basant* reads as follows:-

The Iron Age has dawned
Sow the seeds of Lord's *Nama*
This season is not propitious for
any other crop.

Do not be deluded by any doubt (Narang, 1998).

In *Rag-Gauri*, it is stated that the essence of all faiths is contained in the *Nama* of the Lord. Ramananda taught that Lord Rama is the supreme Lord, and that salvation could be attained only through love for and devotion to him, and through the repetition of his sacred *Nama*. The beautiful compositions of Candidasa, Vidyapati, Jayadeva, Meerabai and Surdasa are popular examples of expressing devotion by uttering the eternal *Nama* and attributes of God.

³¹ Chaitanya (also written as Caitanya) Mahaprabhu was an ascetic Hindu monk and social reformer in 16th century Bengal. A great proponent of loving devotion for God, bhakti yoga, Chaitanya worshiped the Lord in the form of Krishna and popularised *Kirtana/ Samkirtana* -the public renderings of love towards Krishna. He composed eight devotional poems, popularised the *Harekrishna mantra*. Chaityana is venerated by followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism.

³² Literally means "the first book." This is the early compilation of the Sikh scriptures by Guru Arjan, the fifth Sikh Guru, in 1604. This Granth (Book) is the Holy Scripture of the Sikhs. The tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh added further to this Granth during the period 1704 to 1706. Then in 1708, before his death, Guru Gobind Singh affirmed the *Adi Granth* as the perpetual Guru of the Sikhs and the Granth then became known as the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.

The practice of *Nama* does not refer to mechanical renderings of the *Nama* of God. Rather it is with pure devotion, love and respect, this is practiced. All these renderings try to make the audience/listener involved directly in reality and thus try to feel about God and devotion through very familiar, humane activity. Maintenance of hygiene, proper dress codes and systematic sitting arrangement are followed so that it can be practised in the most perfect manner. In spite of the slight variations in rituals and beliefs, all types of Bhakti philosophies share their commonality in the effectiveness of *Nama* as the most suitable means of expressing devotion. The prosperous bunch of Bhakti literature proves the fact that the movement inspired aesthetic practices including literary compositions, music and songs, dramas, handicraft etc. Thousands of lyrical, dramatic, poetic and philosophical writings exemplify the aesthetic side of this trend. Emphasis on *Nama* and rejection of dogmatic rituals works behind the composition of those eternal texts which have been mesmerizing the people for so many years. The Bhakti movement also led to the erosion of the dominance of the Sanskrit language and Sanskrit holy texts. The availability of holy texts in simple, comprehensible, vernacular language helped the common people to access them. Any literate person can now access these texts. As most of such holy writings were lyrical in nature; they could easily be read or sung by the common public. This also helped in increasing the practice of *Nama*.

Even the Sufi tradition,³³ though rooted in a different belief system, also celebrates the importance of chanting or singing the attributes of the Supreme power. Music was central to both Bhakti and Sufi movements. It was considered to imbibe a mystical state of ecstasy, when one could feel the presence of God. This music was the inner music which is constantly there till the human is 'alive'. The core essence of religion and devotion has been disseminated in an attractive and popular way through these renderings. No one plays any instrument but the music is on and when one

³³ Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is the term to refer to mysticism in Islam. The term Sufism embraces the philosophy and practices which aim at direct communion between God and man, and those who practice Sufism are called Sufis. The Sufis trace the origin of Sufism or *tasawwuf* to the Prophet of Islam. They believe that there were two dimensions to the revelations received by the Prophet: one took the form of the words of the Quran, the other that of the divine inspiration within his heart. The second one- 'the knowledge of the heart' was known as *ilm-e-sina*. The religious scholars or *ulama* (sing. *alim*) were experts in the knowledge of the Qur'an and *hadith*, but it was claimed that 'the knowledge of the heart' remained with those called the Sufis.

meditates, he just needs to concentrate on it in order to reach the state of union with God. Sufi and Bhakti saints organised musical recitals (*Sama* and *kirtan*) and this was a manifestation of spreading spiritual Knowledge in popular manner. In *sama*, a *qawwal*³⁴ sings Sufi poetry on musical tunes. This is also to invoke the audience to go into a trance to experience what is called the 'meeting with the Beloved'. They talk about *ishqe-i-haqeeqi*³⁵ which has also been explained by Bhakti saints like Kabir and Nanak, their couplets telling how love towards God is love towards one's own and the society. Sufism now turns out to be a strong musical tradition and has been enjoying immense popularity throughout the world.

3.6.3 Nama in Neo-Vaishnavism -

Sankardev and the *Eksarana Nama Dharma* also considered *Nama* to be the best way to demonstrate Bhakti. The essence of the teachings of Sri Sankaradeva contained in his *Kirtana-ghosa*, *Bhakti-Ratnakara*, and those of his spiritual successor, Madhavadeva, is devotion to *Harinama* (holy words or songs praising the God and His attributes, *Hari* is the Assamese word for God). Sankara held the view that Hari becomes his who takes His *Nama*. Madhavadeva in *Namghosha* emphasizes the same point:-

Ram Krishna Hari Nama Mukhe Thake Jar

Sehise Harir Priya Hari bhoila tar

Ram Krishna Hari jito satate boloy

Sito mahajane mukutiko naganay

(Whoever frequently chants the *Nama* of Rama-Krishna, he/she is the most favourite to Hari and Hari is intermingled with him/her. The hope of salvation too becomes secondary for that noble soul who regularly chants the eternal *Nama*).

(*Nam Ghosha*, stanza 504-505, p 120).

³⁴ A qawwal is a vocal musician who sings Sufi poetry in musical tones.

³⁵ *Ishqe-i-haqeeqi* or *shqe-i-haqeeqi* is a Sufi concept which means love between a human and God.

Hari or *Rama*, *Krishna* or *Rama-Krishna*, *Govinda* or *Madhava*, *Mukunda*, *Murari*, *Narayana* (different names of God) by which Sri Sankaradeva addresses the Lord is the Divine *Nama* Which, in fact, is the Incarnate Word, the Holy Spirit of God. It is this Divine *Nama* which enables a man to lose his identity and become mingled with the Lord. The touch of this creative power of *Nama* alone takes away all the duality of man by making him as pure as the Lord Himself. The Divine *Nama* or *Nama*, the worship of which is recommended by Sankara, is the vital power itself. In Sikh scriptures, it is stated that *Nama* pervades all the worlds. It is thus the reality and the end of all devotional endeavours. In fact those who merge in the Divine *Nama* find absolutely no difference between the *Nama* and the *Named*. “He who worships *Nama*,” say the saints of *Bhakti* cult, “realizes the *Named One*”. *Nama* which is the manifested power of the Lord dwells nowhere except in the heart of a devotee. It is far superior to rituals and pilgrimages.

Mantra,tantra,Yajna jata Tapa tirtha koti sata

Hari Namaa adhika sawate

Kino bhagya kino bhagya Hena hari Namaa laga

Paila loka mukhata sakhate

(*Kirtana*, stanza 2021, p 507)

Nama, Sri Sankaradeva further says, is beyond the three attributes or *gunas*, i.e. *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. So long as one is under the spell of these attributes - whether they are of beneficial nature or otherwise, Sankara’s disciple Madhavadeva writes, they are only causes of bondage (Verse 212, *Nam Ghosha*). The *Name* of Lord alone, he says, is beyond the three *gunas* and helps the spiritual aspirant in crossing the ocean of this world which is nothing but the eternal play of these three *gunas*. At another place, it is said that *Nama* alone is “beyond attributes”, the Unsullied One (754).

The *Nama*, according to Sri Sankaradeva, is *Niranjana* (The Unstained One). Mind becomes clean only by listening to the sweet melody of the Lord ringing all the time within the deep recesses of the heart of man. So long as one does not rise above the

world of sense and matter, one can never get this *Niranjana Nama*. Sri Sankaradeva arises above the body's consciousness, one can never get this most precious gift of *Nama* and take refuge at the red "Lotus feet of the Lord." The grace of the *Guru* is also necessary for attaining this highest goal in the path of *Bhakti*. It has been emphasized by Sri Sankaradeva in his teachings. In a number of verses (132, 193, 235, 254, 257 etc.) of *Nam Ghosha*, Sankara's successor, Madhavadeva stresses the importance of *Guru* in the worship of *Nama*. In one of these verses he says,

Guru Upadesh labdha shishyasawe

Upadesh shar dhara

Jewe Ishwarak paiba jatna kari

Buddhik satwasta Kara.

(The disciples should follow the advices of the master. Incorporated with ones intelligence it shows the easiest way to meet God)

(*Nam Ghosha*, stanza 254-255, p 662).

This Divine *Nama*, acquired through the *Guru's* grace, says Sri Sankaradeva, is the supreme cure for all the maladies of the world. It makes man perfect and eternal. The worship of *Nama*, therefore, it is said, gives man immortality, and purifies him of all the dirt of his sins. In almost all the *Bhakti* scriptures including those of the Sikhs, i.e. *Adi Granth*, the Divine *Nama* or the Eternal Word is described as *Amrta* i.e. Nectar or *Maharasa* i.e. Divine Ambrosia, the partaking of which makes one free from the cycle of birth and death. There are a number of verses in the *Nama-ghosa* which refer to *Nama* as "the sweet nectar" (Verse 654), "the nectar ocean" (Verse 236), "nectar of *Ramanama*" (237), "nectar-ocean of *Harinama*" (248), "Sweet extract of *Harinama*" (371), "the river of nectar" (372) worship of *Nama* also washes off all the sins of man thereby saving him from "the suffering of eighty four hells" (Verse 46).

Apart from the religious and philosophical justifications, we would like to trace the other practical reasons behind the claim that *Nama* is the most effective means of

Bhakti. In the socio-economic context of the erstwhile Assam, it is clear that *Nama* was the most viable medium of Bhakti both socially and economically. It neither requires any material preparation nor does demand any ceremonial arrangement. It can be practiced in any safe place with simple infrastructural arrangement.³⁶ Secondly, *Nama* can be sung or recited by any person irrespective of their educational or economic standard. The erstwhile Assamese society was mostly illiterate and multiethnic. In such a social structure, scholastic preaching could not be adopted for dissemination of religious or spiritual teachings. *Nama*, in the form of simple, familiar language presented the mythological and devotional episodes in a fascinating manner. It proves how practical and farsighted *Sankardev* and his successors were. Unlike the expensive ceremonial arrangements of ritual based performances (*Puja*, *Yajna*, pilgrimage, sacrificial session etc) one does not need anything to recite *Nama*. In general one person leads the singing activity/recital and others accompany him/her. So, just by memorizing the words or lyrics, anyone can participate in this activity. It does not need any expert or *Pundit* to practice *Nama*. This it is free from the scholastic hegemony of a particular class in matters of reading and interpretation of a holy text and also saves from a fixed set of meaning. Moreover, in the context of Assam, the introduction of *Nama* was finely tuned with the existing musical traditions. These religious compositions were shaped in the framework of familiar Assamese musical forms, for instance – *Biya Nama* (wedding songs), *Ojapali* (Traditional Assamese musical performances accompanied with local musical instruments), *Bihu Nama* (songs sung in the Bihu festival), *Dehbicharor geet* (folk songs narrating the futility of material pleasure and importance of spiritual introspection) and numerous folk songs of different ethnic communities etc.³⁷ So the common Assamese mass did not have any difficulty to cope up with this new cultural trend. *Namas*, practised in Eksarana *Nama* Dharma thus, transcended its religious characteristics, became popular more as a new spiritual musical tradition and gradually made its own niche.

³⁶ In Assam *Nama* is performed by sitting on simple mats made out of cane, bamboo or reed.

³⁷ The pre-Sankardeva Assamese society has also rich musical traditions. Apart from the songs in Assamese language, different communities of Assam like the Mishings, the Rabhas, the Bodos, The Morans, The Deoris have their own musical forms. Along with their own treasures, they also practised the Assamese songs. A large number of musical forms are also associated with the festival of Bihu. All such music and songs were oral and transmitted orally from generation to generation.

Along with the increasing importance of such musical and reading activities, importance on collective assemblies for discussion of socio-religious matters was another change brought about by the Bhakti movement. Unlike the prevailing religious beliefs, the new concept of Bhakti propagated the idea of harmonious relation between master and his/her devotees (*Guru-shisya parampara*). The *Guru* is someone who provides divine knowledge and shows the path of self realisation. So the *Guru* should not be someone who is not accessible, who is difficult to understand or who is orthodox and full of creed or rituals. Rather he/she is a learned human being who can show the real path of duty and devotion with the simplest way available. Therefore, the relation between the master and his/her disciples should be simple, accessible and cordial. They should have the facility to meet him/her easily to learn from and interact with him/her. Moreover Bhakti philosophy denied private or secluded idol worship and freed religion from rituals and rites performed within the enclosed rooms. Rather Bhakti is a more public activity than a private affair. Scholars opine that the concept of Bhakti stresses more on the public sphere, the outward expression of the self. “I want to suggest that *bhakti* seeks to form publics of reception rather than communities that imply a single cohesive issue or idiom. I advance the thesis that all manifestations of *bhakti* are performances and, more to the point, public ones, that is, performances that are part of, or help form, publics of reception... *Bhakti* without an audience, without a *loka* (mass), has no meaning” (Novetzke, 2008).

This importance on *Nama* and the public face of Bhakti are the logical explanations of the establishment and evolution of the organisations like *Namghar*. “*Bhakti* indicates a practice of sharing, equal distribution, and mutual enjoyment, what Karen Prentiss calls “participation” (Novetzke, 1999), an interaction that suggests the “embodiment” of *bhakti* as a prerequisite for its practice... This very useful notion of “embodiment” does not simply exist as a trope of literature, but is deeply engaged in the performance of the discourse of *bhakti*. By “discourse” I mean the manifestations of *bhakti* not only in performance through song or literacy, but also through all those actions and bodily displays that make up *bhakti* in the broadest sense” The popularity of this new means of practicing Bhakti demanded a particular place to practice *Nama*. Though it can be practiced in an individual manner, the Neo Vaishnavism in Assam insisted more on

collective practices. Moreover, whenever someone practices *Nama*, people gather to listen to the renderings. Therefore, this practice led to the demand of a public space of practice where a large number of people can assemble and practice *Nam*. This trend is visible in most of the religious institutions like the Gurudwara, mandirs where devotees assemble and chant the holy *Namas*. Indian philosophy considers Word as the supreme power –*shabda brahma*. This was the original concept that worked being *Nama* as the influential means and so the establishment of *Namghar*.

3.7. Introducing the institution of *Namghar*

The village *Namghar* can be considered as the grass-root institution of the Assamese society. The Assamese identity is integrally associated with this institution. Described as the “decentralised replica” of the *Satras*, *Namghars* are situated in each and every village of the state of Assam (Neog, 2000). By nature, *Namghar* is the community prayer hall of the Assamese people who follow the Neo-Vaishnavite religious tradition. But as time passed, *Namghars* were not confined to its religious activity and appeared more as a public platform of social and cultural activities of the race. This “everywhere institution” is a village based socio-cultural traditional institution which has been enjoying immense respect and dignified position in the Assamese society since time immemorial. *Namghar* is available in each Assamese village irrespective of class, caste and status. Every member of each household of an Assamese village is the member of the *Namghar*. There is no strict rule for the membership of a *Namghar*. Whenever a new member is born to a family, he/she becomes a member of the *Namghar* until his/her death. It does not demand any monetary or material charge for its membership.

Namghar has been integrated with the Assamese culture in such a way that it becomes really a hazardous task to describe its role and its impact on the society. “Besides being the custodian of the Vaishnavite and Satriya culture, *Namghars* are the social platforms of the unique Assamese culture” (Puzari, 2014). Uniqueness of the institution of the *Namghar* lies in the fact that it transcends the limitations of a typical religious institution and appears more as a socio-cultural institution with the passage of time. This transformative nature and flexibility of the institution helps it being alive with the same grandeur even in the twenty first century. “With the passage of time, *Namghar*

turns out to be an influential institution-it gradually overcomes its religious identity of a mere place of worship and establishes itself more as a cultural centre as well as a social organisation. Now-a-days, *Namghar* is identified more as a socio-cultural institution. This is a rare phenomenon in the history of religion of the world” (Kalita,2014) . Since the fifteenth century, both the institutions - *Satras* and *Namghars*- have been immensely contributing in strengthening the social and cultural foundation of the race and the state. “...it can be concluded that the neo-*Vaishnavite* tradition initiated by Srimanta *Sankardev*, in terms of its humanistic philosophy, art, literature, music and institutions stands at the very core of the Assamese cultural identity even as it contributes immensely to the process of socialization in Assam” (Bhuyan, 2013). The day to-day life of an Assamese person is inseparably assimilated with this institution. The address of some person, the address of some household, the identity of a village or any institution is provided in reference to the village *Namghar*. Here are some examples –

1. “Mr. x lives next to the *Namghar*” (Reference, to refer)
2. “Are you asking for the address of Mrs.Y? Her house is hundred meter away from the location of the *Namghar*.”(Reference, to refer).
3. “I swear in the name of the *Namghar* ,I am telling truth”.(To convince, to support).
4. “Before sitting in the examination, you should go and pray in the *Namghar*”.(Belief, Encouragement)
5. “Inform all the women of the village that we are meeting today in the *Namghar* premise to discuss the opening of a new self help group”.(Meeting place, public space).
6. “We decide to continue the teaching in the *Namghar* premise until the completion of the new school building”. (Alternative arrangement, secured public space).
7. “Don’t ride on the bicycle in front of the *Namghar*”. (Belief, teachings on public behaviour).
8. “You cannot break a promise that you have made in the *Namghar*”. (Loyalty).

9. “This place seems to be as sacred as the *Namghar*”. (Trust, Faith).

10. “If you do not go to the *Namghar*, what kind of an Assamese you are?”(Identity).

While asking about his idea on the role of *Namghar* in the social life, a respondent simply reframed the question and said-“What can I say about *Namghar*; I am feeling short of words to describe the role of the *Namghar* in our day-to-day lives.”³⁸ This simple statement is enough to tell about the role the institution plays in the life and society of the state of Assam.

3.7.1. The Historical Background -

A proper historical study of the institution of the *Namghar* is hard to trace in the exact chronological sense of history. Like the *Satra*, as discussed earlier, *Namghar* was also an outcome of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. Rather *Namghars* are often described as the “miniature replica”, offshoot of the *Satras* etc. So the history of the Assamese *Namghar* is integrally associated with the history of the *Satra*. From this point of view, *Namghars* also share its origin period to the last years of the sixteenth century. But if examined from the point of view of the structure and grandeur; it seems that *Namghars*, due to its smaller size and simpler architecture, might be earlier in its origin. *Satras*, as we find them in the present time, was not existent in such a grand scale during the days of Sankaradeva. *Satras* in such a magnificent form large compound was not available in that time³⁹. “We can assume the existence of only of the *Namghar* and *Manikut* during the lifetime of *Sankardev*”(Sarmah, 1997)⁴⁰. It should be made clear that *Namghar* is also a part of a *Satra*. Every *Satra* has a *Namghar* in itself. Though the basic objective of the *Namghar* within a *Satra* and an independent *Namghar* is same, the independent *Namghar* is more influential as in case of the former one, it works merely as the place of worship

³⁸ Response of Mr. Dinanath Saikia, 68, from Rangasahi village, during the field visit in Rangasahi village of Garamur. The interview was held on 12/1/15 through an open ended questionnaire. A sample copy of the filled in questionnaire has been attached in the appendix of the dissertation. The views of the particular respondents, used in the dissertation, are incorporated after analysed objectively.

³⁹ These days *Satras* are large compound institutions.

⁴⁰ It is opined that *Satras* during the sixteenth century existed in the minimal form of a *Namghar* and a *Manikut*. At that period, the dividing line between *Satra* and *Namghar* was very thin and both the institutions were considered interchangeable. Another group of scholars opine that *Satras* are nothing but the extended versions of the *Namghars*.

and the larger institution (*Satra*) always overshadows it. When Sankaradeva became popular and experienced as a religious preacher and philosopher, there grew up an urgent need of an institutionalised mechanism to disseminate his teaching. The growing number of disciples and followers and the increasing demand of public interaction resulted in the use of a public space for these activities. Moreover, the biographical writings on Sankaradeva tell that he had to move here and there under different circumstances. So wherever he shifted, he used to set up a public house which can be termed as the initial form of *Namghar*.

“The discussion of religious and spiritual matters was the only duty of *Sankardev*. Since he left Bardowa, he turned out to be more as a religious leader than the administrative leader of the Bhuyans. Everywhere there was the need of a Harigriha for this purpose. So, wherever he stayed, he used to build a Harigriha along with the residence for him and his followers” (Kalita, 2014).

The first *Namghar* of Assam was established on 1509. The fact has been confirmed from the biographical writings of Sankaradeva and relevant refererances from literary texts. After coming back from his pilgrimages, Sankara felt the need of a public space for religious discussion which resulted in the *Namghar* in Tembuani, which later known as Batadrwa or Bardowa. Scholars reveal that it was after his pilgrimage and the second marriage, the first *Namghar* was established in Tembuani⁴¹. This was where the saint composed the holy texts –*Bhaktipradip*, *Rukmini Haran* and *Gopi Uddhava Sambad*. As Belaguri/Dhuahat was the second permanent residence of Sankara and his followers, it had the second *Namghar*. Madhabdeva also established *Namghar* in Ganakkuchi and Sundaridiya. The Kirtanaghar of Bardowa, the oldest of the existing *Namghars*, was built by the famous Vaishnavite followers –Narayandas Thakur and Mathuradas ata. The present Kirtanaghar of Bardowa was renovated in the first decade of twentieth century. *Sankardev*, Madhabdeva and some of his major disciples appointed Dharmacharys to disseminate the philosophical teachings of the Neo-Vaishnavism. These Dharmacharys also established hundreds of *Satras* and *Namghars* in their respective areas. This way the

⁴¹ Charitputhis, now available in edited versions and numerous biographical writings mark Tembuani as the first site of *Namghar*.

tradition of *Namghar* gained popularity among the Assamese mass. Assamese people, coming under the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism stated constructing *Namghar* as the public venue for religious gatherings.

Variations prevail in the issue of the use of the particular term *Namghar*. Though in the present context *Satra* and *Namghar* stand for completely different institutions, the institutions shared commonality in their objective, duty and structure in the past. Hence Harigriha-the word used to describe the present form of *Satra* was also used to refer to the present form of *Namghar*. But the mostly used and mostly accepted word for present *Namghar* is Kirtana Ghar. In all the *Charit puthis*, we find the use of the word *Kirtanaghar/Kirtangriha*. Kirtana refers to the practice of chanting Nama where there may be an audience. So the word simply means the place where the Kirtana is performed. From a different perspective it can also be interpreted in such a way that this is the sacred place where the holy text of *Kirtana* is placed. So the abode of the holy text is what Kirtan ghar. But majority of the people agree to the first explanation behind the use of the term Kirtanaghar. The *Namghar* of the Bardowa *Satra*- often considered to be the first *Namghar* of Assam-is still known as Kirtanaghar. The use of the word *Namghar* is more frequent in the Upper Assam while Kirtana ghar is more used in Lower Assam. Whatever may be the variation in the usage of the term for the institution, it everywhere bears the basic nature of a public forum for religious and social discussion.

3.7.2. The Structure of *Namghar*

The village *Namghar* is always situated in the centre of the village. The *Namghar* has a simple structure with minimal architectural embellishment. Though different scholars find influences of different cultural institutions,⁴² structure of the *Namghar* is primarily original to the geo-cultural characteristics of Assam. A *Namghar* contains the following structural arrangements-

⁴² Eminent historian Dr. Kapila Batsayan found structural similarities between Koothambalam of Kerala and *Namghar* of Assam. Prolific writer Jyotiprasad Agrwal compared the graphics of *Namghar* with the Valkishe Theatre of Berlin. Dr. Maheshwar Neog suggested the possibility of the influence of the religious institutions of Orissa, particularly of the Jagannath Puri temple on the structure of Assamese *Namghar*. The Chaitya of the Buddhist tradition and ethnic structures of Assam like the Murongghar of the Mishing community are also considered to be influential behind the structural pattern of *Namghar*.

Toran- Toran is the very first structure on the way to a *Namghar*. It actually refers to the entry point of the *Namghar*. It is a small structure based on two pillars, either of wood or concrete.

Batchora- Batchora can be defined as the main entry point where devotees are welcome to the *Namghar*. This structure is common to both *Satras* and *Namghars*. E.T. Dalton on his article on Neo-Vaishnavism on 1851 talked about Batchora- “To the north of the enclosure containing these buildings ,is the principal entrance, a covered structure of timber grotesquely carved and gaily painted” (Dalton:1904). In most of the *Namghars*, Batchora is a roof with local ornamental motif in the front. Now-a-days Batchoras are concrete structures though still there is the use of timber, bamboo and thatch in some places.

Tup- Tup is an attached structure of the main *Namghar*. It is a half moon design structure on the roof in the western direction.

Manikut- The structure of the Manikut is similar to the *Satras*, discussed in the previous chapter. It is the shrine where the sacred scripture is placed. It is a smaller structure than the *Namghar* and is generally attached to the latter adjoining the eastern end. In addition to the sacred scripture, all the valuable materials dedicated to the Deity are kept in the Manikut. It is the sanctum -sanctorum of the entire establishment and as the sacred scripture and all the valuables of the *Satra* are kept here, it is called Manikut, literally the house of jewels. Except dire occasions, only the designated persons enter the Manikut.

Cho Ghar- It is a small room in the western part of the *Namghar*. It can be defined as the room where the materials used in *Bhaona* are stored. During the performance of a *Bhaona*, it is used for the make-up and dressing of the performers. It can be compared with the modern green room.

Thapana- Thapana can be defined as the particular material arrangement to keep the holy texts. In Neo-Vaishnavism, holy texts are worshipped as the symbolic manifestation of God. Hence, such texts are placed with utmost respect and care .The particular arrangement for these books is what called *Thapana*. *Thapanas* are made of

wood .Sometimes it is replaced by a brass or *pitol Sharai*. Beautiful decorative wood paintings enrich the beauty of a *Thapana*.



Pic 1.3. *Namghar* of Mudoichuk Village, Bongaon Gaon Panchayat

Source- Photograph taken during field study, 12/12/14

Sinhasana /Guru Asana- Sinhasana or *Guru Asana* (literally the Seat of the Guru or Master) is a permanent structure within the Manikuta. It is a beautifully crafted wooden structure. *Guru Asana* is a seven-tiered, triangular, wooden throne adorned by the tortoise-elephant-lion motif and other decorative woodwork .The seven small structural divisions, each having its own symbolise seven devotional concepts. Tortoise, Elephant and lion are the three motifs used in *Sinhasana*. “Tortoise in the *Guru Asana* reflects the religious meaning of the Kurma Avatara .Elephant is the symbol of sin and it is dominated by the Lion-*Namsingha*. This entire design symbolises that only such a state makes salvation possible” (Kalita:2014). This structure symbolises Lord Krishna and the Guru, his message as well as the highest truth propounded by him. *Satradhikars* of the *Satras* and elderly villagers of the study area commented that only local wood of *Chegun*

(Teak), *Gamari* (Kashmir tree) ,*Kathal* (Jack tree) ,*Bael* (Bael tree) are used in the construction of *Sinhasana*.

Namghar - This is the main building, a rectangular, open, wide structure supported by fourteen pillars. This structure is built with a gabled roof raised on the pillars the length of which is aligned in the east-west direction. The fourteen pillars symbolise the fourteen *parishads* (mythological officials symbolizing the keeper).The fourteen pillars divide the *Namghar* into a house of seven rooms without walls. The northeast most pillar is called *Laikhuta*- the main pillar with symbolic value. Thus, a *Namghar* has nine rooms including the *Manikut* and the *Tup*.The first room is used to place the *Sinhasana*. The roof of a traditional *Namghar* is made of thatch which has been replaced by corrugated tin sheets. The pillars are generally decorated with local designs and covered by beautiful hand-woven *Gamochas*.On the upper side of the open hall, *Chandratap*- a beautifully designed woven cloth piece ,is fixed.

There is an abstract (imaginative) division of the space of the *Namghar*. The place used for the *Sinhasana* is termed as –*Archan Sthan*-the place of praying God. The next place, used for *Nama* and used by the *Namlagoa*, *Satradhikar* or the singers –is known as *Bandan Sthan*-the place of praising through *Nama*.The place where the devotees sit and participate in the *Nama-Kirtan* is the –*Padasewan sthan*-the place of offering salutation at His feet.

Namghar is the public space used by the common mass. All the activities of the *Namghar* are conducted in this open premise. During the *Nama*, *Nam Prashanga*, *Shakam* and *Sabah*, people sit on the ground and practice *Nama*.The *Namlagoa* and the *Pathak* generally sit on the centre and lead the recital. During the *Bhaona* performances, actors use the central space and audience sit on the remaining space in the right and left side. During such performances, people even stand/sit outside and enjoy *Bhaona*. Mats of bamboo, cane, thermocol (popularly known as *dhari* and *kath*) are used for the sitting purpose.

Namghar in an inclusive sense stands for all structures. So, while using the word *Namghar*, Assamese people refer to the entire structures. It includes the entire structure

of *Namghar* and its attached surroundings . *Namghar* is always a sacred place for the people. People always bow down while passing in front of a *Namghar* and get down of their vehicles in front of it.⁴³ Any kind of foot wear is not allowed within the *Namghar* premise. There is a special dress code to enter the *Namghar*. This is Dhoti-Kurta for men and *Chadar-Mekhela* for women. Except the dress code, there is no other rule for the entry to a *Namghar*. Anyone can enter the *Namghar* at any moment and bow down before the sacred throne. Devotees often offer earthen lamps, incense sticks, beetle nuts with Pan⁴⁴ and minimal monetary amount to the *Namghar*.



Pic 1.4. The *Namghar* of Dakhinpat Satra

Source- Photograph taken during field visit, 3/3/14

⁴³ Riding on a vehicle in front of a *Namghar* is considered showing disrespect. It has been a traditional practice not to ride on vehicles while crossing the *Namghar* premise. People irrespective of caste and religion still follow this practice.

⁴⁴ Having betel nut (*tamol*) and betel leaf (*paan*) is a part and parcel of Assamese society. The process of having betel nut with betel leaf is known as *Tamol Khowa*. Guests in an Assamese household are welcome by offering a *tamol* in a typically designed brass vessel called *Bota* .In all social, cultural and religious occasions, *Tamol-Paan* is offered to the public. This particular practice is a unique symbol of cultural hospitality in Assam.

With the passage of time, *Namghar* has also undergone various changes in matter of its architectural design and materials used for its construction. Now-a-days, *Namghars* are everywhere concrete cemented structures. Concrete walls and pillars are decorated with motifs, not exclusively religious. Electric fans, water reservoirs and filters, tube lights and electric bulbs, sound systems gradually enter the *Namghars*. Some public *Namghars* even have separate rooms for washing and storing materials, guest house, libraries of their own. Devotees from different parts donate money for constructing walls, fixing of electronic items, construction of auditorium, urinals and toilets, tap and filter, guest houses, rest rooms in the *Namghar*. Festivals organised in the *Namghar* attract thousands of devotees which lead to the growth of small shops, cycle stands, parking slot, fruit shops, restaurants and hotels near the *Namghars*. *Namghars* in particular places like Athkheliya, Dhekiyakhoa, Mainaporiya, Bardowa, Charaibahi turn out to be public institutions attracting thousands of daily visitors. Unlike the village *Namghars*, they are like public holy space for anyone from any part of the world. During the month of *Bhadra*, such *Namghars* enjoy lakhs of devotees in a daily basis.

3.7.3. Internal Management System

The maintenance of the *Namghar* is the collective duty of the villagers. The overall management of the *Namghar* is looked after by an administrative body consisted of the members of the particular *Namghar*. This administrative body is different from the religious body of the *Namghar*. It is a very simple administrative body which consists of a president, one secretary, one treasurer and some members. Whenever necessary, they can call for a meeting, which in reality is an informal gathering to discuss different issues. The treasurers keep account of the monetary expenses and submit the report of the entire expenses once in a year in the public gathering. The president and the secretary coordinate the activities. They all are selected on common consensus of the public. Members of the *Namghar* have to pay a certain amount of money once in a year for the maintenance of the *Namghar*. During the field study the respondents reiterated that the fee offered is not ‘membership charge’. “We do not need to pay for the membership of the *Namghar*. An Assamese is by birth a member of the *Namghar*. We pay the money for

the maintenance, not for membership”⁴⁵ Though this amount varies from one village to another, the average amount is often charged between 300-500⁴⁶. On certain occasions, specially while celebrating the death and birth anniversaries of the saints, an additional amount is charged for the arrangement. Sometimes some members or other persons spontaneously donate a certain amount to a *Namghar*. The concept of donation also includes material properties. Now-a –days such donations include construction of concrete walls, ceiling fans, utensils, flooring, urinal, setting up of drinking water facilities etc. The treasurer keeps accounts of all these things and present the account in the annual meetings. The daily cleansing of the *Namghar* premise is distributed among the villagers and each of the household cleanses it one by one by. While organising some functions or other public activities, all the villagers cleanse the *Namghar* and its surrounding. There is a particular person who has been entrusted the duty of lighting the earthen lamp in the *Manikut*. In most of the *Namghars*, there is the practice of the lighting the lamp two times (morning and evening) a day. In some *Namghars*, it is lighted for one time. The properties of *Namghar* (musical instruments, utensils, donated clothes, sitting mats etc) are stored in the *Namghar* itself. One particular person is appointed to look after these things. During the time of organising some functions or public activity, a committee is convened and different duties are assigned to different persons. In such occasions, there are committees like food committee, music committee, reception committee, sound system and electricity committee to look after the specific areas and they are controlled by one executive committee. Such committees consist of the members of the *Namghars* and the villagers.

For conducting various religious activities, specially trained persons are assigned on. Such designations are as follows- the first one is the *Namghariya*. *Namghariya* is the central figure who controls all the activities of the *Namghar*. *Namghariya* is selected by the villagers. He is generally an elderly villager with good knowledge of religion and scripture. Then comes the *Namlagoa*. He is someone who leads the practice of singing or chanting the holy songs and also explains the meanings on demand. The *Deuri* and

⁴⁵ Views expressed by the respondents during the field study. It was also revealed that the amount is relaxed or reduced for poor families. It is compensated with his/her physical labour like daily cleansing of the *Namghar* floor, repairing of the *Namghar* properties like the roof, pillar, ceiling etc.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Biloniya refer to the persons who conduct the distribution of the offerings on certain occasions.

3.8. Activities of the *Namghar*-

The origin of *Namghar* is rooted on the objective of discussion and dissemination of religious and spiritual matters. Therefore, the basic identity of the *Namghar* is that it is a religious institution. It was with the passage of time that *Namghar* started acquiring a socio-cultural institutional identity. So, while discussing the activities of the *Namghar*, we can divide them into two categories- religious and social-cultural.

3.8.1. Religious Activities

The religious activities of a Neo-Vaishnavite Assamese village are centered on the village *Namghar*. As discussed above, the religious activities of the *Namghar* is looked after by a loosely formed body consisting of the villagers. But all the villagers simultaneously enjoy the right to express their views in any matter and also to interfere any activity. Therefore the village *Namghar* is termed as a democratic institution. “The *Namghars* since the time of Srimanta *Sankardev* have been so designed and constructed that people of all races and tribes living in this part of the country could easily enter them and take part in congregational prayers and the like” (Bhuyan, 2014). Village *Namghars* are completely free from any social hierarchy as all the members have equal space and right over any issue. Though there are administrative and religious bodies to conduct and coordinate the activities of the *Namghar*, they do not enjoy special privilege/position. These bodies exist just for the smooth running of the *Namghar*.

Nam-Prashanga is the major religious activity performed in the *Namghar*. The importance and significance of Nama is already discussed in the previous paragraph. *Nama-Prashanga* is the formal way of chanting the holy name of God in the *Namghar*. It is divided into two parts-Nama- the activity of chanting holy songs and *Prashanga*- the aloud reading of the Bhagawata. *Nam-Prashanga* is a regular practice which continues throughout the year. This is the neo-vaishnavite way of expressing devotion .This practice includes the activities of chanting of Nama, the explanation of certain chapters from Kirtana, *Gayan-Bayan* and Oja. Traditionally, there is the system of twelve or

fourteen *Prashangas* in a day. But due to the constraint of time and for other practical reasons⁴⁷, the numbers of *Prashangas* have been reduced to two in most of the *Namghars*. The daily *Prashanga* is generally performed by the *Namlagoa*, as a representative of the entire *Raij* (Assamese word referring to the common mass). In the absence of the *Namlagoa*, it is performed by the deputies. *Pathak* is the official who performs the reading of the *Bhagawat*.

Shakam is another religious activity conducted in the *Namghar*. This refers to the practice of reading the Holy texts, commonly known as *Nama* in the *Namghar* premise. It is generally organised to commemorate the dead family members on an annual basis. Sometimes *Shakam* is also organised in a grand scale on an annual basis. This is known as *-Barsabah-* where every villager takes part. On this occasion, *Palnam-* a genre of group musical performance and a *Bhaona* is also organised in the evening. Assamese people offer food offerings to the *Namghar* on the eve of numerous occasions like birthday, before starting a new business, getting a job, new admission of children to a school, before fixing a marriage, etc. It is called as *Sharai diya*⁴⁸. Here also *Nama* is rendered in *Namghar*. One member of each of the household attends this *Sharai diya*. Food items (*Mah-Prashad-* Mung dal and fruits and *Jalpan-* rice and curd) are distributed after the rendering. Now-a-days, *Khira-* commonly known as *Payash* and *Puri-sabji* are also found to be distributed in such occasions. *Nama* is also organised on other religious festivals like *Janmastami*, *Holi*, *Pachati* etc. *Sharai* is also offered in the starting day of the Assamese festivals of *Bihu*. All activities of an Assamese household is started by offering a *sharai* to the *Namghar*. *Sharai* is also offered in the day of wedding. Only after the *sharai* in the *Namghar*, wedding starts at home. In all these occasions, *Nama* is practised. Banana leaves are used to have the food items. The skins of banana leaves are used to have the boiled rice and curd. Use of metallic instruments for having food in the *Namghar* is very rare. Brass metal bowls are used for having tea. All Assamese *Namghars* are far away from using steel and plastic materials.

⁴⁷ Due to professional engagements, jobs and changing lifestyle of the people, it becomes difficult to attend all the fourteen sessions.

⁴⁸ This is a religious practice of offering fruits and other edibles on a special occasion. *Sharai* is brass tray/platter (sometimes made in bell metal) with a stem and a domed lid, which is used for sacred household activities. As the food items are placed in a *Sharai*, the practice is known as *Sharai diya*.

Assamese people celebrate the death and birth anniversaries of the two saints – Sankaradeva and Madhabdeva. This specific day is known as *tithi*. These two are the main religious functions organised in each and every *Namghar* of Assam. On the very day of the Tithi, Nama is taken by the villagers and then food items are served. Some episodes of the holy texts are read aloud. Tithis are celebrated to remember the contributions of Sankaradeva and Madhabdeva. It is often followed by the organisation of *Bhaona* in the evening. Now-a-days, relevant cultural activities like essay competition on the life and contribution of the saints or competitions of Satriya dance and *Borgeet* are also organised. In some places, Tithis are organised for two-three days. Tithis of the late *Satradhikars* are also organised in the *Namghars* of the *Satras*.

The month of Bhadra⁴⁹ is considered as a holy month by the Assamese people. In this particular month, *Namghars* of Assam turn out to be divine sites with the sound of holy Nama and *Nama-Prashanga*. People irrespective of caste and community take the Nama and offer their devotion in the heartiest manner. It is mentionable that some of the *Namghars* of Assam really appear to be auspicious sites of pilgrimage as thousands of devotees from different parts of the state visit the *Namghars*, bestow offerings and participate in the holy renderings⁵⁰. The long lines of burning earthen lamps and grave recital of holy texts create a celestial environment in the *Namghars*. Mainaporiya *Namghar* and Dhekiyakhoa *Namghar* of Jorhat district, Athkheliya *Namghar* of Golaghat district attract huge number of devotees in the month of Bhadra.

There are some traditional religious functions which are typically performed by the Assamese women. Such functions are organised in the *Namghar* premise and attended only by the women members of the household. *Aisabah*, *Prasuta Sakam*, *Pachati* are some such typical women centered functions of the Assamese society. *Aisabah* is organised for praying God for the recovery of certain disease. *Prasuta Sakam* is a religious occasion praying for the good health of the newly pregnant woman.

⁴⁹ Bhadra or Bhaado is a month of the Hindu calendar that corresponds to August/September in the Georgian calendar. It begins on the new moon in August/ September. The *Tithi* of Sankaradeva and Madhabdeva fall in this month.

⁵⁰ People offer “Sharai”- the traditional practice of offering fruits and other food items in the *Namghar* and *Satra*- especially during the month of Bhadra. It is a common belief that by offering *Sharai* in this month ones wishes are fulfilled.

Pachati is the celebration of the birth of Lord Krishna, a symbolic re-enactment of the merriment after the birth of Lord Krishna in the palace of King Nanda at Gokul. All these functions are held in *Namghar* where women assemble, chant Nama and offer food offerings at the end. They are completely arranged by women where all activities- chanting name, arrangement of food, distribution, cleansing are conducted by the women.

3.8.2. Socio-cultural activities-

Namghars are the primary socio-cultural units of the Assamese society. Now-a-days, a village *Namghar* cannot be defined as a mere religious institution. Rather the proper definition of *Namghar* is that it is the grass root level socio-cultural institution of the Assamese society. “*Namghar* is not just a religious institution; it is a cultural, academic and economic institution. Therefore, the race grown out of it is not religious by nature, rather can be termed as secular” (Kalita, 2014). Transition of *Namghar* from a religious to a socio-cultural institution is a historical process and cannot be attributed to a particular period of history. But this transition can be attributed to the following reasons. Firstly, *Namghar* was the only institutional mechanism where common people can assemble in a large scale and interact in a public manner. This social gathering helped *Namghar* acquiring a more democratic character. It was the first experience of the use of the public space for the Assamese people. Secondly, Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva encouraged utilization of cultural activities for propagation of its religious and spiritual teachings. Such visual mediums were more appealing and effective for the illiterate Assamese people. As most of such activities were organised in the *Namghars*; the institution parallelly acquired a cultural and social character even after retaining its religious root. Moreover, *Namghars* are simple structures and are built upon the collective efforts of the villagers.

“It is constructed by the joint labour of the villagers. Every household is considered as a unit and therefore, each household is required to place the service of at least one member of the family in constructing and maintaining the *Namghar*. Every household must contribute proportionately to the *Namghar* according to the number of its members in cash or kind” (Bhuyan: 2012).

Earlier, people used to construct *Namghar* by donating their own materials like bamboo, timber, cane, thatch and themselves built the structures. Most of the *Kutchha Namghars* under the field visit of the present research were found to be collective efforts. It is a more prominent trend in the flood affected villages of the island as the villagers have to shift their place of residence and wherever they migrate, they themselves construct their own *Namghar*. This physical attachment leads to a sentimental attachment with the institution. Any Assamese person refers to the institution as “Our *Namghar*”.⁵¹ It clearly indicates the institute as a representative of the collective identity of the people which cannot rest upon mere religious factors.

Namghar is where Assamese culture has been practised and preserved throughout the ages. Satriya culture, in the village level, is taught and practised in the *Namghar* premise. The experienced seniors teach the musical and dance forms in the *Namghar*. It includes teaching and practice of Satriya dance, *Borgeet* and other devotional songs (*Dihanam*, *Thiyanam* etc), organising *Bhaona* etc. The young generation of the village are taught all these forms by the experienced seniors. It also includes teachings on playing of local musical instruments like *Khol*, *Tal*, flute which are often accompanied with the dances and *Bhaona*. These days, workshops and training programmes on these practices are also organised in the *Namghar*. Experts from the *Satras* and other institutions teach the villagers for a certain period of time.

Village *Namghars* are the training workshops of the unique practice of *Gayan-Bayan*. *Gayan –Bayan* is Assamese musical performance accompanied with dance, songs and local musical instruments. It is divided into two parts- *Gayan*-the vocal performance and *Bayan*-the instrumental performance. Only *Khol* and *Tal* are used in *Gayan-Bayan*. The particular musical form of *Gayan –Bayan* is known as *Bol*..The musical form is semi-classical and songs are religious in nature. Dressed in traditional hand woven shirt, cotton dhoti and white turban, performers create a heavenly musical atmosphere in *Gayan-Bayan*. *Namghars* of Assam has been preserving this ancient musical tradition

⁵¹ The use of the word “our” indicates the aspect of the collective identity associated with the institution. All the respondents refer to their respective *Namghar* as “our *Namghar*” or “our institution”. The spontaneous rejection of the singular pronoun like me or my is significant in understanding the collective value associated with the institution.

from time immemorial. Elderly villagers train the young ones in the *Namghar* and this way the form has been transmitted from one to another generation. Though *Gayan-Bayan* is also practised in the *Satras*, training of this genre for the common public is possible only through the *Namghars*. It is only through the *Namghars*, this unique cultural treasure of Assam has been kept alive in its proper form.

Bhaona in the village level is organised in the *Namghar*. Academicians completely agree that it is the *Namghar* that keeps alive this beautiful cultural tradition in Assam. The village *Namghars* helps retaining the real taste of *Bhaona*,

“*Namghars* are the primary custodians of the tradition of *Bhaona* in Assam. Though *Satras* also organise *Bhaona* in a regular basis, it is the village *Namghar* which makes it a more public and popular cultural activity. The engagement of the common people is more visible in a *Bhaona* of a village *Namghar*. In a *Bhaona* organised in the *Satra*, their role is a mere spectator” (Rajkhowa, 2013).

Bhaonas are organised on many occasions ranging from the celebration of the *tithis*, the annual *Barsabah*, *Janmastami*, *Sankar Janmostav* etc. Sometimes an individual household or a group of villagers sponsor a *Bhaona*. Assamese people, on many occasions (especially on good occasions like getting a job, good result of their children, recovery from prolonged illness etc) offer a *bhaona* in the *Namghar*. In this process, they publicly request the villagers to stage the *Bhaona* as to fulfil their wish and take the entire financial responsibility to hold the performance. Assamese people consider sponsoring and organising a *Bhaona* as a sacred duty and believe that by organising a *Bhaona* ones wishes can be fulfilled. In such special cases, such individuals bear the entire expenses. *Bhaona* is not merely a dramatic enactment; it encompasses different activities of singing, recital of musical instruments, make up, preparation of settings, sitting arrangements etc. Organising a *Bhaona* is a collective phenomenon and all the villagers are associated with it. In *Namghars* of Majuli-the study area of the present research, *Bhaonas* are also organised on *Pachati*- a festival celebrated by the women folk of the village which falls five days after the *Janmastami*. *Pachati* is celebrated marking the merriment on the birth of Lord Krishna. *Nama* is practised as well often accompanied by *Nagara Nam*- devotional songs accompanied by *Nagara*-a local musical instrument.

In this context a special mention should be made of Baresahariya *Bhaona* of Jamugurihat, Tezpur district of Assam. Baresahariya *Bhaona* is the practice of performing a large number of *Bhaonas* (reports vary from 10, 12 to 25) at the same time in the same venue. It is organised in an open field under a lotus shaped round stage with a temporary *Namghar* in the centre which has provision of organising several performances at the same time. Cultural troupes from different parts of the state perform different dramas at the same time in this venue.

“During the festival twenty-some plays are staged simultaneously under a uniquely designed roof in an acting area shaped like a lotus in bloom. The festival offers a veritable feast of spectacle, stylized acting, classical dance, and music, all imbued with a sense of spirituality. The performance is marked by a continuous shifting between the classical and the folk, the mundane and the spiritual, providing thousands of spectators a rare aesthetic experience” (Sarma, 2009).

This is a huge cultural phenomenon which has tightened the communal relationship among different communities like Adivasi, Bodo, Nepali, Rabha etc. The tradition has its proud prolonged history of 218 years continuously showcasing the distinct Assamese cultural treasure. Though the unique drama festival has acquired a modern shape in respect of its open field and pandal, it is still rooted to the *Namghar* as the central stage.

Namghar is the common venue for any public function in the village. Such functions may include- annual meeting of local village based organisations (youth club, women organisation, children bodies, NGOs) literary or cultural competitions, felicitation programmes, celebration of the birth and death anniversaries of the cultural and literary personalities (eg- *Shilpi Diwas*, *Rabha Diwas*, *Chukhafa Diwas*, *Sati Joymoti Diwas* etc), one act play, annual meeting of the village school, discussion forum of the elderly people etc. Experiences of the field suggest that *Namghar* is the only and most suitable venue of any public activity in the village level. “Now-a-days we have separate community halls constructed under certain governmental scheme. But we still prefer to sit in the *Namghars* for any public discussion. We are not much accustomed to these new constructions.”⁵²

⁵² Respondents in the field said that though there are community halls under governmental schemes they still prefer to go to the *Namghar*. They find the open, wide space more comfortable. Moreover they

Most of the village based cultural organisations like literary forum, music school, dance academy, youth clubs, organisation for the development of the children are run in the *Namghar* premises. The researcher found that all the villages under field study have their cultural training centres in the *Namghar*. Two of the historical socio-cultural organisations of Assam-*Sadou Asom Maina Parijat* (a state level forum for the development of the children and the teen-agers) and *Sadou Asom Mahila Samiti* (a state level women organisation) has been literally run on the *Namghar* premises for the decades. The meetings and other formalities of most of the women run Self Help Groups (SHG) of Majuli are conducted in the *Namghar*.

Satras and *Namghars* are inseparable institutions of the daily life of the Assamese people. On every occasion of their lives, people of Majuli visit the *Satras* and *Namghars*. Literally speaking, the day-to-day lives of an average resident of Majuli is so integrally associated with these institutions that it becomes practically impossible to document their influence on their lives. Most of the schools, health care institutions, libraries, roads, cultural or social organisations and public /community halls are named after the *Satras* and *Satradhikars* of different institutions. Only in the eastern part of the island, there are sixty seven schools named after the *Satradhikars* of different *Satras*.⁵³ Assamese people consider sponsoring and organising a *Bhaona* as a sacred duty and believe that by organising a *Bhaona* ones wishes can be fulfilled. In such special cases, such individuals bear the entire expenses.

Namghars are like the soul force of the rural life in Majuli.⁵⁴ *Namghar* is the recreational centre, cultural training school, meeting place of the elderlies, village court and the religious hub. People of Majuli start every initiative of their lives by bowing

expressed that discussions in the *Namghars* are grave, never become cheesy and people hardly violate the decision once taken in the *Namghar*. To quote, “*Bhagawanak agat loi ji-ti hidhanta kariba noari*” (We cannot take baseless decisions by having God in front of us). This spontaneous value based underpinning towards the institution is a suggestive factor of its age old influence.

⁵³ Meragarh Narayan Deva Higher Secondary School, Bongaon, Majuli Auniati Hemchandra High School, Auniati Bisnudev Middle English School, Sri Sri Bishnu Chandra Deva Goswami Middle English School, Bormukoli, Harideva Science Laboratory, J.B.College, Jorhat, Sri Sri Kamalabari Satra Girls High School, Kamalabari, Ramakanta Deva Goswami high school, Bengenaati are some of the educational institutions named after the *Satradhikars* of different *Satras* of Majuli.

⁵⁴ There is no urban area in Majuli. Census of India identifies the entire island under the category of rural.

down before the Manikut or lighting an earthen lamp before the shrine. During the field visit, respondents share stories how their children studying or working in different parts of the country or abroad request them to dedicate a *saki* (earthen lamp personified as sacred light) before their examination, joining in a new job or setting out for a trip. The names of the *Namghar* and *Satras* are frequently taken in the day-to-day conversation of the residents of Majuli. It is found to be a moral and encouraging force working in the psyche of the people of Majuli. *Satradhikars* of the *Satras* are associated with most of the executive and management bodies of the educational and social institutions. They frequently visit the social functions and public meetings organised in different parts of the island, offer their suggestions and help and actively take part in any initiative regarding the development of the island. Since the days of Pitambardeva Goswami (1885-1962) of Garamur *Satra*, all *Satradhikars* have been raising their sincere voices in issues like protection of the Majuli island, demand for recognition of the problem of flood as a national problem, demand for a bridge connecting Majuli with the main land, establishment of higher educational institutions in the sub division, sanction of tourism packages for Majuli etc. *Satradhikars* are always vocal on the issues related with the dignity, safety and development of the people of Majuli and have been raising their voices in different medias. So, the institution of *Satra* also acquires the status of the representative body of the island and its people. Thus the term Majuli is synonymous with the term –the land of *Satras* and *Namghars*.

CHAPTER 4

Mechanisms of Peacebuilding of *Satras* and *Namghars*: special focus on Majuli

4.1. Introduction

This chapter deals with the mechanisms opted by *Satras* and *Namghars* in the field of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is an umbrella term that includes all initiatives to attain certain conditions which build an environment conducive to develop peace. Peace itself is a multifaceted concept and to define peacebuilding is so becomes a hazardous task. Depending upon the contexts and methods, “People use the term “Peacebuilding” in widely differing ways” (Schrich, 2004). So to save from those complexities, the discussion is divided into two major parts. The first part deals with the mechanisms of conflict resolution opted by the institutions. The second part is dealing with the cultural and social activities. Both these activities, in together, are examined as the peacebuilding mechanisms of the institutions. The first part is a concrete description of the issues of conflict the institutions deal with and their respective methods of responses to those issues. The second part is contextualized on the belief that peace is a natural byproduct of social and cultural activities.

4.2. Conflict: Issues and Resolution mechanisms of the *Satras* and *Namghars*

Conflict is an unavoidable social behaviour. Therefore, to resolve conflict constructively is more important than settling or managing a conflicting issue. The rejection of mere resolution leads to the development of the concept of conflict transformation. Conflict transformation (CT) stands for those initiatives which help in rebuilding the torn relationship between conflicting parties and thus transform the relationship from antagonism to cooperation. In this process, there is the need of examining a conflicting issue with a deeper perspective, thus crossing beyond the immediate cause. The initiatives (methods & activities) focus on improving communication skills and are often characterized by long term interventions at multiple levels with the goal to change perceptions through addressing the roots of conflict,

including inequality and social injustice. Overcoming fear and distrust, dealing with stereotypes, perceptions and interests and learning how to communicate effectively are important steps towards redefining relationships (Schilling, 2012). If transformed properly, conflict leads to the creation of the foundation of peace. At this point, conflict transformation and peacebuilding can be located in the same orbit. In reality; they follow the same methods to achieve the same goal under different names.

Satras and *Namghars* believe on the twin principles of equality of men and recognition of the worth and dignity of every living being. At the core of its functioning there always remains their commitment to structure the society along egalitarian lines. The leveling spirit of the *Satra* and *Namghar* permeates all its functional spheres – religious, cultural, educative or in terms of citizen participation for that matter (Bhuyan, 2007). This allows any individual, irrespective of caste, class or creed to participate in all activities of a *Satra* or a *Namghar*. The efforts of peace and peacebuilding are deeply embedded in the institutions. As resolution of conflict and peace building depend on one's underlying understanding of peace, it may differ in terms of approaches, scope, and time and frame (Paffenholz, 2010). On the backdrop of this statement, these institutions are found to practice mechanisms of conflict resolution and peace building in a context specific manner. The first part of the chapter examines the issues of conflict dealt by the institutions and the respective methods to handle them.

4.2.1. Issues

The issues brought into the *Satras* cover a variety of issues. Experiences of the field suggest that the issues can be summed in the following types-

- land disputes
- marriage problems
- ownership rights
- local disputes
- resource distribution issues

Conflict over land ranges diverse issues. They are also diverse in nature- inter family disputes, inter village issues or community use of land. In the first category comes

conflict over land between two families of the same clan. For instance, it may be a case of illegal occupation of one's agricultural land by another family. Cases of clash over inherited land between siblings are common phenomena. In such cases, brothers of the same family quarrel over the ownership rights of cultivable or residential land. There are even instances of beating, stabbing and killing out of such conflict. Since 2010, thirty six cases of sibling rivalry over land use have been reported in Dakhinpat *Satra*¹. Illegal expansion and occupation of residential land and boundary is also a frequent issue regarding land. Sometimes, land under *Adhi* system is found to be illegally occupied by the Adhiyar². There are also instances when the Adhiyar does not return adequate amount of produces to the land owner. Such issues are also found to be reported to the *Satra*.

Inter village clash over land basically arises out of issues like construction of a public road, use of grazing field that falls in the boundary of two villages, running of vehicles through village roads etc. While constructing a public road, villagers often disagree to leave their portion and it often leads to hostile situation. As most of the villagers of Majuli rear domestic cows, grazing land conflict is a common occurrence. Villagers often create issues over the grazing right of a grazing site and cutting of the grass grown over it. In many times, instances of attacking the animals of the other villages were reported to the researcher. There were six cases where conflict occurred due to the running of heavy vehicles through the village roads. During an interview in Mudoichuk Village, under Dakhinpat block, villagers complained the running of tractors and sand carrying trucks responsible for the degraded state of the village road. In Dhapkota Mishing village, the youth of the village attacked a contractor for damaging the village road by running heavily loaded sand and stone carrying trucks through the village road which the villagers constructed by their own effort after being damaged in flood. The third category refers to conflicting issue over land where a larger public, a community is engaged with. Such cases carry the dissatisfaction of a particular community, entire villagers of a village or may be of the residents of a larger locality

¹ Information provided by Narayan Bora, the present *Kakati* of Dakhinpat *Satra*.

² *Adhi* is a common crop sharing system in Assam and Majuli. *Adhi* is a tenancy system where the land owner provides the land, seeds and agricultural implements to another person. Under this tenurial agreement, the crop produced is shared 50:50 between the two parties. In some places, the land owner only provides the land. In some areas of Majuli, the harvesting is also done by the land owner. The leaseholder or the lessee is known as *Adhiyar*.

over the use of the public land. For instance, a complaint was reported in Natun Kamalabari *Satrabdy* the people of the surrounding villages when someone tried to establish a bakery in one of the local areas which they considered as a sacred place. Similar clash arose between the public and the organising committee of a local club when the latter invited a mobile theatre group to hold their show for three days while the public wanted the same venue for a devotional music competition.

Marriage related conflicts are also frequently reported for in the *Satra*. “We have large number of issues related with marriage in our *Satra*. But instead of words like conflict or cases, I would like to describe them as social problems as sometimes they do not have the nature of a serious crime. They may be called social hostilities due to mistakes”³. The *Satradhikar* of Natun Kamalabari *Satra* also agreed to the point and said that such issues are neither violent crimes nor intentional. *Satradhikars* were found to be very sensitive and conscious while talking about the issues related with marriage. It was found that hostility borne out of marriage related issues affects the level of relationship among the family members.

Discussion on the conflicting issues related with marriage need an introductory discussion on the societal norms followed by the Assamese people in relation to the institution of marriage. According to the prevailing norms a marital relationship cannot be held between members of the same family or same kinship⁴. Marriage between sons and daughters of maternal and paternal families are considered unsocial and immoral as inter cousin marriage is a sin. A boy cannot marry a girl who is the daughter of the sister of his mother or father, his uncle, his maternal uncle, his paternal uncle etc. Violation of this norm is considered a heinous activity and they are hardly accepted in the society. People are hardly encouraged for making a marital relationship between families who have same birth history, common lineage or somehow related with the groom or brides parents. Some communities even do not agree to tie to the knot if the groom or bride

³ As informed by Nani Gopal Devagoswami, the present *Satradhikar* of Dakhinpat *Satra*

⁴ The social relationship deriving from blood ties (real and supposed) and marriage are collectively referred to as kinship. In most societies, kinship plays a significant role in the socialization of individuals and the maintenance of group solidarity. In traditional societies kinship may be so extensive and significant that in effect they constitute the social system.

happens to be the first and eldest child of the respective families⁵. Under the influence of Sanskritisation, Assamese society considered inter-gotra marriage as a big sin (people use the word Mahapap). Traditionally, pre-marital sex is considered as against the social norms and it is a taboo for the average Assamese people. If someone is publicly convicted for pre-marital sex it may become a reason for societal hostility. Pre-marital sex is still considered as a major taboo in the society of Majuli.

Inter caste marriage is a critical issue in Assamese society. In the context of Majuli, inter caste marriage is hardly encouraged and accepted. The society is still found to be rooted to their rejection of inter caste marriage though examples of inter caste marriage are not rare these days. In this context, though there are ideological differences among social groups⁶, majority of the people view inter caste marriage as unethical and unsocial. It originates in the inter-village relationship, which is basically determined by caste relationships. "There was no communication between a Kalita and Non-Kalita village, or between the Katani village and a Kalita or Kaivarta village, or between a Kaivarta village and a Brahmin settlement, or between a Kumar Kalita village and a Koch or Keot village except perhaps on matters of business or economy. Inter caste marriage or inter-caste dining was a taboo." (Nath: 2009). In such a situation, Brahmins in Majuli hardly go for inter caste marriage. People of the Kalita community⁷, the dominating class of the island, also have restriction in norms for a marriage. They prefer to conduct the marriage only within the Kalita community. Though these days they are open to having marriage with Koch and Keot people, Kalita and Koch people hardly welcomes marriage with Scheduled castes or other tribes. Within the Mishing community people of same title cannot marry each other as they are thought to be originated from the

⁵ Many respondents expressed this view as they do not welcome marriage between children who are the first and the eldest of the respective families.

⁶ Through informal conversation with a bunch of young generation, it was known that they hardly support the taboo on inter caste marriage. But interestingly, the same people insist on the traditional or family value associated with the issue and opine that they would love to avoid any hostility for this issue. This group consists of college and university students within the age group of 20-24.

⁷ The Kalita is a caste or a community of Hindus belonging to the state of Assam. They commonly claim to belong to the Kshatriya caste. According to "Purana Tradition", the Kalitas are considered as pure Aryans. The Kalitas along with the Kayasthas in Assam are considered next only to the Brahmins in the caste-hierarchy. According to the legends, they are "the non-Vedic Aryans" who are responsible for bringing Aryan culture to Assam. Having mingled with local population, they still preserve certain elements of Aryan culture even after localizing their culture to some extent.

same Gumin So:yin (forefathers) (Kuli, 1998). Restrictions regarding marriage are found to be bit liberal among the Yogis, Deoris, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kumars.

Inter religion marriage is also a sensitive issue in this category. Even being a secular country by principle, Indian social norms are still far from being flexible to accept inter religion marriages. In spite of rigorous efforts of the social activists, hostility over inter caste or inter religion marriage still grips the society. There are numerous instances of direct violence out of inter religion marriage throughout the country. The principle of secularism is often found to be futile in front of such serious happenings.

An attitude of rejection and rigidity prevails throughout Majuli towards inter religion marriage. Many of the respondents were not even ready to talk about this issue as it is for them something 'unthinkable' and 'unimaginable'. So, question of acceptability of inter religion marriage is something like a taboo for average residents of the area. Dominated by the religious principle of Hinduism and specifically of the Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy, people of Majuli consider such instances as indicators of social breakdown and scar in the traditional structure of the society. The issues of social hostility and tormented relationship due to such 'unusual' incidents are prioritised than the religious issues. It seems that such marriages are unacceptable not because they are associated with a particular religion, but because this leads to an atmosphere of uneasiness which affects the social environment⁸. Instead of commenting on the comparative qualities of particular religions, people of the area identified such incidents more as disturbing factors for a traditionally structured social setting. Though there are few cases of such marriages, it is not rare.

During the field visit, two such recent cases were experienced by the researcher, both being reported to Dakhinpat *Satra*. While investigating about the cases, it was found that such cases are reported to the *Satra* by the villagers of the village the family belongs to. In such a situation, the family where such marriage happens is instantly boycotted

⁸ While discussing one of the above mentioned cases reported to the Dakhinpat *Satra*, one of the village members, a high school teacher by profession, said that such incidents often lead to gossip, back biting, rumours, unhealthy discussion in the village. In this sense the environment of the village is affected and there grows up uneasiness among the people. He also refers such incidents as bad example for the future generation.

from the public sphere and then the villagers approach the *Satra* for resolution of the issue. The activity is considered as a sin (paap) and the family is boycotted up to the time of purification (*praychitta*). Significantly, though the 'mistake' is committed by a single member of a family, and often without information to and consent of the other members, the entire family is considered to be equally responsible for the paap. But after the purification process, they are again included within the social arena. But in most cases, the particular member is boycotted or he/she himself/herself migrates to another place. In this matter, as per the experience of the researcher, even the highly educated persons also dare to go against the traditional norms. It proves that inter religious marriage is considered not only as a violation of social norm but also as a bad example of disturbing social factor.

The discussion proves that people of Majuli somehow share same traditional Indian mindset regarding caste and inter caste marriages. Caste and religion are integral components of Indian society since the time immemorial. These two systems create water tight compartment between communities and bring division, hatred and tension among various social groups. Marriages within the same caste and same religion are the traditional norm of the Indian society. To think of marriages between different castes and different religions is a difficult and socially unacceptable proposition. For years Indians had an orthodox mindset. They cannot imagine marriages beyond the same caste, community and religion. Those who dared for the inter-caste marriage by violating the social norm had to face the consequences in terms of violence, social boycott, family boycott and death of the boys and girls (honour killing). The report of the India Human Development Survey revealed that out of the 42,000 household under their survey during 2011-12, only 5.4% Indian families' practices inter caste marriage⁹. Though the outcome of inter caste marriage do not lead to such harsh outcome in the island, it does have social disagreement among the people and still a proscribed trend for the society. In M. Weber's

⁹ The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) is a nationally representative, multi-topic survey of 41,554 households in 1503 villages and 971 urban neighborhoods across India. IHDS has been jointly organized by researchers from the University of Maryland and the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi. The quoted information was published in a report entitled "Just 5% of Indian marriages are inter-caste: survey" in *The Hindu* on November 13, 2014. The report used the data provided by IHDS. For more details see the website www.ihds.info.

study on India caste represented an important illustration of social ranking by prestige and formed part of a wider interest in pariah groups. Caste or caste system is an important tool to study the socio-economic profile of a society or a race (Weber, 1998).

Elopement is another area associated with marriage. Elopement also sometimes leads to hostility. But in this context, there are variations regarding the public perspective towards elopement. In Majuli, elopement is a normal phenomenon among the Mishing people. Marriage through elopement is known as *Dugla La: nam* among the Mishings, they hardly consider it as something offensive or against social norms. Similarly, elopement is common among the Kaibarta, Yogi, Deori community and they do not find anything offensive about it. But majority of the Kalita community has reservation against elopement and they often consider it against their societal norms and behaviour. In such situation, such instances may lead to social disturbances and then *Satras* are approached for consultation. Elopement becomes a cause of conflict when the parents are not ready to accept the relationship. Similarly, elopement of boys and girls of different communities or caste also leads to social antagonism. There are even instances of physical violence and lifelong disputes out of such elopement cases. In many cases girls eloped with boys without parental consent are never allowed to come to her parental home for lifetime. Many respondents expressed that they had not been to their parents' home due to their elopement activity without parental consent.

Ownership issues reported to the *Satra* are basically about community ownership of natural resources and public properties. Individual or intra-family or inter family ownership issues are hardly brought into the *Satras*. Disputes over ownership right among family members or siblings are either resolved within the family members or are solved in courts. But for clashes out of community ownership in the study area, *Satras* are still considered to be a viable platform.

Depending upon the information provided by the officials of different *Satras* of Majuli during the field visit, common ownership issues are found to be related with use of water bodies like ponds and Beel, fishing areas, grazing sites, forest for collection of fuel wood and other natural products, public venues like sports field, washing places etc. The basic source of livelihood of Majuli is agriculture and rearing domestic animals like

cows, goats, buffalos are a common practice. Pig farming is a major livelihood option of the Mishing community. In such an agricultural setting, conflict often arises over the use of water bodies and grazing sites. As such natural areas legally do not belong to any party; anyone can impose his/their right over it which consequently leads to antagonistic situations. The officials of Auniati *Satra* informed that villagers of the surrounding villages come to the *Satra* seeking solution of verbal disputes over the use of the surrounding grazing sites. During the monsoon, grass is grown over the grazing sites and wetlands of Majuli. Villagers of the nearby areas cut those grasses, use them to feed their animals and also sell them. Use of water bodies like ponds in the agricultural fields for feeding animals are also constant sources of conflict among communities. Such water bodies exist in the fields where all communities have their own cultivable land. So, when animals come for drinking water, sometimes a group of villagers attack the herd of another village which results in verbal attacks. But, verbal and even physical disputes often occur out of the right to cut the grass as each of the parties claims the area to be his own. In such situation, cases are often reported to the *Satras*. Officials of Dakhinpat and Bengenaati *Satra* also confirmed of dealing with grass cutting issues, especially during the monsoon.

Firewood collection is a common traditional practice for certain group of people in the island. People, for domestic use, collect firewood –especially dried bamboo and wood logs, from their nearby forests. A large number of people are still dependent on the use of firewood for their fuelling activity. Sometimes, it is also opted as a livelihood option. In most of the cases, people do not know about the laws regarding the use of forest resources. This often leads to verbal or physical disputes .During the field visit, dispute over firewood collection both in private and community forest areas are found to be frequent in the flood prone areas, and riverine villages .Among the villages under field study, the issue was more experienced in Srirampuriya, Bebejiya, Dakhinpat Kaibarta etc. Some of the disputes were reported to and solved by Auniati *Satra* and Dakhinpat *Satra* respectively. Collecting firewood from privately owned forest areas lead to hostile situations. Similarly cutting of reeds grown in the Chaporis is a frequently reported issue of social hostility.

Fishing has been one of the major sources of livelihood among certain communities, especially of the Kaibarta community¹⁰ in Majuli. Fishing practices are also very common among the Deori and the Mishing community. The different types of water bodies of Majuli Island are the main resources of this practice. They include the river, wet land, marshy land, ponds, rivulets etc. Different fishing techniques have been evolved by man based on the level of water and availability of fishes. Commonly known as beels¹¹, temporary or permanent water bodies are another major source of fishing in Majuli. During the time of flood, beels get connected to the river or the rivulets and so form as important source of fish. While some beels are leased to the individuals or co-operatives by the Revenue department, the newly formed unstable water bodies remained as open access or community controlled beels. Conflict over community fishing rights often occurs upon the use of such open access beels. The registered beels are under the control of some individual or co-operative and any clash related with them comes under the formal judicial system. But in case of open access beels, clashes are hardly taken to the court. *Satras* are the first choices for such community clashes. Such clashes, as reported to the *Satras*, basically arise out of violation of fishing norms. For instance, fishing is prohibited during the fertilization or mating period of the fish. But if someone is found to be practicing fishing in this time, they are convicted of criminal offence. Secondly, communities fix certain days or period for fishing in the community beels. But if a group of fishermen of certain village disobey the rule, the other villagers lead the case to the *Satra*. Conflict also arises out of the use or abuse of certain limits of the water body as imaginative divisions are made for each village. Sometimes forced fishing in a village pond or private fishery is also reported to the *Satra*.

¹⁰The Kaibartas are one of the sixteen Scheduled Castes of Assam as per Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. Fishing is considered to be the primary occupation of the Kaibartas. They are believed to be the descendants of the first Dravidian immigrants. In Majuli, Kaibarta community resides by the river banks. They are called as *Kebarta* in the Jatakas (*Ke*-water, and *varta*-livelihood). This means that the Kaibartas derive their livelihood from water.

¹¹ *Beel* is the Assamese term used to refer to temporary or permanent water bodies specially used for the purpose of fishing. Some Beels are registered and run by co-operatives while unregistered beels are controlled and used by communities. Revenue Department lease out the *beel* for a period of 1 to 3 years through the process of tender or directly to a cooperative society with the average annual 10% increment in lease rate

In this context, the concept of conflict or conflicting issue also includes incidents leading to social disequilibrium borne out of religious reasons. Activities against the religious codes cause disturbances in the social life of a race. Though Neo-Vaishnavism does not have strict dogmatic codes, it does have certain practices and beliefs which help maintaining a peaceful situation in the society. For instance, Hinduism considers Cow as a sacred animal and slaughter, physical attack or disrespect towards cow is considered a social crime. Though Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy does not offer any particular belief on cow, it considers animals as worthy as human beings¹². This belief leads to the construction of the concept of good and evil where hurting an animal is considered as crime. Under such construction, Assamese society also considers hurting to cow as a crime. So, in such instances, hostilities arise in the area and then people approach the *Satras* for mechanisms to repair the social fabric.

Issues related with religion also include confusion over the performance of funeral activities, post death rituals, marriage rituals, violation of certain religious norms. Confusion over the performance of funeral activities is borne out of exceptional cases like funeral of someone committing suicide, death of a second member of a family while another one is dead within the same period etc. Assamese society does not follow the traditional system of funeral in a case of suicide. Suicide is an unnatural death and considered as a sin. In such cases, confusion over the funeral and post death rituals is a common occurrence. Similarly, if a second member dies within a short period of the death of a member from the same family, confusion arises regarding the organisation of Shradha (rituals followed after death). Often, the villagers have clash/disagreement over the period to organise Shradha. In the study area, respondents expressed that disagreement over the arrangement of Shradha is a common issue of conflict as some follow the tradition of organising it on the 11th day after the death while another section organises it on the 13th or 30th day¹³. It leads to conflict among the villagers. Sometimes, it leads to disagreement even among the members of the same family. There are instances of

¹² *Kukur Srigal Gardavaro atma ram*

Janiya sabako hari kariba pranam- this stanza by Sankardev tells that Lord Rama exists even in the heart of the dogs, fox and donkeys. So they all are equal to Him and all are worthy to be revered.

¹³ These systems are known as *egharadiniya* (11), *teradiniya* (13) and *mahekiya* (30). Most of the respondents list the clash between these two groups as one of the common cause of social discomfort in the village level. There are even cases where members of the same family disagree on the period.

organising Shradha on different days even among the siblings. During the field study, numerous incidents of differences regarding this issue were reported where there are even reports of formation of a new group within the village, commonly known as *Khel*. *Khels* are the basic units within a village on the basis of ritualistic codes. In such situations, relationships deteriorate and sometimes siblings or cousins are even found to be in non-talking terms. The researcher found that there are three to four different *Khels* in villages having only forty to fifty households (Malual Kalita, Mudoichuk, Dalani Chamaguri, Na-Pamua etc). Even siblings too are members of different *Khels*. Most of these *Khels* were reported to be byproducts of disagreement over ritualistic issues of funeral and post-death activities.

The violation of religious norms include issues like violation of food norms during the fasting in a post death period, conversion without prior information, conversion against the wishes of the family, having restricted food items, entering a holy place in a drunken stage, stealing properties of temples or other religious institutions etc. Violation in any of these forms is considered as *paap*. Women entering certain areas of religious places (Manikut, the place of Guru Asana in *Namghar* etc), doing certain activities during menstruation, having non-vegetarian food during holy days like the day before *Sharan* are traditionally considered as violations of the religious customs. Everywhere in Majuli, entering a *Namghar* or visiting the *Satra* without taking bath is believed to be a serious violation of religious code. Though there is flexibility along with the changing time, such issues are still considered as violation or disobedience towards the prevailing customs. All these issues always lead to hostilities. They may appear trivial, but such issues do create social commotion in an Assamese village. *Satra* and *Namghar* are the first choice to resolve the conflict over such issues.

The category of local disputes includes miscellaneous social wrong doings that disturbs the social atmosphere. It includes a diverse range of social crime like theft in a household, theft in religious institution, damage of public properties, insult of women, disrespect towards elderly, crime over parents, issues of domestic violence etc. But these days, issues of domestic violence are hardly handled by the *Satras*. There was only one

reference of murder¹⁴. Robbery, murder, rape, theft of grand scale, dowry related violence, threat are not reported to the *Satras*. Even, cases of minor theft, damage of property, bad or insulting behaviour within a village is also resolved in the village *Namghar* or on mutual negotiation. But if two different villages or communities or different localities are engaged with such cases, they are generally reported to the *Satras*. Officials of the Auniati *Satra* informed that there are frequent reports of inter village clashes due to theft (house hold properties, ornaments, agricultural products etc) and damage of public property (tube wells, statues, public stage, public gate etc) from the surrounding villages. In all these cases, the clash occurs between two villages. During the harvesting time of paddy, theft of cut paddy from the field is a frequent phenomenon. Cutting of tree from a forest that belongs to a different locality is also frequently reported. Interestingly in most of such cases, the complainant is found to be informed about the offender and instead of accusing him/her as a suspect, he is directly mentioned as the victim.

Experiences of the field make this clear that the understanding of conflict depends on the socially constructed and accepted notions of values and necessity. Cases related with behavioural aspects acquire justification in relation to the prevailing conventions or codes followed by a certain social group or in a certain geographical location. Codes differ in terms of the locality where it is practised and also in terms of the people who practice it. Therefore, violation or misuse of certain code may be considered as unsocial activity for a certain group of people while some other group may consider it as negligible incident. In Majuli, eve teasing is a rare phenomenon and passing any comment on a girl or woman is also considered offensive. In such a situation, using words like sexy is considered an offense and it leads to discomfort and deterioration of the situation as well as relationship. But in an Indian context, the word sexy is found to be frequently used in day-to-day conversation, socially accepted and interpreted as having no sexual connotation even by the apex body working for the rights of women in

¹⁴ Narayan Chandra Devagoswami expressed that he ‘remembered’ about a murder case reported in the *Satra*. He could not provide any details about the criminals or the parties associated with the case.

the nation¹⁵. Similarly using words like burha, burhi (old man/old lady) in an insulting manner is always criticised. Scolding someone by taking name of his/her caste, community or profession is also considered a social offense¹⁶. The concept of “Nepay” refers to those customs, beliefs or codes which are regarded socially, psychologically or economically harmful for the certain social setting.

4.2.2. Nature of issues- Within /Outside the Satra

Issues within a *Satra* can be discussed and resolved even in an informal gathering which may not be termed as *Mel* in the traditional manner. Sometimes conflict or misunderstanding occurs among the residents of the *Satra*. In such instances, *Satradhikar* checks the issue and tries to resolve providing amicable solutions. Amicable solutions here refer to appeal to repair the relationship by forgiving each other and promising publicly not to repeat the same. In this process, whoever moderates the discussion offers advices, cites examples of the outcomes of such issues and requests them not to commit the same in future. In this context, the moderator often insists on the importance of maintaining the symmetry of the institution. They often insist the point that the *Satra* is considered to be the ideal by the common mass and so a tiff within its own marks its failure to maintain its pride¹⁷.

Cases within the *Satra* are dealt in the *Satra* itself in the presence of the *Satradhikar* and the chiefs of the respective Bahas and the *Satradhikar* are present. They listen to each other and accordingly resolve. In case of minor conflicts, the resolution is done mutually even without the presence of the *Satradhikar*. *Satras* with large number of residents allow autonomy to the Hatis to resolve smaller issues within themselves. In such cases, the senior residents manage the issues. The senior *Bhakats* themselves solve

¹⁵The controversial comment of Mamta Sharma, the president of National Commission on Women on February ,2012 where she said that the word sexy should better be accepted as attractive or as a positive comment. These days, the word has frequent use in movies, tv discussions, print media and also in day-to-day conversations.

¹⁶ One senior resident of Dakhinpat Satra recounted how he was a part of a complaint where the complainant sought justice for being scolded by the offender as *kumar*- word literally means a potter, but often used in a derogatory manner while scolding someone from the particular profession.

¹⁷ During the interviews, respondents within the *Satra* are found to be very conscious of the identity and public image of the institution and expressed how they want to save the image by resolving the internal issues in an amicable manner. Here too, they always used the phrases -‘*amar anusthan*’ (our institution), ‘*sanman*’ (respect), ‘*nam*’ (the public image), ‘*raiagar astha*’ (the faith of the public on the institution) etc.

such issues. Talking about the intra-*Satra* conflict management, Dr.Pitambar Devagoswami of Auniati *Satra* said, “Hatis of a populous *Satra* enjoy autonomy and have a loose administrative system. In case of a serious crime, they can even publicly boycott the offender” (Devagoswami, 2002). One senior resident of Uttar Kamalabari *Satra* said that such disagreements or misapprehensions are often solved by the senior *Bhakats* in an informal gathering. In case of serious issues, the forum does take the shape of a *Mel*. *Satradhikar* of Bengenaati *Satra*, said, “In such serious situations, we conduct the *Mel* even for our own *Bhakats*”.¹⁸

In case of issues outside the *Satra*, the offender, victim, *Satradhikar* and the experienced senior *Bhakats* deal with the issue. Matters are initiated through criminal or civil complaints or petitions addressed to the respective *Satradhikars*. Then *Satradhikar* would discuss the matter with the officials of the *Satra* and would provide a date to discuss the issue. The person who coordinates the communication between *Satradhikar* and the public is known as *Byabasthapak*. Sometimes, *Satradhikars* can be approached directly. On request, others with a legitimate interest in the matter are also allowed to be engaged with the process. If the issue covers a larger public or two or more villages, representatives from each of the parties may also assist them. For instance, clash over the boundary between two villages or use of common natural resources may engage two or more parties. In this aspect *Satras* are found to be insisting on the issue of adequate representation.

Significantly, the vocabulary within the *Satra* is built on utter respect and is far away from using any derogatory terms. Here *Bhakats* use words like Rama or Krishna while responding to others, address the senior residents as *ata* (a respectful word for an old man) or “*deu*”, address the *Satradhikar* as *Prabhu Iswar, Prabhu, Adhikar* (courteous words synonymous to God) and mostly use passive voice to avoid direct confrontation. For addressing the devotees and the visitors, residents of the *Satras* always use the word *apuni, aponalok*- adjectives used in Assamese with respect to seniors and respected ones. Even within themselves, residents of the *Satra* hardly address by name. They either use honorific terms or address by the surnames. Use of such honorific titles and respectful

¹⁸ Opinion of Sri Sri Bhabananda Goswami, the present *Satradhikar* of Bengenaati *Satra*.

words reflect the societal etiquette that serves two purposes- an attempt to maintain a reverential atmosphere and to reduce the possibility of perceived indifference or inferiority in the minds of the visitors. “The rejection of first person adjectives (*moi*) and use of passive voice in conversation is a practice to dominate pride, boastfulness and control over selfishness” (Devagoswami, 2001). Residents of the *Satras* have their own alternative terms for common household activities – *Siddha* (to boil), *Bhojan* (to eat), *Saulmuthi* (rice), *Grahan* (to consume or to accept), *Anna* (meal), *Saul hijoa* (to cook), *Bahir fura* (toilet) etc. Sitting carelessly in front of the seniors, passing insulting comments, referring to one's caste or origin are totally avoided within the *Satra*. The social set up of the institution is built on mutual respect and informal but strictly followed codes of public behaviour. Smoking, drinking or consuming toxic things is strictly prohibited. So, in such a situation, the concept of conflict may include some issues or behavioural activities which may not be identified in the universally coded definition of conflict. While examining an issue, the social norms and values should be kept in mind and looked into carefully.

4.2.3. *Mel* - the forum to address the issues

The *Mel* or the *Bichar* is the public, democratic forum to deal with diverse conflicting issues. The Assamese word *Mel* means ‘to open up’ or an ‘open forum’. *Mel* refers to a public forum where an issue is discussed in presence of the respective people. Within the context of the Ahom reign, *Mel* referred to an abstract organizational arrangement where the sons, daughters, wives, relatives of the reigning king were conferred with autonomous power. Historians like Surya Kumar Bhuyan, Edward Gait referred to the existence of different *Mels* like *Charingiya Mel*, *Tipomiya Mel*, *Gabharu Mel*, *Dangariya Mel*, *Phukan Barua Mel* etc. The chief of such a *Mel* enjoyed the power to settle their disputes (Dutta, 1989). The *Mel* was a very fruitful public forum during the colonial days. Popularly known as *Raijmel* (meeting of the commons), was the instrument of the peasant uprising of Phulaguri and Patharughat against the colonial oppression.¹⁹

¹⁹ Popularly known as “Phulaguri Dhawa”, this assembly of people on October, 1861 was a heroic resistance of the peasants of Nowgong district against the tax on agricultural products. The *Raijmel* was attended by thousands of people which later became violent and led to the killing of a British official Lieutenant Singer and deaths of several peasants. In Patharughat in the Mangaldoi district, fifteen peasants

Raijmels were peoples' assembly where people assemble, discuss certain issues, take collective decisions under some leadership and decide the protest strategies. The *Raijmels* during the colonial reign were the most effective means to protest against the economic oppression of the colonial power, particularly against the increased rate of land revenue, tax on different agricultural products, ban on opium etc. On October 1861, thousands of people assembled in the *Raijmel* of Phulaguri, Nowgong, to protest against the oppressive economic policies like ban on opium cultivation and proposed tax on betel nuts and paan. Since then *Raijmel* had gained popularity as a "robust voice" of the public and one of the successful as means of establishing their rights (Guha, 1977). History of Assam has gone through the effectiveness of *Mel* in different social phases of the state- the national movement, the language movement of 1960s, the Assam movement of 1979 etc.

Raijmels of the colonial period were articulated versions of the traditional '*Mel*'. It was designed for the special purpose of awakening the political consciousness of the Assamese people against the colonial oppression. *Mel* in general refers to an assembly of a public to discuss any issue. The size of *Mel* varies according to the intensity of the issue. Issue concerning a particular village leads to organising a *Mel* of the villagers while an inter community issue may ask for an assembly of inhabitants of a larger area. Traditionally *Mels* were held in open, wide areas and it had minimal seating arrangement. Now-a-days, it has been replaced by public, communicable venues. Experienced, elderly persons are selected for conducting such assemblies. *Mel* in the context of Assam differs from formal meetings, seminars or symposia as it is comparatively informal and free from hard and fast procedural regulations. *Mels* are conducted on any public matter- whether it is about organising a function, celebration of a certain day or resolving a conflicting issue.

The role of the *Namghar* and *Satra* as the village court has already been recognised by the scholars. Since the inception of these institutions, conflicting issues of the village centred Assamese society have been processed in these institutions. "*Satras* and the *Namghars* have been playing the role of village courts for the Assamese people.

were killed by the British during a *Raijmel* protesting against the increased rate of land revenue on January, 1894.

Whenever any villager commits any moral offense or social crime or if there occurs any dispute between villagers, people examine the issue in the *Mel* by being assembled in the *Namghar* and offers punishment for the crime and rectification measures for immoral act. Both the offenders and the victims are compelled to accept the resolutions. Even during the reign of the Kings, the verdicts of the institutions were valid. The royal courts dealt only with the political issues” (Adhikari: 2014). In case of the *Satra*, such *Mels* consist of the *Satradhikar*, selected *Bhakats*, offenders, victims and family members of the respective families. The word *Bichar* is also used as it literally means the process of judiciary. The *Mels* convened for resolution of a conflict consists of the *Satradhikar*, selected residents of the *Satra*, representatives from the families of the offender and the victim. *Mels* can be convened only after submitting a written application/petition to the *Satradhikar* or such other officials of the *Satra*. After submitting the petition, one date is fixed for the discussion of the issue. In this discussion, both the parties are invited. From the *Satra*, the *Satradhikar*, expert personnel of the issue (depending upon the nature of the issue) within the institution are also invited in the discussion. Then the issue is discussed and resolutions are prescribed.

The issues coming to the *Satras* vary in their context and nature. Depending upon the issue, different personnel are engaged in this process. For instance, in a land dispute, persons having knowledge over the land measurement system or ownership history of the land are invited. The same persons may not be engaged in a marriage related issue. While asking about this procedure, the present *Satradhikar* of Dakhinpat *Satra* said, “We engage only those *Bhakats* who have expertise over the issue. Therefore, the persons engaged in a land issue may not be engaged in a marriage related issue. People do not have knowledge over all issues. We accept and respect this limitation”²⁰. Sometimes qualified and trained persons of the surroundings are also approached for advice. “We sometimes approach the trained people also for advice, but they are hardly engaged in this process.”²¹ Such persons include Lawyers, Mandal, Gaobura, Academicians, Forest

²⁰ Comment by Nani Gopal Devagoswami, the present chief of Dakhinpat *Satra*.

²¹ *ibid*

officials etc. For instance, while dealing with the incident of a fisherman, the Bishoya- the leaseholder of a fishing area, was approached for collecting information²².

The discussion in the *Mel* is run on democratic nature. Though the *Satradhikar* is the moderator of the entire session, everybody has his/her right and scope to express opinion and narrate the case. While narrating the case, anyone can ask any question. In this process, the *Satradhikar* always insists on maintaining peace and interfere whenever the situation turns to be hostile. After listening to the views, *Satradhikar* interprets the understating in his manner and seeks for a compatible solution. *Satradhikars* of all the *Satras* visited during the field study agreed to the point that they always emphasise on compatible solution. “We accept the fact that conflict is a natural phenomenon. But our duty is to resolve it compatibly. They come to us because they believe us worthy of judgment. So if we behave in a biased manner, things may become worse”.²³

4.3. Resolution Mechanisms.

Mechanisms of resolution of the conflict or antagonistic issues by the *Satras* are founded on the traditional values, contextual references and moral codes of conduct. The concept of customary law is not applicable in this context. Rather they are more dependent on customs, beliefs, set of social systems which has acquired legality due to their social validity, though not legitimacy. Since the time of inception, institutions like *Satras* and *Namghars* have been enjoying loyalty and respect of the public.

For issues related with land, the issue is first discussed in the *Mel* where both the parties are present and narrate the case. To support their side, the parties also have to submit relevant documents like the land patta, receipts of payment of land tax, ownership documents to support their claim. The details of the issue should be written in details which should contain the exact date or time, the nature of violation, the details of physical attack if occurred supported with medical proof. In such situation, neutral neighbours, whom we can consider as third party, may also be invited and asked for proof. After listening to all of them, the *Satradhikar* would come to a decision, would

²² *ibid*

²³ Opinion of Narayan Chandra Goswami, present *Satradhikar* of Natun Kamalabari Satra.

prescribe it in written, copies of which would be given to the parties. Such decision generally includes advices to solve the case mutually by offering an analysis of the history of ownership of the land and logical explanation of who should be the real owner. Narrations help the parties come to a revelation of root causes of their conflicts, acknowledgement of apologies for atrocities, and enumeration of bad experiences the parties acquired from the conflict. Such narrations, done in a public space such as the *Satra* or *Namghar*, “can lead to revelation, acknowledgement, apology and forgiveness” (Karbo and Mutisi, 2008).

While checking the original pattas and relevant documents, *Satras* can take help of experts on the issue. So Mandal or lawyers can be discussed for advice. *Bhakats*, who have adequate knowledge over the land measurement system, are discussed about the issue. The particular land is measured in front of both the parties and the real owner is identified. This entire process resembles to the modern Indian legal mechanisms. Whoever is found guilty, should confess his crime publicly in the *Namghar*, should offer a minimal monetary and material fine and promise not to repeat the crime. During the field study, the researcher found that such cases often end with emotional repentance and spontaneous public confession. Oath taking is also followed in cases of theft or robbery. Here the prime suspects have to take oath in the name of God or by keeping his hand on a holy scripture by sitting in the *Namghar*.²⁴

In case of minor social crimes, moral codes of conduct or customs are the guiding principles. For instance, in cases of misbehavior to parents or women, the offender is offered a moral lesson about the societal norms. The concept of “pay-nepay”-literally translated as should be or –should not are reminded to make him/her understand about the mistake. To quote the *Satradhikar* of Natun Kamalabari *Satra*,

“Cases of tiff with parents or other family members are judged on the basis of our traditional societal norms. We do not follow any legal codes in the modern sense of the term. Rather the offender is given lesson about the importance of parents in

²⁴ This practice involves making confession of innocence in the name of God by putting hand on holy texts like *Bhagawat*, *Kirtana*, *Namghosha* etc in front of the *Satradhikar* and other public.

their lives, the significance of family values and the possible impact of such activities in the society”²⁵.

Examples of Hindu scriptures and mythologies like the story of Harichandra, Shrivana Kumar, Lord Rama, Ajamil Upakhyan are frequently cited. Sometimes attempts are made to know about the actual context of the case which leads the offender to such behaviour. “We often find that in cases of parental or family discord, instant emotions work more than structural causes. In most of such cases, offenders become angry or violent not because he /she is a professional criminal, rather some immediate circumstances compel him/her to behave that way”²⁶. In such cases, during the time of the *Mel*, the offender regains his/her consciousness, often finds to be repentant and ready for rectification. So, healing lessons of values and norms and advices are enough to realise the mistake and to repair the torn fabric.

Cases of inter-caste, inter-religion or inter-community marriages engage a different approach. In such cases, the issue is brought to the *Satras* and the *Namghars* by the villagers and community members, not by respective household. So, such cases have a public face where insistence is put on the issues of public image, reputation and breakdown in the communal structure. Experiences of a group interview in Rawanapar village, where villagers dealt with a case of a Hindu boy of the village marrying a Muslim girl in the Dakhinpat *Satra*, make it clear that they consider it as anti-religious, anti-social and as sign of moral degradation and so harmful for the society. Most of the respondents bluntly express their uneasiness to cope up with such issues and repeatedly insist that it leads to lots of difficulties in running their religious and social activities. Therefore, they approach the *Satradhikar* for “bidhan”- solutions.

In such cases, *Satras* basically take help of prescriptions of Smritis and Shrutis. *Satras* like Dakhinpat, Auniati or Natun Kamalabari has one person known as Shrutikar. Shrutikar is one who examines the Shruti and Smriti and finds out the intensity of a case or conflict. He should be an expert in Sanskrit language. The person, who conducts this activity in Auniati *Satra*, is known as Bagish. “The Bagish Bhagawati of the Auniati

²⁵ Opinion of Narayan Chandra Devagoswami

²⁶ Information provided by Nandeshwar Bayan, Natun Kamalabari Satra

Satra has to provide the Smritimat. The *Satradhikar* provides the major resolutions and *Bagish* has to compile and execute it. In the absence of the *Bagish*, *Bhagawati* performs the task” (Devagoswami, 2001). In the absence of the *Bagish*, it is conducted by the *Bhagawati*. Tarun Chandra Sharma holds the present designation of *Bagish* of Auniati *Satra*. Sarma affirms, “I think 60% of people of the surrounding still believe in us. We frequently deal with social issues, especially problems out of marriage issues”²⁷. After the *Shrutikar* or *Bagish* offers the solution, it is written in a piece of paper and handed over to the parties with due signature of the *Satradhikar*.

Officials of the *Satra* refer to the Smritis and Shrutis as some ancient Sanskrit texts compiling moral and legal codes and rules²⁸. Shrutis in general refer to authoritative, ancient religious texts comprising the central canon of Hinduism which includes the four Vedas, the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, The Aranyakas and the Upanishads. Smriti literally means "that which is remembered," refers to a specific bunch of Hindu religious texts. The Smriti literature is a corpus of diverse varied texts which includes but not limited to the six Vedangas (the auxiliary sciences in the Vedas), the epics (the Mahabharata and Ramayana), the Dharmasutras and Dharmasastras (or Smritisasttras), the Arthasasttras, the Puranas, the Kavya or poetical literature, extensive Bhasyas (reviews and commentaries on Shrutis and non-Shrutis texts), and numerous Nibandhas (digests) covering politics, ethics (Nitisasttras), culture, arts and society, in addition to the ethical conduct of the wise, as sources of knowledge and through which sacred law can be known. It explains different rites, proper conduct, Dama (self-restraint), Ahimsa (non-violence), charity, self-study, work, realisation of Atman (Self, Soul). Levinson states that the role of Shrutis and Smritis in Hindu law is as a source of guidance, and its tradition cultivates the principle that "the facts and circumstances of any particular case determine what is good or bad" (Levinson, 2002).

Smritis or Shrutis offer the guiding principles in such cases. They prescribe the moral codes and norms that help maintaining the social equilibrium and social status.

²⁷ Opinion of Tarun Chandra Sarma, the present *Bagish* of Auniati *Satra*.

²⁸ Respectively informed by Dr. Pitambar Devagoswami, the present *Satradhikar* of Auniati *Satra*, Sarvanda Duawriya of Uttar Kamalabari *Satra*, Deva Dutta Goswami and Sri Sri Nanigopal Devagoswami, the present *Satradhikar* of Dakshinpat *Satra*.

They codify what is good or bad as well as the prescriptions to get rid of something that is bad or harmful. The word *bidhan* –refers to those prescriptions which punishes the guilty and lessens the intensity of crime. “Smritis or Shrutis do not offer the exact verdict of an offense; rather they define what is good, bad, socially harmful and immoral .We take help of the Shrutis or Smritis to identify the nature of the offense”.²⁹

Concrete resolution mechanisms are not extracted from Shrutis or Smritis. After confirming the intensity of the social impact of an issue, *Satradhikar* and their official hold discussion on it and try to make out a cordial solution. As inter religion marriage is a deep rooted taboo for the respective people, solutions hardly talk about inclusion. Rather provisions are offered for purification of the victim family so that they can be brought back to the society. Such purification process generally refers to donation, a public feast, organising a session of Nama. While enquiring about the Bidhan offered to such a case to a family of Mudoichuk village, under Bongaon Panchayat, the respective family informed that they had to organise a Nama and a public feast to get back to the society. Sometimes monetary fine is also imposed to them. But the main individuals, the boys and girls are publicly boycotted. Nani Gopal Devagoswami said, “ I consider it as a serious mistake as it leads to intense mental and social disturbances. We live in a certain locality and we traditionally consider such incidents socially injurious. People here are not ready to accept such things and such rejection cannot be overcome by arguments. So we better prescribe purification for a psychological satisfaction”. While asking about his personal opinion on inter-religion marriage, the *Satradhikar* simply denied commenting.

Experiences regarding inter-caste marriage present a different picture. It was found that while villagers try to project it as something immoral or unsocial, *Satradhikars* are found to be liberal, progressive and inclusive in such matters. Instead of considering such instances as socially harmful, they rather encourage the parents to be sympathetic to such issues. Resolution of such issues never deals with any religious or scriptural reference. Rather, *Satradhikars* believe in the changes of time and try to make people understand of such changes. “I think inter caste marriage should not be considered as a crime or an offense. I always explain to the parents that our own place is a place of

²⁹ *ibid*

different castes and communities. So reservation on inter-caste marriage is like showing dis respect to our own people”- commented Janardan Dev Goswami, the present *Satradhikar of Uttar Kamalabari Satra*. It was found in Garamur *Satra* that the *Satradhikar* himself appealed the people to come for suggestions regarding issues of marriage, but not to lodge as complaints.

Monetary punishment is also imposed in cases where the offenders are found to be guilty of illegal occupation of land, encroachment, theft, misbehavior with parents etc. *Satras* prescribe harsh mechanisms like public boycott or not allowing taking part in religious activities for persons found guilty of damaging public property, theft within the village, misbehaviour towards women. *Satras* order the villagers to avoid such persons for a certain period of time .If the intensity of the case is low and the offender is found to be repentant, then it is minimised to a minimal monetary fine .The offender has to publicly admit his/her crime and should apologise in front of everyone. Such public apology is done in the village *Namghar* in presence of the entire villagers. The offender offers the fixed amount of money with a betel nut and paan and places it in the central position of the *Namghar* and begs mercy by lying down on the ground. Then the present public announces that he/she is forgiven and takes the promise that he/she would not repeat the same. In most of the social crimes, this practice is found to be practiced frequently. The process of Eghariya Kara is found to be practised in many instances in many villages during the field visit. It was found that disrespect towards parents, verbal abuse, inter caste or inter religious marriage, damaging of public property (public gate, unauthorized use of common water resources, damaging *Namghar*, destroying community hall or auditorium etc) are the basic offences for which such punitive measures are prescribed.

While dealing with issues where two villages or two communities clash over resource related or social issues, *Satradhikars* always insist on repairing their relationship. Neither punishment nor strict resolution mechanism is prescribed in such cases. Rather, efforts are made to repair the relationship in a public, transparent and open manner. *Satradhikars* and the other representatives have good knowledge of these villages and many of the villagers are familiar to them. This familiarity with and

knowledge of the social, economic or cultural aspects of the villages help them to find out a more effective and practical solution. So, in such cases they better aim at retaining the social fabric and communal harmony. They are reminded of the relationship they shared in the past and also how they are interdependent. In this context two examples from the field can be cited. The first case is related with a clash of interest reported to Dakhinpat *Satra*. The second example is a conflicting issue out of sharing of a grazing site as reported to the same *Satra*.

The first incident was about the use of a public road that falls within two villages. The villagers of Dakhinpat Naoshali village verbally abused a group of fishermen of Dakhinpat Kaibarta village complaining that they have been deteriorating the condition of the road during the rainy season. This verbal attack led to a physical attack by the second group. When the clash of interest between Dakhinpat Naoshali village and Dakhinpat Kaibarta village³⁰ was reported, the *Satradhikar* of Dakhinpat *Satras* imply pointed that they had been using the same field and same public roads. There is no use of fighting over a public property nor can they sustain without using the properties. Quarreling over such Moreover he pointed that as the villagers of the Naoshali village are dependent on the Kaibarta village for fish and manual labourers, the latter one is also dependent on the former for rice, and firewood .Such practical issues make the parties realise the outcome of such clashes in a better way than going and waiting for a verdict of the court.

The second incident occurred between the villagers of Karhal Gaon village (no.1) and Karhal Gaon village (no.2)³¹ on the issue of sharing of a common grazing site .The conflict occurred during the post harvesting season when a herd of cows of the former village was attacked by a group of youths of the latter village .The incident led to a hostile situation between the two villages and the situation became worse when a group of youth came for direct attack from Karhal Gaon village (no.1). Though the situation was controlled by the villagers and the Village Development Committee, it was later

³⁰ The incident was narrated by Narayan Bora, the present *Kakati* of Dakhinpat *Satra*. *Kakati* is the person who keeps the record of such cases. Both the villages are under Dakhinpat Panchayat and they are the bordering villages of Dakhinpat *Satra*. The Sanskrit *tol* of Dakhinpat *Satra* is run in the Naoshali village.

³¹ This incident was also narrated by Narayan Bora, the present *Kakati* of Dakhinpat *Satra*. Both the villages fall under Dakhinpat Panchayat.

reported to the *Satra*. After listening to both the parties, the *Satradhikar* simply asked how many families shared marital relationship with the village. When it was found out that fourteen families are interrelated through marriage with the villages, *Satradhikar* again explained that it would have been nothing but attack on their own families as they are interrelated. Moreover, he warned that attack upon cow is a serious crime and imposed a fine of 500 rupees on the aggressors. Both the parties signed on written agreement of not committing such offenses in the future.

In caste issues or marriage related issues, efforts are always put to inclusive policies so that both parties are satisfied. In this process, *Satras* follow the recommendations from Shrutis- old Sanskrit written codes dealing with recommendation for social conflicts. In this process most of the offenders are temporarily dissocialized for a certain period. They are given lesser spaces than the others to realize and repent their violations, which basically end at self-criticism. Either they are not allowed to sit in the same row with others in public functions, basically in religious and social functions like funeral ceremony, wedding ceremony, cultural programmes etc. or are temporarily boycotted by the public. If the mistake is committed by someone enjoying any social designation (e.g. - priest, village chief, president, secretary or member of any organisation), he or she is demoted or suspended from that position.

In dealing with sensitive issues like eloping with relatives or cousins, sexual relationship with family members or rape, criminals are permanently boycotted from the villages and their entry to any public activity is restricted. Psychological consultancy and healing services are provided to the rape or other sexual crime victims through moral advices and engaging in recreational or vocational training which include training of dance or music. One respondent from Meragarh, who was a victim of sexual assault, was found to be an expert weaver after having the weaving training run by the women folk of the village. She was suggested to go for such training by a group of elderly villagers during the *Mel* held for the discussion of her case. The *Mel* entrusted a group of women the responsibility to train her. She has already been participating in various national and state level trade fair and exhibitions and is found to be economically sound. Assamese society considers intra-family marriage as a crime and *Satras* always try to create

awareness against such social wrong doings. Inter cousin marriage - consanguinity or sexual relationship with cousins or family members are considered as 'Agamyama Gaman'- something that is immoral and anti social. The mechanisms to deal with such issues are based on moral ideology, traditional value system and existing codes of social relationship. Such practices are considered against the norms of Nature and so referred as Agamyama- literally meaning visiting somewhere that is restricted. Such cases are treated with strong resentment and strictly prohibited to be encouraged. "We do not provide any code, but completely oppose such practices." Such oppositions also have scientific validity as one of the recent surveys on consanguineous marriages revealed that such wedlock could have a multiplicity of congenital problems.³² Heart problems top the list, followed by nervous disorders, limb anomalies and so forth. The report hence advocated for maintaining a genetic distance for a healthy generation. Though our systems do not talk about these scientific things, the rejection of consanguinity is really a healthy tradition.

But in cases of inter caste or inter community marriages, *Satras* offer repentant resolutions to realise the harm and grief caused to the family by his/her action. Sometimes parents of the boys or girls are also boycotted or fined to make them realise their mistakes in upbringing and controlling their children. Sometimes a public feast (*Bhoj*) or donations (*Dakhina*) are also prescribed. This prescription aims at repairing the torn relationship with the public.

The same process is followed in cases of ownership rights and resource distribution .Emphasis is always put on spontaneous confession .When there is the case of inter village clashes on resource distribution (generally about sharing of water resources. Public land, forest resources), representatives of both villages discuss the issue in the presence of the chief and senior residents of the institution. After listening to both of them, historical connection of utilisation of the resource are analysed and examined to reach out an amicable solution. References from holy texts and examples of moral or

³² Dr Eamonn Sheridan and associates from Leeds, U.K. published the report "Risk factors for congenital anomaly in a multiethnic birth cohort: an analysis of the Born in Bradford study" on the volume 382,19 October ,2013 issue of *The Lancet*. It was a study over 11,000 children, born out of consanguineous marriages in Bradford, U.K. For more details visit the website- www.thelancet.com.

religious stories are provided to emphasise the need of harmony and respect. As a resolution method, responsibility of forest or water resources is divided annually to each of the groups. While dealing with the fishing right over a Beel (large pond or water body where fishing is done commercially) between the villagers of two villages, Dakhinpat *Satra* of Majuli resolved the issue by granting the fishing right to each of the villages alternatively for six months of the year.

4.4. *Bharasha*- the counseling mechanism of the *Namghars*-

The Assamese word *Bharasha* claims two inter-related meanings- suggestions regarding certain topic and to depend on something or someone. The mechanism of *Bharasha* – available in the *Namghars* of the villages of Majuli, is found to borne out of the admixture of both the meanings.

Bharasha is an informal gathering in the *Namghar* to discuss a certain issue. It differs from the *Mel* as it does not deal with conflict or problem. Rather, *Bharasha* can be described as a counseling mechanism where villagers offer their suggestions before organising or conducting a social function. For example, when a family organises a marriage ceremony, the head of the family convenes a *Bharasha* session in the *Namghar* to discuss all the issues for successful conduct of the wedding. Everything related with the preparation- the number of guests to be invited, the menu of the food items, the pandal, transportation, reception of the guests –everything are discussed in the *Bharasha*. The particular family requests the people for their help and advices for conducting the marriages. In the *Bharasha*, special duties like the sitting arrangement, the f pandal, the cleansing of the venue, the hospitality of the guests are distributed among the villagers for smooth running of the ceremony.

Marriages or wedding ceremonies in Majuli and in most rural areas of the state are still organised collectively. Unlike the urban weddings, where it is conducted by the respective household in rented buildings, wedding ceremonies in the villages are organised in the household venue with local arrangements. So, it needs lots of physical activities, ranging from fixing the pandal to carrying of food items. So, in *Bharasha*, suggestions and helps are asked from the villagers to successfully complete the process.

Religious and cultural rituals (including *Sharai diya*, *Nam loa*, *Joron diya*, *Pani Tola*, *Sat Purushor Shradha*) to be performed in the wedding are discussed in concrete details and specific duties are assigned to the respective villagers.

Similarly, on the eve of organising the funeral rites, public feast or other cultural functions, *Bharasha* are organised to discuss the plan and to ask for the best suggestion and innovative ideas. Sometimes, clashes over social issues are also discussed in the *Bharasha* session. In the *Bharasha*, the host family is advised and provided with the best suggestions. People often draw out their own experiences and advice to follow or reject certain things which help saving time, money and other relevant expenditures of the family. Collective contribution in the form of materials like firewood, bamboo, tin, chairs and contribution in the form of physical help in fixing tent, chopping fuelwood, arranging chairs, serving the guest, preparing food items (tamol-paan, banana, fish, rice etc) are decided and informed to the respective family.

4.5. Cultural Activities of *Satra* and *Namghar* and Peacebuilding

Apart from the conflict or dispute resolution activities, institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* are engaged in numerous cultural activities. This bunch of culture, propounded and nurtured under the institutions is popularly known as Satriya culture. Though the title bears the word *Satra*, the cultural activities are not restricted to the *Satras* alone. The culture derives the title because it was originally developed and practiced in the *Satra*. The spread of the institutions and the growing number of *Namghars* spread the culture among the entire mass. Now-a-days, Satriya is the most representative Assamese culture. It has already transcended its national boundary and most of the countries of the world have tasted the fragrance of Satriya culture. Satriya culture is displayed in all major cultural platforms of the nation. Artists of Satriya culture have visited most of the countries of the world in different cultural functions. *Satras* of Majuli turn out to be workshops for endless artist from the nation and abroad. Hundreds of Satriya artists have

been awarded the prestigious awards like Sangeet Natak Akademy Award, Lalit Kala Akademy Awards, Tagore Akademy Award, Sankardeva Award to name a few³³.

Satriya culture basically denotes to –*Bhaona*, *Satriya* Music, *Satriya* Dance, and recital of a set of musical instruments. Along with dance, dramatic performances and music, mask making, wood carving, handicraft and painting also belongs to this beautiful bunch of culture. *Satras* of Majuli are living examples of traditional institutions with the rich heritage of *Satriya* culture. The different forms of *Satriya* culture has been discussed in one of the earlier chapters. In this chapter, attempts have been made to discover the role of the cultural activities of *Satra* and *Namghar* in the field of Peacebuilding.

All cultural activities under *Satriya* culture are collective by nature and grounded on team work. Whether it is about performance or organisation, *Satriya* culture cannot be conducted individually or within a small group. Without the collective effort, no one can organise a *Bhaona* or cannot perform a Gayan-Bayan. Similarly, *Satriya* cultural forms are never aimed for closed performances. Since the time of inception, cultural activities of the *Satras* and *Namghars* are held in public places for public entertainment. Though under the influence of modernity, these cultural activities are performed in halls or stage, still they maintain its public nature. Nowhere is it performed for specified audience or are they performed individually. Even a solo *Satriya* dance has also to be accompanied with instrumentalists, singers and narrator. The principles of collectivity and social solidarity are inherent in all these cultural activities which invisibly contribute to the harmony and peace of the village and the society.

4.5.1. *Bhaona*

Bhaona is the most popular and dynamic form of *Satriya* Culture. *Bhaona* is the dramatic enactment of Hindu scriptural or mythological stories accompanied with songs, music and dance. *Bhaona*, from its organizational stage to the stage of performance, contain elements of collective behaviour. The basic objective of *Bhaona* is to provide moral teachings and lessons of victory of goodness over evil. Stories adapted from

³³ Late Rasheswar Saikia Barbayan (Uttar Kamalabari Satra), Narayan Chandra Goswami (Natun Kamalabari Satra), Koshakanta Goswami, Hem Chandra Goswami (Natun Chamaguri Satra) Gopiram Bora Oja (Uttar Kamalabari Satra) are some of the award winning artists of the respective satras.

mythology and Hindu texts are enacted in *Bhaonas*. In all these stories, there is always the message of morality ranging from- victory of good over evil, value of loyalty and selfless devotion, the outcome of material greed, duty towards parents, duty towards teacher, commitment to relationships etc. Every Assamese, since their childhood achieves these moral lessons from *Bhaona* which helps immensely to mould those values in their own lives.

The traditional notions of morality of the Assamese society are very much influenced by the teachings of such dramatic performances. *Bhaonas* are specifically significant in this aspect as they do not need scholastic knowledge to understand their moral lessons. Accompanied with lucrative costumes, beautiful songs, musical notes and powerful dialogue, *Bhaonas* can easily attract the attention of the common mass. In contrast to the specially designed academic curriculum or crafted mechanisms of religion, *Bhaonas* disseminate the fundamentals of morality, harmony and peace in the grass root level without using any propagandistic mechanism. In the individual and inter-personal level, such popular mass media always plays very effective role in building the framework of peacefulness and ethics. Teaching morality is always a difficult task whereas it is very important as it helps individuals to distinguish the good and bad, develops the sense of justice and regulates one's behaviour. *Bhaonas* impart those difficult lessons to a large number of public in an easy and effortless manner. Every Assamese enjoy *Bhaona* in his/her village *Namghar*, takes part in the enactment and memorises the dialogue for a long time

Bhaona is not merely about acting and dialogue. The organisation/performance of a *Bhaona* requires huge preparatory activities where a large number of people are engaged with. *Bhaonas* are organised in *Namghars*, sometimes in an outward public venue. It need cleansing and decoration of the *Namghar*, seating arrangement, lighting, make-up, arrangement of music, arrangement of costumes and masks, reception of the spectators etc. The, all the villagers have to be engaged with the *Bhaona*. Villagers donate bamboo and wood for construction of the stage if it is organised outside a *Namghar*. People of the village are divided into different groups to look into the specific areas. Women are entrusted with the duty of cleansing the *Namghar* and serving light

refreshment. The youths of the village generally conduct the decoration and setting for the performance. Temporary gates are made by another group of youths. The rehearsal of the performance is held for almost one month in the *Namghar* premise. Popularly known as Akhara, rehearsals are conducted under the guidance and supervision of the seniors and the experts. Sometimes, youths of the village are provided the teachings of Gayan-Bayan along with the rehearsal. Children of the village assemble in the *Namghar* to watch the rehearsal which naturally turns out to be the first cultural lessons in their lives. On the particular day of *Bhaona*, all the villagers assemble in the *Namghar* in their traditional attire and offer a Sharai and take Nama. Women cleanse and wipe the *Namghar*. Children collect seating mats from the village households and arrange accordingly within the *Namghar*.

The performance section is also possible only with the united efforts of a group of people. As *Bhaonas* are dramatic performances with songs and dances, it needs a trained group of singers and instrumentalists. The instrumentalists and the troupe of singers is known as Gayan-Bayan, which is also a dance base performance. *Bhaona* is a night-long performance and they have to accompany the acting with their vocal and instrumental recital. Recorded music or songs are not used in *Bhaona* performance. Hence acting cannot be done singularly by the actors. The entire performance is tuned into a group performance and a single pause or fault may spoil the entire activity.

This description reflects how *Bhaonas* impart the lesson of co-operation and communal unity in the Assamese village. Not a single activity of a *Bhaona* can be done single handedly. It always needs the physical and intellectual labour to successfully organise a *Bhaona*. Since the day of first rehearsal, Assamese villages acquire a lively atmosphere. People meet, interact and co-operate each other's activity during this process. By assisting each other in a group activity, *Bhaonas* create an atmosphere of group activism. During the field visit, lots of respondents shared interesting experiences which reflect the unity factor of the phenomenon. Rupam Mudo, 27, of Bhuramora village recounted how he had regained his friendship with another village guy during a *Bhaona*. Rupam did not talk with one of the village guys since class nine due to some personal issues. But, in a *Bhaona* organised on 2011, he had to enact the role of the

general while the other guy acted as the king. There were lots of dialogues and dramatic moments where he and the King had to share the same space. So, up to the day of final performance, both the boys started talking with each other and now even they run a mobile repairing store in Pahumara Chariali on partnership basis³⁴. Similarly, another respondent of Senchoa village shared an interesting experience which too reflects the bonding element of *Bhaona*. In this incident the respective respondent, Mr. Saroj Das had to enact the role of Sutradhar. Saroj was not expert in dance as Sutradhar has to be an expert *Satriya* dancer. As rehearsals in the *Namghar* were not enough for Saroj, he requested one expert senior to teach him the dancing lessons at his home. A stern follower of castism, the senior was not ready to bring Saroj to his home as Saroj belongs to scheduled caste. But out of repeated requests by the villagers, he agreed and Saroj stated taking the lessons. While the researcher met Saroj, he was the successor of the dance school of the senior master as well as the son-in-law of his master's single daughter. "It was only the role of *Bhaona* that broke down the barrier between us. I turned out to be a good dancer which eased the other issues", Saroj said.³⁵

4.5.2. *Rashleela*

Rashleela is the dramatic enactment of the story of life and adventures of Lord Krishna, based upon mythology and holy texts. The festival falls in the full moon night of the autumn season which falls between October-November. *Rashleela* is a very popular festival of the island and it attracts thousands of visitors from different parts of the country and abroad. *Rashleela* is basically celebrated in the *Satras*. It is also organised commercially in auditoriums or stages by different organisations and clubs. The history of Stage *Rashleela* is almost sixty years old. The stage performances of *Rashleela* of Banshigopal Natya Mandir (Garamur), Ranghar, (Bongaon), Milan Sangha, (Kamalabari), Rupali Yuvak Sangha (Kamar gaon), Sankardev Kristi Sangha (Garamur)

³⁴ Rupam Mudoj and Bikash Bhuya, two youths from Bhuramara village run Devaki Mobile repairing store in Pahumara Chariali since 2013. Rupam was interviewed during the field visit after coming to know about the interesting incident, shared by another villager. The interview was conducted on 23rd January, 2014.

³⁵ Saroj Das,³⁵ is the principal of Nrityashali, a training school of Satriya dance in Rawanapar. He is a resident of Senchoa village. He permitted the researcher to publish his story during the field visit conducted on 12th January, 2014.

are famous for their artistic quality in the entire state.³⁶ All these stage performances produce famous actors who have been working in the film, television and mobile theatre industries of Assam.

Unlike the commercial stage performances, *Rashleela* in the *Satras* is a public festival. Apart from the religious or spiritual significance, *Rashleela* for common people is a celebration of brotherhood and communal unity under the auspicious supervision of the *Satra*. The festival is celebrated for two or three days. In *Satras* like Auniati, Bengenaati, Natun Chamaguri it is celebrated for two days. *Rashleela* is celebrated for three days with all the rituals in Dakhinpat *Satra*. It has the oldest tradition of *Rashleela* among the *Satras* of Majuli. Garamur *Satra* has also the tradition of stage performance in the stage situated near the *Satra*” (Devagoswami, 2001).

Satras are just the patrons of the festival of *Rashleela*. It is a festival of common public. During the days of the festival, thousands of people visit the *Satras*. It is a free accessible event and people of all castes and communities visit the *Satra* premises to enjoy. Outside the *Satras*, there grow up temporary stalls of different stationery items and people purchase and sell different products. People from different parts mix up in such fairs, exchange their goods as well as make friendship. To conduct the smooth functioning of the festival, duties are assigned among the residents as well as the villagers of the nearby villages. *Satras* simply work as the coordinating institution while respective duties are performed by the villagers of the nearby villages. As, it is a huge public function, it needs lots of preparatory arrangements which include cleansing and decoration, construction of temporary infrastructural arrangements like urinals, dining hall, guest houses, preparation of food items for reception, firewood for cooking, large number of seating mats etc. Therefore, there grew up a large workforce with villagers of all the villages. During this time people forget their intra-village or personal clashes and work as a team which helps smoothing the social fabric.

Sri Sri Nanigopal Devagoswami, the present *Satradhikar* of Dakhinpat *Satra*, narrated the history of communal engagement of the *Satra* with the nearby villages

³⁶ Information about these stage performances are collected from various persons associated with the organisations like Bongaon Ranghar, Majuli Milan Sangha, Ratanpur Nabajyoti Yuvak Sangha etc.

during the festival. He said that the nearby villages of the *Satra* have their own assigned duties which have been traditionally followed by them. According to this tradition, villagers of Naoshali village cleanse the *Namghar* and the *Satra* during the festival time. They also decorate the *Satra* by fixing Chandratap and Gamocha in the *Namghar*. Villagers of Afalamukh Mishing village have been traditionally providing firewood for the entire festival. Reception of the guests is conducted by the villagers of Dakhinpat Kalita gaon. They also provide rice powder (*pithaguri*) for preparing Mithoi- a special sweet served to the guests. The villagers of Dakhinpat Kumar village provide the earthen lamps to use during the festival.³⁷ The villagers expressed that it has been a long tradition and they do not charge for it .During the Rashleela, the Kaibarta communities of surrounding villages of Bhogpur *Satra* perform Gayan-Bayan. Youths of all the surrounding villages take part in the enactment of *Rashleela* in Bhogpur *Satra*. Cleansing of the festival venue before and after the *Rashleela* is conducted by the villagers of Perabhari, Patiyori and Natun Chamaguri in Natun Chamaguri *Satra*, situated in the Eastern part of the island.

There is no particular way to imbibe peace. Building peace is possible only after building the foundation of peace after nurturing the attached necessary values. Festivals like Rashleela silently perform this task of creating the foundation by strengthening the relationship between different castes and communities since the sixteenth century. Such festivals help breaking the impasses of communal or caste differences. Initiatives of the *Satra* can be compared to capacity building programmes in an informal sense. By engaging the communities, villages and people of different status and professions, such festivals create an atmosphere of collective unity where everyone forgets their specific distinctiveness and work more as a responsible member of a public institution. This transformative capacity of such festivals help the institutions to retain their uniqueness even in the twentieth century .Secondly the system of distributive responsibility and the freedom to perform those duties without interference from the patron organisation, help developing a sense of commitment and obligation. In this sense, *Satras* are found to be successful psychologists who aim at creating a set of socially responsible citizen. A

³⁷ Information gathered during field visit to Dakhinpat *Satra* and the adjacent Dakhinpat Kumar village.

committed and responsible citizen is one of the important catalysts of peace and harmony. Usage of a religious festival for synchronization of merriment, peace and unity is an exceptional initiative in the field of peacebuilding. They are unique peacebuilders in another sense that they never enforce any law nor do they call for certain behavioural conditions. Rather, just by using the power of social capital, which they have been spontaneously enjoying and nurturing for a long time, these institutions bind the people and the surrounding under a broad umbrella of common love and brotherhood.

4.5.3. Other Festivals

Chanting the Nama- the holy songs attributed to the Supreme power, by a group or by more groups for a certain period is simply known as *Palnam*. The Assamese word *pal* refers to group or turn. Under this specific form of chanting Nama, one group or groups of people systematically take the name of God for a certain period of time. As a religiously inspired cultural activity, *Palnam* is practiced in the daily prasangas of the *Satras*. But *Palnam* as a religious festival is organised once in year in the *Satras*. Though it is not common to all, most of the *Satras* of Majuli organise *Palnam* as a festival. Among them, *Palnam* of Auniati *Satra* is organised for five days in a year and it has turned out to be one of the popular festivals. Sometimes, *Palnam* is organised in the *Namghars* also. Though it is organised by a certain village, anyone can attend the *Palnam*. In case of *Palnam* organised in a village *Namghar*, it turns out to be the occasion for relatives, cousins or friends to visit their respective relatives in the villages. Villagers of the nearby villages offer *Sharai*, participate in the group chanting and enjoy the *Bhaona*. Thus, *Palnam* in a village *Namghar* is also an event made successful by the presence and co-operation of the surrounding villages. Respondents in the field pointed that whenever a *Palnam* is organised in their respective villages, surrounding villages also help in different means – by preparing *Khol* for serving of food, donating material products like bamboo and firewood, taking part in the *Bhaona*, providing mat and carpet for seating arrangement etc. All the nearby villages are invited for the *Palnam*. Villagers, especially the youths offer physical help in the form of cleansing the premises, helping in the construction of temporary tents, serving food items, accompanying musical instruments in the dramatic performances etc. *Palnam* in a village *Namghar* of Majuli is

possible only with the help of the surrounding villages. Thus, *Palnam* in a village *Namghar* is also a collective event. The elements of interdependence and sharing of resources help strengthening the bond among the villagers. Experiences of the field suggest that, such events often help healing misunderstanding between villages over old issues. Sometimes, during the *Palnam*, conflicting parties publicly apologise their guilt in the *Namghar* premise and ask for forgiveness. Here too the same process is followed-offering of Tamol paan, public confession of the misunderstanding, public appeal for apology and settlement of the issue. Discussion over this issue reveals that people believe that the celestial environment borne out of the chanting of Nama and assembly of public may influence the psychology of the offenders to admit their transgression and to repent. This public facet of the settlement mechanisms reveals the trust and popularity of the traditional institution.

Apart from its religious functions, the festival of *Palnam* has been deepening the relationship among the different communities as well as strengthening the relationship of the common mass with the institution. In the *Palnam* festival of Auniati *Satra*, villagers of the surrounding villages play very vital role. Duties are distributed among the villages and they accordingly perform the assignments. *Palnam* of Auniati *Satra* engages the Mishing community to participate in the festival and they have always been entrusted the duty of reception and decoration. Surrounding villages like Jugunidhari, Bartani and Lahiyal are integrally associated with all the activities of this *Satra*. Being under the influence of the *Satras*, all the surrounding villages of the island have acquired very strong cultural atmosphere with most of the children having expertise over cultural activities.

The festivals or the functions patronized by the *Satras* and *Namghars* claim their specificity in the fact that they transcend their archetypal religious character and attain a more public face. So, such festivals attract a large number of people who may not be stern follower of Vaishnavism. Rather it turns out to be a public event to meet, interact, share .This element of reciprocity illuminates the meaning and significance of these festivals and they work more like a bridge to connect among people. Officials of the *Satras* under field study expressed that number of visitors exceed lakhs during such

festival days, especially during festivals of Rashleela and *Palnam*. In recent times, different cultural promotional activities like *Bhaona* Samaroh also attract large number of audiences. The visitors include people of all classes, castes, communities and creeds.

The festival of Fakua or Phalgustav- Holi is also celebrated in most of the *Satras*. This Festival also opens up a horizon of cooperation and exchange of brotherhood. The Meshdah Griha³⁸ (place of putting sacrifice) - the central hall of the festival, of Dakhinpat *Satra* is built by the Kaibarta people of the nearby Kaibarta village. They also cleanse the entire compound of the *Satra* when the festival is over. The recital of Dhol by the Mishing community and Gayan Bayan of Kaibarta community is a regular feature of the Fakua festival of Bhogpur *Satra*. The “Akashbanti Prajwalan” (lighting of earthen lamps in the sky) is a major part of the celebration of the festival of Kati Bihu. Under this festival, earthen lams are hung in the sky in small baskets from pole tops made of bamboo. Auniati *Satra* celebrates this activity with grandeur where villagers of the nearby villages are immensely contributing for its successful celebration. The Kaibarta community of Alimur village prepares the Khola –Khestra- the venue where the festival is celebrated. The holes for fixing the bamboo poles are dug by the villagers of Birinabari village. The Kaibarta community of Kakoikata village cleanses and decorates the venue. Bar Alengi *Satra* organises all its major festivals with the active engagement of its surrounding villages- Chilakala (Kaibarta community), Natun Chapori and Purana Chapari (Mishing community).

Bihu – the state festival of Assam is also celebrated with much grandeur in the *Satras*. Within the *Satra*, traditional games are organised along with the regular sessions of *Nam-Prasanga*. People of Majuli visit to their nearby *Satras* on the occasion of Bihu and pray for their well being. Taking blessings from the *Satradhikars* on the very first day of Bohag Bihu- the first day of Assamese New year is a common practice among the people of the island. People often offer Sharai praying for the well being of the family to the *Satras* visit to the *Satra* in the very first day of the New Year is considered to be a serene duty for every resident of the island. Even married daughters, relatives also try to

³⁸ In Garamur *Satra*, a goat is put in a small cottage and is put to fire to the extent of burning a few of its hair as a symbolic worshipping activity. This temporary cottage is known as *Meshdah Griha*.

visit the *Satra* on this day .People irrespective of caste, community or class visit *Satra* on the occasion of the new year and take blessings from the *Satradhikar*. During the Magh Bihu – the Bihu celebrated in the middle of the month of January- Akashbanti Prajwalan is a popular ritual in Auniati *Satra*. In this ritual, numbers of earthen lamps are put on bamboo sticks and they are lighted by praying for the good health and well being of the public. In this activity, villagers of all the surrounding villages take part with vigour and joy. This ritual is performed with same joviality in other *Satras* like Dakhinpat, Oua, Beleshidhiya, Garamur etc.

Festivals thus turn out to be platforms of brotherhood and solidarity. Though Festivals are organised in the *Satra* premise, people from any part can come, sit and enjoy these functions. Such festivals provide a chance to meet new people, share new ideas, and derive new information and create relationships. In context of Majuli, festivals organised in *Satras* have a very important role as it provides a platform to bridge the gap between different communities. Otherwise communities residing in the island, especially the Mishings have often complained of indifference of the other communities. The society of Majuli is composed of both caste and tribe which also determine the social hierarchy. In such situations, such festivals help eliminating such structural discrimination and reinforcing the tattered relationship. The popular concept of Bridging capital can be used in this context. Bridging capital is what brings together people or groups who did not previously know each other with the goal of establishing new social ties to provide new information, access additional social networks, and fill the “structural holes” in the system of networks in the community (Burt, 1992). Woolcock (1998) also referred to linking capital, or the ties between people in communities and their local organizations. So, the aforementioned festivals do bridge and act as bridging capitals in the context of Majuli. Due to the difficulties of communication, transportation, geographical remoteness, the Island does not have scope of regular and varied cultural or social functions. It does not even have a full fledged movie theatre or a sports pavilion. *Satra* based festivals are the major sources of entertainment, interaction and assimilation for these people.

4.6. *Satra* and other Social issues

In this part a brief attempt has been made to examine the contributions of the *Satra* institution of Majuli in other social issues – particularly in the fields of education and health. The issues have been discussed within the arena of peacebuilding with the conviction that the concept of peace is integrally associated with the aforementioned issues. The emerging area of nontraditional or human security considers education and health to be the primary areas to be securitized. The task of peacebuilding should, first and foremost, be to eliminate the mindset that compelled people to distrust and question their socio-political and psychological environment. Self-sustaining peace means not just the cessation of hostilities, which has already been achieved, but the strengthening and reassertion of normative structures that enable individuals to share common identities, understandings, and expectations that enhance a social order that eliminates exploitation, corruption, and all forms of existential insecurity (Morgan, 2005). Efforts for development of the status of education and health measures have been identified as major agendas of achieving human security.

The educational scenario of the Majuli Island is integrally related with the *Satra* institution. During the pre independence period *Satras* were the only places of education for the people of Majuli. During those days, *Satras* used to impart education on Sanskrit, morality and religious issues through their in-house. In spite of the pathetic transportation and communication system, erstwhile *Satradhikars* used to invite scholars from different parts of the state to impart education to the inmates and the village kids of the surrounding areas. During the days of Hem Chandradevagoswami (1926-1983), one expert of Sanskrit and Grammar was appointed in the *Tol*. Garamur and Dakhinpat *Satra* too followed the tradition of appointing Sanskrit scholars in their respective *Satras* (Nath, 2009). *Tols* were common to all the *Satras* like Bhogpur *Satra*, Natun Kamalabari *Satra*, Elengi *Satra*, Garamur *Satra*, Dakhinpat *Satra*, Bengenaati *Satra* etc (Thakur, 2001).

Thus education in the island of Majuli was the tradition initiated by the *Satras*. This developmental strategy took a new shape after the introduction of the formal education system during the British rule. Though *Satras* belong to traditional institutions,

Satras of Majuli appeared to be very progressive and supportive in the issue of education which stated reflecting in their support in establishing educational institutions, especially in the form of primary, high and higher secondary schools. *Satradhikars* of different *Satras* of Majuli played the pioneering role in establishment of schools in the island. During the field visit, the researcher came through hundreds of schools established under the patronage of *Satradhikars* of different *Satras*. Similarly, large numbers of schools were established with support in the form of land grant and financial assistance from the *Satras*. To understand the contributions of the *Satras* in the field of educational development, here is provided the names of some of the schools established under the patronage, financial assistance and land grant of different *Satras*. These schools include- Auniati M.V.School, Auniati High School, Majuli Auniati Hemchandra High school, Garamur Pitambardeva High School, Pitambardeva Girls High School, Garamur Pitambardeva Junior College, Sriram Banamalideva High School, Meragarh Narayandeva Higher Secondary school, Bhabakanta Devagoswami High School, Ramakanta Deva Goswami High School, Beengenaati *Satra* Middle English School, Chamaguri *Satra* Rawanapar Higher Secondary school to name a few.³⁹ Hundreds of educational institutions are built on the land granted by the *Satras*. Similarly almost all the schools of Majuli received financial assistance from the *Satras* during the initial stage of their establishment.

Support towards the field of education is also reflected in other activities which include felicitation of rank holder in different state examinations, award and scholarship to highest mark holders in different subjects (Sri Sri Govinda Gold Medal to the highest mark holder in the subject of Sanskrit in H.S.L.C examination by Auniati *Satra*, Krishna Chandra Devagoswami Award to the highest mark holders of Majuli sub-division in the streams of Arts, Science and Commerce in the Assam State Higher Secondary examination by Garamur *Satra* etc), establishment of music and dance academy, financial assistance to brilliant students of poor families, monetary grant to establishment of science laboratory etc. The newly started Adhyatmic College by Auniati *Satra* is a unique effort to provide spiritual education along with traditional courses to the youths

³⁹ Information gathered from respective *Satras* during the field visit.

by Auniati *Satra*. Dakhinpat *Satra* too initiated a series of workshop on spiritual education through its newly formed youth enterprise Adhyatmic Yuva Sanmilan (AYUS). A group of artists from Natun Chamaguri *Satra* has been instrumental in popularising and educating the vanishing art of mask making throughout the world.

These initiatives clearly prove that the *Satras* of Majuli try to come out of their religious identity and to contribute to the development of the place and the people in a holistic way. Education is the most effective tool to know and establish ones rights, to foster the message of solidarity and to curb misunderstanding. It makes men reasonable, compassionate and tolerant. From all these perspectives, role of education in building a culture of peace is inevitable. The emerging concept of emancipatory peace or in other terms ontology of peace is built on the accurate and efficient atmosphere of education (Richmond, 2010). In the longer term education provides values and norms which help transforming relationships. Education is deeply implicated in processes of socialization and identity formation, which have direct relevance for state building, economic growth and the development of social cohesion. On the other hand, education can undermine all these processes and, therefore, we need to ensure it is delivered effectively and equitably and is a driver of peace rather than war (Novelli and Smith, 2011). From this angle, the contributions of the *Satras* of Majuli are really appreciable in the area of building peace.

Satras of Majuli have also been contributing a lot in the field of health security and health care facilities. *Satras* are known for their cleanliness and hygienic practices. Every *Satra* of Majuli presents a clean, hygienic, serene environment. This concern for hygiene and health is also reflected in their efforts to introduce health security measures for the people of the island. Pitambardeva Goswami, one of the *Satradhikars* of Garamur *Satra* raised his strong voice against the opium consumption habit and governmental patronage of opium cultivation even in the third decade of the twentieth century. In his letter to the British officials, Pitambardeva Goswami advocated for instant abolition of opium cultivation and for legal measures against opium eaters.⁴⁰ The hospital in Kamalabari was possible only because of the pressure from the erstwhile *Satradhikar* of

⁴⁰ Contribution of Pitambardeva Goswami in different social sectors has been well documented in different books, news paper articles, documentary and radio talks. This information is a specific summative statement from some of these sources.

Kamalabari *Satra*. The hundred bedded Garamur Civil Hospital is established on the land donated by the Garamur *Satra*. The Veterinary hospital of Garamur is also set on the land granted by the *Satra*. The primary health centre of Bongaon was possible only for the patronage and financial assistance of Late Narayanchandra Devagoswami of Dakhinpat *Satra*. It is the only health care institution for the larger public of the Bongaon region. Since 2009, free ambulance service during the days of flood and other natural calamity has been provided by the present *Satradhikar* of Uttar Kamalabari *Satra* Janardan Devagoswami. He has also organised many free eye check up camps for the local people. *Satradhikar* of Natun Kamalabari *Satra* has also been organising free medical camps for the poor people of the locality. Oua *Satra* has been maintaining the tradition of Ayurveda within its own campus. Kamaldeva Mahanta, one of the late *Satradhikars* of Bihimpur *Satra* too helped large number of people with his traditional medicinal knowledge.⁴¹ Thus *Satras* of Majuli is able to attract respect and loyalty by their relentless efforts to strengthen the health security scenario of his rural island.

Human security is the situation/condition of being free of injury/threats to an individual's, groups, or community's well-being, including freedom from threats and/or direct attacks on physical and psychological integrity. To ensure such security involves the understanding of, or elimination of human security located at the structural, institutional, and personal (individual) levels of society. Proper measures of education, health care systems, transparent wage payments are some institutional sources to ensure human security. Peacebuilding with a view to alleviating human insecurity involves transforming the social and political environment that fosters intolerable inequality, engenders historical grievances, and nurtures adversarial interactions. This may mean the development of social, political, and economic infrastructures that produce tolerable inequality and/or prevent future violence (ibid, 2005). This understanding of the relationship between human security and peacebuilding is well supported by the initiatives of the institution of *Satra*. Their effort towards strengthening the human security determinants of education and health in a remote area like Majuli is a hardly

⁴¹ All these information are collected from different officials of the respective *Satras* during the visits to the *Satras*.

discussed but significant aspect to be counted in their role in the practices of building peace.

Satras, in different times have been raising their strong voices in crucial issues of broad social significance. Among them, they have been putting great effort in pressurizing the respective governments for the protection of the Majuli Island from flood and erosion, creating public awareness to include Majuli in the list of World Heritage Sites under UNESCO by various performing activities, organising public meeting and requesting respective authority to take legal actions against witchcraft practices and rhino poaching, for granting of tourism packages to the island etc. This social responsibility and active participation in issues of development ,security and peaceful co-existence help acquiring the institution a worthy status of genuine facilitator of building peace.

CHAPTER 5

Rediscovering Traditional Peacebuilding Methods of *Satras* and *Namghars*

5.1. Introduction

This chapter is an analytical understanding of the role of the *Satras* and *Namghars* in peacebuilding. The chapter is based on the analysis of the previous chapters. On the basis of the previous discussion, this chapter tries to analyse the following issues-

- What do the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* perceive about peace and peacebuilding?
- What do the institutions perceive about conflict and conflict resolutions?
- What are the major characteristics of the mechanisms of the institutions?
- How does the field support these understanding?
- What are the limitations experienced about the institutions in their role of as peacebuilders?
- What is the final assessment of the role of *Satras* and *Namghars* in the field of Peacebuilding?

Traditional institutions and their role of peacebuilding is an emerging concept in the field of academics. Peace, by virtue of being a multidimensional term, includes everything related with initiatives to bring peace. So, though there are abundance of terms like conflict management, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, peacemaking, peacekeeping or peacebuilding, all in general share their commonality in their basic objective- peace. Discussion on the role of traditional institutions and their methods (of conflict resolution, peacebuilding, conflict management, dispute settlement, healing practices etc) is a new entry in this broad initiative for peace. The subject enjoys its scholastic popularity by offering a new alternative towards building peace.¹ While it enjoys its popularity for its “sustainability, independence from expensive and artificial additives in the form of external peace support interventions, and originating locally”

¹ Large number of literature is available on the traditional /indigenous/ aboriginal methods of conflict resolutions of the African countries. The popularity of Alternative Dispute Resolution also contributes the increasing importance of the agenda of traditional methods of addressing conflict.

(Ginty, 2010), it also suffers from skepticism of being “a mere romanticisation” (Ibid, 2010) of old, bygone practices.

The present research was undertaken by accepting both the potentialities and limitations of the traditional institutions. *Satras* and *Namghars* are the best examples of traditional institutions with a history of six hundred years. A general description of the institution often represents them as religious institutions dedicated to the nurture and dissemination of a certain sect of religious philosophy. But in reality, the institutions have their deeper role as peacebuilders, though not as a specifically designed institutional mechanism for building peace. Rather, in spite of retaining their religious character, the institutions have attained new identities as “village court, village theatre...village parliament or the village court” (Neog, 1980) and been contributing in the field of building peace with their own way.

5.2. Peace and Peacebuilding: perceived by the Institutions:

On the basis of the previous discussion, the idea of peace as perceived by the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* can be defined as - Peace is a state of social tranquility where individuals, under their collective identity, enjoy a secured and harmonious existence to develop their creative capacities. This definition clarifies the basic points- that peace as perceived by the institutions put equal importance on its personal and social expression, peace is related with the collective identity of an individual, peace is synonymous with security, peace prevails in a harmonious society and peace is the catalyst to creative and cultural development of the individual as well as of the society. Here we equate the perception of peace with the idea of positive peace which denotes the simultaneous presence of many desirable states of mind and society, such as harmony, justice, equity, etc (Webel, 2007).

With the help of this definition it can be argued that these institutions perceive peace in a wider and positive way. While philosophically it calls for inner peace through servitude and simplicity, its socio-cultural practices call for justice, equity, brotherhood and social harmony. The relentless efforts to provide justice by their culturally intuited mechanisms stand for the fact that the *Satras* and *Namghars* consider justice as the basic

condition to peace. Peace cannot be brought by articulated set of mechanisms. Rather it needs the spontaneous, collective and constructive efforts of the entire people. The importance of *Raij* (the common mass) in every aspect of the activities of the *Satra* and *Namghar* proves the fact that peace can be initiated only by collective efforts. So, institutions of judiciary or administration should be supported by the people to enjoy a just, peaceful existence. Lastly, peace is viewed as an important prerequisite to develop the creative and cultural capacities of human beings. The concept of culture, as perceived by the institutions, is not limited to entertainment. Culture is viewed as the expression of the creative self of the individual which can be nurtured in a tranquil social environment. It gets practically reflected in the successful utilisation of cultural elements for promoting peace and harmony.

Perception of peace complements the perception of peacebuilding. Both the institutions opt for collective effort for resolution of conflict, transformation of relationship and creating condition for peace. It is noteworthy that as peace, as perceived by the institution, refers to more about social harmony; peacebuilding is also possible only when every member of the society cooperates with it. Peace "...does not just happen. It is built when people take great care in their decision-making to plan for the long term" (Schrach, 2004). So, the institutions never practice isolated, fixed set of methods to peace. Mechanisms of peace of the institutions are integrated social approaches as,

"The task of peacebuilding should, first and foremost, be to eliminate the mindset that compelled people to distrust and question their socio-political and psychological environment. The emphasis should be on combating the structural and cultural sources of insecurity-harmful actions and results linked to new modes of thinking and cognition on society at large"(Morgan, 2005).

Earlier discussion illustrates that the institutions do not have any fixed, written set of laws to practices conflict resolution. They don't even have strong support of customary laws, which are very much available with the tribal traditional institutions. It is only by mutual trust, co-operation and respect towards the local context, peace can be initiated.

Secondly, peacebuilding is not perceived as a mechanical, framed activity by a group of individual trainers. Skills are necessary but it does not mean that responsibility to bring peace is entrusted only upon a certain bunch of qualified people. If peace is desired by all, peacebuilding should also be contributed by all. Here analogy can be established with the very first words of the constitution of United Nations- “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed”. Therefore, whenever a conflict resolved in the *Namghar*, not only the offender, but the entire assembly is requested not to repeat the crime and to assist each other in creating peace in the village. The cathartic effect is the specialty of the peace initiative of the institutional mechanisms. Peace research that has emerged in the last several decades also makes it ever more obvious that there are "tasks for everybody" in developing a “culture of peace” (Alger, 2007).

These institutions conceptualise peacebuilding as an ever running social mission. Here their understanding differs from the popular projection of peacebuilding as a post-conflict or post-war activity. While peacebuilding is defined everywhere as post-conflict activity, these institutions perceive it as continuous socio-cultural processes where everybody can contribute. Peace accords merely do not create peace. Rather peacebuilding is more than post accord reconstruction. Here, peacebuilding is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. The term thus involves a wide range of activities and functions that both precede and follow formal peace initiatives (Lederach, 1997). Even in case of a post conflict peacebuilding initiative, emphasis on the material values lead to failure. It is because material and ideational (norms, values, mores, etc.) factors are deeply interconnected. So where,

“...peacebuilding efforts overemphasize the political (with its power centered focus) at the expense of normative integrity of individuals, groups, and communities; they may not flourish in war-torn countries in need of holistic security. Since the widely shared inter subjective beliefs (especially deep-seated psychological/moral values) in a war-torn country are often destroyed by violence

and inter-communal bloodletting, the purpose of reintegration and rehabilitation should be, for instance, to reemphasize collectively held ideas of mutual support and sharing, the centrality of the extended family, respect for elders, recognition of customs and taboos, among others” (Morgan, 2005).

Incorporation of culture in peacebuilding initiatives is another aspect of their perception towards peacebuilding. Their concept of culture encompasses both the interpretations of culture- culture as the collective representation of a society and also culture as the bunch of aesthetic and artistic activities. The road to inclusive social and economic development, environmental sustainability, peace and security is firmly grounded *in* culture, understood in its spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional dimensions and encompassing diverse value systems, traditions and beliefs. Culture informs and influences people’s relation to sustainable development, conflicts, and reconciliation in a distinct, but direct manner. It determines and creates paths for lasting conflict-resolution and healing.² The institutions also believe that aesthetic activities bear certain elements supportive of peace and so they should be encouraged to include within the paradigm of peacebuilding. Art and culture can heal wounds, transform sufferings, and connect people without any favour and obligation and transforms relationship. Both the institutions have numerous examples of cultural activities bearing elements of peacebuilding.

5.3. Conflict Resolution and Transformation of Conflict: perceived by the institutions-

Institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* accept the existence of conflict and believe in its constructive resolution. Regarding conflict, on the basis of the issues discussed, they tend to look it as inevitable but disturbing element against social solidarity. The issues as experienced by the researcher are minor in nature and better deserve the term local disputes. The intensity of conflict, as experienced by the institutions, is limited to issues of breakdown of codes and norms. But, the institutions consider all of them seriously and try to resolve it with same intensity.

²For more details see the Background note on *Peace and Reconciliation: How Culture Makes the Difference* of UNESCO, 2013, prepared by Ann-Belinda Preis and Christina Stanca Mustea.

Conflict is viewed from a social angle, as a divisive factor of social relationship and result of subjective incompatibility to cope up with the scarce resource. The institutions believe that each conflict is socially constructed and so their resolution should also be based on social methods. In this process, discussion, examination and counseling are adopted to make the adversaries known about their limitations as,

“Members of each side in a conflict tend to develop a shared view of who they are and who is their opponent and what issues are in contention. However, no one of them can unilaterally define the conflict of the other. Members of each adversarial side in a conflict strive to construct their own identity and the identity of the enemy; disagreements about that tend to be contentious. Members of each adversarial party conceive what issues are at stake and how the antagonists are endangering or hampering the realization of their hopes” (Kriesberg, 2015).

They often dismiss the element of intention while examining a conflict and project conflicting behaviour as outcome of sudden excitement or emotion. Social and psychological contexts are considered to be the root cause behind any conflict. Understanding of conflict as a product of structural violence is almost absent in these institutions. The institutions never deal with issues of human security health hazards, poverty or food security, armed conflict, hostile war, and ethnic matters. Conflict in the institutions is available only in the form of negative outcome of immediate cause.

Conflict is seen more as violation of certain norms than intentional behavioural expression. Understanding of conflict is limited to immoral and unsocial activities as per the social norms, minimal violent activities and violation of codes and norms. The personal and the structural are considered supplementary to each other and it formulates the view that conflict in the personal level is also influential in the structural level. Identity or existence of an individual is closely linked with the society he/she belongs to. Therefore one is complementary to the other.

The perception of resolution of conflict is interlinked with the perception of conflict itself. The basis characteristic of resolution is the restorative principles of justice. Insistence of *Satras* and *Namghars* on restorative justice can be linked to the the

religious and spiritual origin of the institutions, the relationship they share with the individuals, the low intensity of violence or physical damage etc. While dealing with conflict, the institutions emphasise more on the social damage and so on the repairing of those social damage. In this aspect, the institutions are found to be influenced by the principles of mechanical solidarity .Mechanical solidarity is the solidarity of resemblance. It is based upon a homogeneity of values and behaviour, strong social constraint and loyalty to tradition and kinship (Durkheim, 1893).Though the issue of kinship is absent in this context, otherwise the institutions are influenced by the collective commonality.

Specificity of the conflict resolution process reflects in the matter of use of cultural/artistic activities to provide lessons of morality and ethics. In principles, these mechanisms bear characteristics more of conflict transformation than of resolution. Efforts are made to restore relationships and repair the harm. Mechanisms of ex-communication or demotion of social position may superficially seem to be punitive, but in reality are attempts to bring someone back with repentance, realisation and commitment.

Resolution needs knowledge, negotiator with strong leadership quality and organizational, skills. Here, the institutions share their commonality with modern concept of skilled, trained mediator or negotiator.*Satradhikars* or the village elders are experienced, skilled leaders with a strong hold over the social, political, cultural aspects of the structure. The role of third party in dealing with a conflicting issue is supported by the institutions. The third party is one with less directly at stake. The third party has something at stake (reputation or professionalism),but will not be affected by the allocation of resources, the exercise of power, the determination of new rules or the other types of outcomes.(Laue,1987). The role played by the villagers or the *Satradhikar* reminds the concept of facilitative third party who guide structuring interaction among adversaries, control the structure of exchanges among participants and strive for a type of process advocacy rather than advocating for particular parties or outcomes (Brigg, 2008).

The previous discussion proves that the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* follow the conflict transformation practices more than the resolution practices. The approaches

of both of the institutions try to change perception about conflict, create a willingness to solve an issue cooperatively, renounce violence completely, follow the rules of fairplay, stick to the approaches based on discussion and communication, introduce a third party with skills in dialogue which are considered to be the basic principles of Conflict Transformation (Schilling, 2012). It is felt that in context of these institutions principles of Conflict Resolution (CR) and Conflict Transformation (CT) walk hand in hand.

5.4. Characteristics of the resolution/transformation mechanisms of the institutions

Mechanisms of many traditional institutions are found to be useful in modern legal, conflict resolution and transformation processes. Their usefulness lays in the fact that, inspite of being ancient institutions; their mechanisms contain elements of modernity and universality. Moreover they are flexible and are open to changes. It would be wrong to interpret the traditional realm as unchangeable and static. It is far from that. Custom is in a constant flux. It changes over time (albeit slowly) and adapts to new circumstances, exposed to external influences (Boege, 2011). So, these traditions should not be identified as mere old practices, they are flexible, contemporary and are of great value to all of them who are dealing with conflict and helping others to deal with conflict. Traditional mechanism is not merely a matter of reverting to ancient traditions; it is the collective storehouse of a society's comprehensive perception towards the world. So their knowledge and practices offer a more realistic and alternative paradigm to look into the social issues. This understanding justifies the emerging demand for the development of new homegrown practices in which the best current practices and attuned traditions are integrated. Hence academicians opine that in the light of contemporary nature of conflicts, it may be expected that the incorporation of current practices and compatible traditions may result in new, successful, sustainable, local and indigenous methods of peacebuilding.

Mechanisms practiced by the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* are also endowed with distinctive characteristics which help the historical institutions to maintain their grandeur even in the twentieth century. *Satras* and *Namghars* still act as the guardian of the social life of Assam and as the soul of the social philosophy of the race. In proper terms, they were the catalysts of social reorganization of the state and they still perform

the role with the same dignity. Here are some of the major characteristics of the resolution mechanisms adopted by the institutions. These characteristics help understanding the trends, principles and philosophy of the institutions on their way to address conflict and envisage peace.

5.4.1. Recognition of local perspectives

A successful model of peacebuilding prioritises the capacity of recognition of local perspectives and context. “Peacebuilders need to know what the conflict is about .who is affected or involved in the conflict, what needs to stop, what divides and connects people ,and what fosters vulnerability to conflict. The more peacebuilders know about a context, the more likely they will be successful in contributing to peace” (Schirch:2004).Context here refers to the local situations and perspectives borne out of the locally prevailing social, political, economic or cultural norms and values which mould the cause, outcome and understanding of an issue. Without the understanding of these determinants, examination and evaluation of the issue becomes partial, so difficult.

The institutions of *Satras* and *Namghars* are very much concerned about the local socio-cultural context of the issue as well as of the mechanisms .Being specifically rooted to the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people, the institutions have adequate understanding of the needs and the means to fulfil those needs. Whether it the nature of the spatial arrangement for the discussion of an issue or the punitive measures, all are designed as per the local norms. The mel system is a traditionally popular and comfortable spatial arrangement as it provides a familiar, fearless and open forum to interact. All the communities residing in the island have been practicing the tradition of mel. So speaking in an open forum, in the presence of the experienced people, is a viable manner of communication. Secondly, the traditionally practised codes of morality and justice are what designed for the resolution devices. Methods opted by the institutions are grounded on the local ideas of the true, the good, the right, the beautiful and the sacred that have been internalized in people. So instead of taking a stern opposition against inter-caste or inter-religion marriages, resolutions are designed in such a way which at the same time proves it socially wrong but also as phenomenon that can be included after a ritualistic ceremony. So, after the *dan*, *bhoj*, *udharani*, *prayachitta* or *shuddhi* offenders

are welcome back to the social circle. Even being within the boundary of culture, these institutions carry out modernity as running against culture or structure may become very painful; running with them may be very pleasant (Galtung, 2007).

Secondly, they always keep in mind the economic condition and hence impose minimal monetary fine. Fines in the form of locally available products (agricultural products, food items, organising a small feast) are imposed so that it does not cost large amount of money. Officials of the *Satra* said that the monetary fine hardly exceeds thousand rupees. In some cases, *Namghars* impose fine in the form of rice, bananas, sugar cane etc. In a case of illegally occupying another's cultivable land, the offender was punished in the form that he would have to plough a certain number of the victim's paddy fields as a sign of repentance and self-realisation. The concepts of temporary public boycott, demotion of social designation, decreased public space shows the flexibility of the mechanisms as the social relation can be restored after assuring not to repeat the mistake. The moral, social and cultural ethos are always remembered on the backdrop of the decisions taken.

The aspect of local perspective is also reflected in the fact that the peacebuilding processes of *Satras* and *Namghars* often rely on locally derived resources. These may be items with a high material or symbolic value. *Namghar* –the institution itself is considered as a symbolic entity of morality and justice where there is no place of lies and deception. The *Sinhasana* and the *Manikut* acquire a symbolic significance as the place of supreme power who always takes side of the truth and rejects the liars. This emblematic nature of the institutions helps solving the matters in a local boundary. Example can also be cited of *Tamol-Paan* (betel nut and paan). In Assamese society, *Tamol-paan* has acquired such symbolic and material importance, that its value cannot be compared with huge monetary amount. Offenders after confessing his/her offenses appeal mercy just by offering a *tamol-paan*. The public is also satisfied by getting the *tamol-paan*. The concept of *Sharai diya* –where the offenders have to organise a session of *Nama* with food items belongs to this local context. The guilt and the misdeeds are perceived to be forgiven by pleasing God and the people with locally available resources. These practices resemble with traditional practices of certain communities which also place a high material or

symbolic value (e.g. green stones in the case of Maoris or cattle in the case of some African pastoralists) or simply items that are close to hand (e.g. leaves from vegetation) on local phenomena.

5.4.2. Communication based approach-

Peace becomes possible where open communication is there. Communication remains a critical tool in any form of negotiation. “Good negotiators apply skills of active listening, paraphrasing and summarizing to encourage back and forth communication. Through reasoned arguments, a party stands a better chance of addressing the underlying interests behind a problem. Listening skills also play a vital role in negotiation. Nothing promotes a dialogue better than for the other side to know that they have been heard and understood. Similarly, non-verbal communication plays a vital role in negotiation. The ability to appreciate and interpret the several ways in which we communicate through our behaviour is a critical skill”. Though open communication cannot alone create peace, it does open up the way for peace. The United Nations declaration and programme of action on Culture of Peace recognises, “*that* peace not only is the absence of conflict, but also requires a positive, dynamic participatory process where dialogue is encouraged and conflicts are solved in a spirit of mutual understanding and cooperation.”³ Hence, communication based approach is considered to be one of the most appropriate approaches towards building peace. Communication helps knowing each other properly and to discover new insights into an issue which may not be revealed in closed interactions. Trust is developed by bringing the parties into direct contact with each other in forums that encourage dialogue, discussion and ultimately negotiation. The negotiation process therefore should be viewed as a trust-building activity that taps into the deeply rooted needs of the parties and elicits empathic responses in the way they view the needs of their negotiating partners (Reychler, 2001).

A communication based approach also helps in changing the perceptions and attitudes. Because much of human conflict is anchored in conflicting perceptions and in misperception, negotiation processes must be directed at changing the perceptions,

³ This particular declaration was adapted by United Nations General Assembly on October 6, 1999. For more details see 53/243.Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace.

attitudes, values and behaviours of the parties to their conflict (Kriesberg, 1992, 1997). Communication helps to understand the nature, level and intensity of these aspects and works as a catalyst to build up a more comfortable coordination. There is always a difference of level of behavioural and attitudinal functions in the immediate moment of the conflict and aftermath. Moreover, according to the situational context and surrounding environment, people undergo changes in their responses to an issue. So without communication, one cannot understand these new developments which affect by fixing a certain notion towards the issue. But as communication initiates, new developments are noticed and perceived which helps creating peace easier.

In this context, *Satras* and *Namghars* are found to be expert communicators. The communication process of these institutions can be categorically divided into the following steps-

- (a) exploring shared interests;
- (b) identifying differences;
- (c) identifying objectives of both parties;
- (d) creating solutions which meet the parties' needs; and
- (e) expanding the options available to the parties.

Leaving the parties to open communication under the monitoring of a worthy moderator, these institutions exactly follow the communication based approaches to peace. As mentioned in the chapter 4, *Satradhikar* of Dakhinpat *Satra* once commented how open communication lessened his work as the parties themselves were ready to mutually resolve the issue. In cases of minor theft, misbehaviour to women, sibling enmity, communications are found to be very fruitful to wipe out misperceptions. Through communication mutual understanding is increased which helps in finding common ground among longtime enemies. Assumptions or prejudices are examined and reduced leading to a new understanding of the relationship (Reychler, 2001).

An open communication not only develops trust, it also helps diminishing the negative power of harmful elements like rumour, slander, grapevine information etc. In a rural setting, rumours play a very significant role in deepening a conflicting issue. Though rumour is often overlooked in the study of peace, conflict and violence, it does have a considerable power to escalate or de-escalate conflict. Gossips and rumours often add new colour and twist which often lead to more aggression. In the context of the present study, rumours and gossip are found to be very influential in issues related with inter-caste, inter-religion marriage, domestic violence, sibling rivalry and cases of sexual misconduct. In these issues, rumours often build animosity and thus function as a barometer of the tensions. It often results in short-term outbursts. In cases of inter-caste and inter-religion marriages, rumours are found to leading towards incidents of physical violence like stabbing, burning houses, damaging rice storage etc. So, an open communication is very much necessary to control the negative impact of such destructive structural forces.

5.4.3. Respect to human dignity-

First and foremost, conflict resolution mechanisms of the *Satra* and *Namghar* inherit the implication of Gandhian concept of self-realization as individuals are by birth good and pure. This dignity of human beings is respected by the decisions of *Satra* which helps rectifying the wrong things and coming back with a new responsibility. While the “Culture of Peace” (UN Resolution A/RES/62/13) prompted assurance of equality, participation, communication and free flow of information in 1999, the *Satras* have been practicing these principles since centuries ago. Providing full justice to the faith and loyalty of the common mass, *Satras* also offer compatible, viable mutual solutions to the problems. The researcher’s observation and personal interaction with different villagers find that most of the solutions aim at self-realization, self-criticism and a minimal punishment which never crosses beyond their capacity.

Resolutions mechanisms of the *Satra* and *Namghar* are founded on the concept of *Bhul* (mistake), not *Dosh* (crime). All the persons interviewed and interacted throughout the field work were found to use words like *bhul* (mistake), *agyani* (ignorant), *abujan* (immature), *uttejana* (temporary excitement), *abate joa* (astray) etc while talking about

the issue. Use of these words clarify that conflict or disagreement is viewed as something byproduct of immediate excitement like anger, resentment, sorrows, pain, etc. Instead of considering an offense as an intended, planned activity or the offender as a professional, cold-blooded, in born criminal, matters are considered as temporal error committed in a careless moment. In conflict situations, parties usually become violent due to lack of control over their emotions. In general, according to Jeong (2010), 'violent conflict may be inescapable in human (parties') relationships due to unconscious motivations alone or in combination with competition for limited supplies of basic necessities'. Therefore, this belief on the purity of human nature and the possibility of bringing them back to the normalcy helps both the offender and victim to ease their harm.

Peacebuilding is what makes everybody within the group feel self confident, positive and empowered. The concept of security should encompass everybody; it is not only about the victim. Rather, punishing someone after making him/her secured is a more effective means of resolution of an issue as it helps the offender to realise the stage of the victim has to cross through due to his/her offense. When the offender is able to transform himself/herself to the mental stage of the victim, he/she automatically starts repenting and returning to the normal life.

Discussion on the mechanisms of the *Satra* clearly indicates that their respect towards human dignity works very effectively. *Satradhikars* never use derogatory terms even while interrogating a thief or an abusive husband. Examples are cited from different sources to exemplify the value of human life, dignity, love, forgiveness etc⁴. Sessions in a *Satra* are comparable to psychological consultancy sessions where attempts are made to realise their individual dignity and analogical references of the victims. In *Namghars*, offenders are repeatedly reminded about their importance in the family life and in the village activities. This activity works in a reactive manner by making the offender felt his/her importance and how he/she is to lose that importance if he/she repeats the same.

⁴ Dr.Pitambar Devagoswami, the present Satradhikar of Auniati Satra said that mythologies, scriptures or religious books attain their universality because of their eternal lessons on humanity and peace. So, a healing lesson of an offender is more fruitful when it is enriched with selected portions of a familiar story interpreted in a new manner

In spite of not being professionally trained peace builders, mediators are endowed with those skills as they have proper understanding of the surroundings. The word “skills” here refer to the capacity to show respect to the democratic ideology, human rights issues, economic viability and inclusive participation-the pillars of a proper conflict resolution process.

5.4.4 Active Listening

Listening is essential for establishing rapport with the parties, for making a good diagnosis, and for generating a more effective transformation of conflicts. The ability to listen carefully enables us to seek the truth in any interaction. It helps people to overcome their fear of change. Not only verbal communication but body language also serves as an indicator of what the parties are thinking and feeling (Reychler, 2001).

The uniqueness of the practices of *Satras* lies in the tradition of listening to the offender patiently. The concept of Mel in the *Namghar* or the *Satra* is founded on the art of good listening. In all such public forums, both the parties are listened patiently and carefully by everybody present in the forum. The grave environment and the ubiquitous spirituality of the institutions contribute in maintaining a good listening environment. In the Mels, when someone is speaking, no one is allowed to interfere. Questions are asked only after someone completes his/her conversation. The moderator interferes if someone tries making noise. Even tea is also served only after the process is over.

It helps understanding the compulsion, frustration and aggression – all the situational contexts which leads to the conflict. Resolution of conflict and building peace always make plea for proper understanding of the underlying causes of conflict and it helps an effective resolution mechanism. To develop trust and co-operation between the parties, to improve communication and to assure all the relevant parties that their perspectives will be heard, are primary features of peace building (Horowitz, 2006). The processes of dealing with conflict of *Satras* and *Namghar* obviously carry all these principles. A good number of respondents also agree to the point that in the mels held in *Namghars* or *Satras* they get “fearless, familiar and comfortable” environment to express their words. It is also felt that the personality of the *Satradhikars*, senior Bhakats and the

presence of the elderly people create a sober environment where even telling a lie also becomes difficult. It is difficult to say whether it is fear or some psychological transformation, but the entire atmosphere helps generating an atmosphere conducive to spontaneous expression and good listening

Listening to the offender and the victim actively, helps examining and evaluating an issue in an objective and open-ended manner. Listening attentively to someone encourages the speaker to express his/her entire part. Secondly, after listening properly, audience can paraphrase and restate the important points which helps introspecting the issue and to arrive at a logical conclusion. A good listener can validate the worth of the speaker, can pin point his/her doubts, put valid questions to assure something. Such activities save the matter from being distracted and the discussion thus remains centred. All these help build up a good relationship among the group.

5.4.5. Collective Wisdom

Collective wisdom can be defined as the knowledge nurtured and shared by the individuals by virtue of their membership of a certain group. The culture of the certain group determines what is wrong, what is good, what should be opted for rectification of the wrong doer and how peace should be perceived. Being a member of the collective, individuals also practice certain behaviour. When the authority in charge of resolution of the particular issue, knows about the basic cultural norms of the group, it becomes easier for them to approach the issue.

The traditional institutions depend on “the existence of a community of relationships and values to which they can refer and that provide the context for their operations. Relationships are a precondition for the effective operation of the modes of conflict management” (Zartman: 2000) or – to be more precise – relationships that are rooted in a common view of the world and a shared acknowledgement of customary institutions. So while discussing conflict or visualizing peace, such institutions are basically influenced by the we factor- as reflected through collective wisdom.

Mechanisms opted by *Satras* and *Namghars* put importance on collective wisdom for social reconstruction and stability. Fundamentally, the principal advantage stemming

from traditional and indigenous approaches to peacebuilding lies in its culturally intuitive nature. In theory, such approaches are able to connect with ‘cultural memory banks’ and conform to popularly held and accepted norms and expectations. They have low start-up costs in that they do not require extensive explanation and the importation of expensive outside expertise or material resources. Instead, their efficacy and legitimacy lies in a near-automatic public understanding and acceptance (Ginty, 2010).

Use of collective wisdom are best utilised by the *Satras* and *Namghars* in their dealing with religious issues. The provisions of *Eghariya kara*, *bad diya*, *purification rituals* are developed on the norms determined by collective wisdom. Here, it is the group that determines the production system of knowledge.

Another perspective of collective wisdom is evident in the sense of the historical knowledge about the surrounding and the resources .While dealing with issues of resource distribution and ownership, an analytical framework based on the historical sharing of the entities is very important. In this sense, collective wisdom provides the missing link. Communities, particularly the elders of the villages and the senior residents are storehouses of information of such entities. The engagements of *Burha bhakats* (the senior bhakats of the *Satra*) in all the decision making processes signifies this aspect. “All our *Burha bhakats* are senior to us .They know the surrounding and the resources earlier and better than us”- Dr.Pitambar Devagoswami of Auniati *Satra* commented⁵.Koshakanta Devagoswami, the present *Satradhikar* of Natun Chamaguri *Satra* too echoed the same thing when said, “Our *Burha bhakats* are the treasure houses of knowledge, skills, causes and outcomes. So, in most instances, I am dependent on them.The are well aware of family history of most of the villagers of the nearby villages. They also know many old handicraft and medicinal techniques”⁶. He specially mentioned of the issues of caste based clashes and disputes over community land where their knowledge plays a determining role. In context of *Namghars*, the seniors are often requested to recount their experiences in analogical matters before drafting the final

⁵ Opinion expressed during field visit.

⁶ Opinion expressed during field visit.

resolution. Matters over public land, natural resources and their use, determination of the real owner of certain properties are resolved in presence of larger public.

5.4.6. Village elders, *Satradhikar* and the concept of leadership

Activities of the *Namghar* are basically controlled by the elderly villagers. Though all the villagers are members of the *Namghar*, the senior villagers take more responsibility in conducting the social, religious and cultural activities of the institutions. The executive committee helps the elders in material arrangement. In the *Satra*, *Satradhikar* is the central figure and the other members work under his supervision. All the matters of the *Satra* are reported to him and all decisions are approved by him.

Similar to the other traditional institutions of different parts of the, seniors or the elders are considered to be the storehouse of traditional knowledge in Assamese society. It is not the age, but their experiences and knowledge gained through experience, that helps the seniors acquiring the frontal position. The range of knowledge covers their knowledge over customs, beliefs, causes and possible outcome of certain issues, religion, mythology, agricultural practices, natural disasters, ecology etc. These elements are what make culture and in this sense, these seniors have strong knowledge of culture. In matters of conflict resolution, they work as the mediators, facilitators, negotiators, peace makers. In social and cultural activities, they work as onlookers, teachers, demonstrator, examiners and judge.

The concept of leadership while applying to a *Satradhikar* is different from the general understanding of leadership. *Satradhikars* are leaders of an institution which is primarily religious in objectives and social by nature. There are four methods of selection of a *Satradhikar*- selection of the successor by the existing *Satradhikar*, on the basis of seniority, on the basis of heredity and democratic method of election (Devagoswami, 2001) .*Satradhikars* are supposed to be persons of broad social outlook, capable of handling any situation accurately and of patience and tolerance. They are well versed in Sanskrit, have good hold over reading and interpretation of religious, mythological and spiritual literature, expert communicators, successful mediators and brilliant teachers. Being religious preacher and the Guru, they have been enjoying a social status hardly

questioned by the public. In Majuli, *Satradhikars* have been able to enhance their position by their active contribution in larger social issues like participation in different social movements including the national movement of India, spread of education in the island, protection of the island from flood and erosion, infrastructural development of health facilities, awareness activities about the need of protection of the distinct geo-cultural identity of Majuli in different national and international platforms. It saves the *Satradhikars* from becoming typical religious leaders and helps emerging as representatives of the expectations of the islanders.

The characteristics derived from common understanding of traditional leadership differ in case of leaders of these two institutions. Firstly, there is no hierarchy even though the villagers or the *Satradhikar* enjoys priority in the processes. In spite of accepting their role in a gathering, every single member has his/her space to enjoy and right to express. Economic or political status is never counted for their social status. The concept of chieftaincy or king or ruler, primarily evident in the literature on African traditional institutions, is completely absent in these institutions. Unlike the leaders of these settings “bound together by ties of kinship, marriage and Patronage” (Beal, Jo and Mduduzi Ngonyama, 2009), leaders of *Namghars* and *Satra* are bound together by common consensus, urgency of harmony and efforts for overall development of the society. Moreover, the village elderly in context of a *Namghar* or a *Satradhikar* in case of a *Satra* do not represent any certain clan, community or caste. Unlike the traditional leaders of African countries or North-Eastern states of India, they are leaders of the Assamese people of the respective locality; irrespective of the caste, clan and community they belong to.

5.4.7. Restorative justice

The emphasis is on restorative justice, which is presented as the genuine traditional form of justice. “Restorative justice is not a new method in our societies. It is what our ancestors used for thousands of years to resolve minor and major disputes, up until colonial times” (Tombot,2003). Under the common worldview, crime of any sort is considered as a harm that should be repaired in a unified way, as a harm of one is the harm of all. The life runs on a web of relationship and any harm or wrongdoing damage

the cyclical path. So it is an obligation to amend the relationship and in this process all of the cycle- the victim, offender and the community should be engaged in. Restorative justice views crime first of all as harm done to people and communities. The traditional legal system, with its focus on rules and laws, is concerned primarily with making sure offenders get what they deserve, the legal system considers victims at best a secondary concern of justice. A harm focus, on the contrary, implies an inherent concern for victims' needs and roles (Howard and Gohar, 2003).

Restorative justice refers to a process for resolving crime by insisting on redressing the harm done to the victims, holding offenders accountable for their offenses and, often also, engaging the community in the resolution process of the conflict. Participation of the parties is a vital part of the process that emphasises relationship building, reconciliation and the development of agreements around a desired outcome between both the parties. Through such participatory and open justice processes the victim, the offender and the community regains some control over the process. Restorative justice is based on the belief that parties to a conflict ought to be actively involved in resolving it and mitigating its negative consequences. Restorative justice programmes are based on the fundamental principle that criminal behaviour not only violates the law, but also injures victims and the community. Any efforts to address the consequences of criminal behaviour should, where possible, involve the offender as well as these injured parties, while also providing help and support that the victim and offender require (Handbook on Restorative justice programme, 2006).

Not the punishment of offenders, but the restoration of social harmony within and between communities and the restoration of relationships between the communities of offenders and victims are seen as the main aims of the justice system. Restorative justice assumes that justice can and should promote healing, both individual and societal. Restorative justice *processes* typically emphasise the participative involvement of victim and offender, and sometimes the community, in a facilitated encounter. The *goals* of restorative justice include promoting empathy, repairing harm and reintegrating offenders. The *values* of restorative justice centre on key oppositions between restorative

and retributive justice. Restorative justice is said to possess values of healing, non-coercion love, caring and democratic participation (Andrew and R.S, 2008).

Mechanisms adopted by the *Satras* and *Namghars* always follow this concept of restorative justice. They try to restore the degraded social relationship by identifying and repairing the harm by involving all the stakeholders in the process. *Raij*- the collective people is associated with all issues. In the Mels, offenders are tried to make understand the harm they have done, accept and carry out their obligations, instead of accusing them as rule breakers. Punitive measures like *Eghariya Kara, Athu Lowa, Shram dan*, feeding the public, open confessions are tactics to make the offenders realise that his/her wrongdoings downgrade him/her from the previous social position. It makes the offender realise the obligations to be carried out in the future. These peacebuilding mechanisms have all the four basic characteristics of restorative justice- Encounter, Amend, Reintegration and Inclusion. Even the ex-offenders (who previously committed the same mistake) are also included to build just peace.

5.4.8. Mechanisms intuited with culture

In dealing with conflicts, *Satras* and *Namghars* are found to be conscious of and truthful to the perceptions of the individual or the group of goals and resources. In the process of perception, culture is a very influential determinant. Culture can be defined as “the socially inherited ,shared and learned ways of living possessed by individuals in virtue of their membership in social groups” (Avruch, 2009). Being the member of a particular culture, individuals or groups inherit certain norms and codes which he/they consider to be true and representative of the collective identity. Lederach, while defining the change goals of conflict transformation stressed on “to identify and understand the cultural patterns that contribute to the rise of violent expressions of conflict” (Lederach, 2003). In many instances, violence (though in a minimal sense) is also justified under the cultural patterns. Here, pattern stands for the set of cultural norm that construct the ideological foundation of life. Hence their understanding of an issue and the means to deal with the issue is guided by such cultural constructions. Violation of such norms, which may not be crime in the formal legal and constitutional jurisdiction, turns out to be crime or offense for the group. The cultural construction is so deep rooted and influential

that people tend to be guided by them. So, resolutions in accordance with such cultural norms best suit the issue.

In dealing with issues of marriage related or religious confusions, *Satras* and *Namghars* are found to be committed to the cultural codes. It seems that *Satras* and *Namghars* respect the view that understanding of a conflict or discord depends upon the socio-cultural context of the issue. Moreover, culture has two dimensions- generic and local. The generic dimension directs attention to universal attributes of human behaviour and human nature. But the local dimension refers to meanings (encoded in symbols, schemas and other cognitive representations), created, shared and transmitted (socially reproduced and inherited) by individuals in certain social groups (Avruch, 2009). Conflict over religious, ritualistic or marital issues acquires best understanding when studied from the local dimensions. *Satras* and *Namghars* are found to be aware of this fact as they examine the issues by placing them within the local cultural framework. So, though inter religion marriages should not be opposed in the modern period, they consider it as unsocial and destructive. Significantly, *Satradhikars* never said that it is immoral or unnatural. Rather, their prescriptions of purification contain an underlying sense of inclusion. It proves that instead of opposing sternly, these institutions rather aimed at inclusion, but according to the cultural norms.

Discussion of the approaches of the institutions towards conflict proves that *Satras* and *Namghars* consider restoration of order and relationship as the basic condition for a peaceful existence. It does not necessarily mean “the return to the status quo, but implies some sort of transition to new arrangement (Boege, 2011). Peace is not considered as a commodity under certain framework. Rather, it is a natural development in a harmonious social structure. So transformation is what makes the way possible for peace. This way, processes of the institution better carry the characteristics of conflict transformation than mere resolution. Rather than seeing peace as a static “end-state”, conflict transformation views peace as a continuously evolving and developing quality of relationship (Lederach, 2003). Following the central norm of conflict transformation, these institutions also focus on the dynamic aspect of social conflict. Here too the convergence of the relational context (ibid, 2003) are gained momentum. Instead of

prescribing some management tactics, cooperation between conflict parties is guaranteed for the future. Thus such practices have a futuristic vision of peace.

Festivals and functions organised in the *Namghar* or *Satra* can also be evaluated as major cultural catalysts of building peace. Peace in context of traditional institutions is a result of a holistic social process where everyone has to take part in. Public gathering and exchange of skills, ideas and innovations help building a strong foundation for a society based on mutuality and brotherhood. If analysed in a Durkheimian perspective, such festivals:

- enable people to gather together as a community on regular occasions,
- include community participation in music, e.g. singing together, which means at a practical, bodily level, people submerge their own individuality into the sense of belonging to a social community and share their love of this common good,
- in their art, music, food, and forms of commemoration, are centred on the bodily experiences which represent the sharing of various common but abstract social values,
- and help breaking down the prejudice among certain groups of people, clarify taboos on issues of purity, food habits and ritualistic differences and creates a more cordial relation that may not be possible through policy based state centric programmes. Such festivals can be studied as soft power techniques to achieve peace in a wider manner.

This angle is very much right in context of Majuli as certain anecdotes are prevalent regarding different communities hampering create a unified social structure which consequently affect the holistic development of the region. So, such festivals are really necessary to eliminate these divisive elements and to create an atmosphere of peace. The importance of the maximum use of a public venue and a public space is one of the crucial urgencies from the sociological perspectives. In modern times, people have been suffering from the lack of adequate public or social space. The individualistic, closeted lifestyle hardly provides any chance to assemble, share and interact. Changing time, decline of physical public spaces results in the wide usage and popularity of electronic

social media. But festivals organised by such institutions help bridging this gap. Assembly in the right manner and for a right occasion is always considered to be an integrating mechanism.

5.5. The inherent elements of peacebuilding of *Namghar*

In accordance with the aforesaid mechanisms, there are certain inherent mechanisms of the institutions of *Satras* and *Namghars*, which too reflect and fulfil some primary conditions of peacebuilding. They are inherent in the sense that, they are not articulated nor practised in a materialized way. Unlike the mechanisms of conflict resolution, these are rather intrinsic components being intermixed in the structural existence of the institutions. In general terms, they can be pointed as the certain norms followed in using the institution. Sometimes they are just abstract issues and have been traditionally followed without conscious understanding by the public.

The institution of *Namghar* has some inherent mechanisms which are important catalysts for peace. Discussion of peace implies the importance of participation of the common mass in the grass root level. In the above discussion, it becomes clear that *Namghar* is a decentralised social institution which incorporates the participation of the common mass in all decision making process. Besides such activities, the institution itself has some inherent structural devices which prove the democratic nature of the institution. Here is a discussion of those inherent mechanisms which can be viewed as bearer of the culture of peacebuilding since the historical time.

Traditionally *Namghars* do not have boundary and side wall. It is always a wide, open structure where the central portion is also left open. Whenever something is organised in a *Namghar*, people bring seating mats and discuss. Thus, significantly, the *Namghar* is built without walls or if at all, only with half walls with two rows of pillars with a thatched or tin roof. The concept of half walls or small gate in the entry point is modern additions to the institution. Most of the *Namghars* of the state and the study area still follow the traditional structural design and they are halls without a hall. This structural device of the *Namghar* signifies its democratic, open nature. This architectural uniqueness of the institution proves people of all races and tribes living in this part of the

country could easily enter them and take part in congregational prayers and the like. Walls create boundaries, both structurally and psychologically. A free, open space of devotion creates a feeling of spontaneous attachment. Any person, whenever crossing in front of or by the *Namghar*, can easily come and offer their devotion just by bowing down their head. This has a great deal of symbolic value in terms of promotion of the ideal of equality. An open wall-less *Namghar* underscores the point that its doors are open to everyone and that it is an *inclusivist* institution embracing all people without making any discrimination among them along such artificial lines as caste, creed, religion, tribe or language (Bhuyan, 2009).

The seating arrangement of the *Namghar* also bears elements of co-operation and egalitarianism. People sit in the right and left sides of *Namghars* leaving the central space open. No one enjoys any privilege in matter of his/her space in the *Namghar*. No one can cross the place of the Thapana where the sacred book is placed. Otherwise, leaving the central space like a corridor, one can sit anywhere in the left and right side of the hall. The central space is left open for distribution of food items and for the actors during the Bhaona. Sometimes while chanting the *Nama*, people sit in the lower/western part of the *Namghar* placing the holy books facing the Manikut. This distinct seating arrangement in the *Namghar* clearly proves the egalitarian principles it inherently carries forward. Within the *Namghars*, everyone is equal and enjoys equal space. The concept of priest or religious leader is absent in the *Namghar*. Though *Namghariya* or *Namlagoa* is there, they are designations just for the functional purpose. Otherwise, there is no hierarchy within a *Namghar*. Unlike the priests in the Hindu temples, religious officials sit equally with the common mass in the *Namghar*. Only the locally made cane or bamboo mats are used for sitting in the *Namghar*. Chairs, sofas or other furniture are not allowed to be used. It helps making everyone feel equal. It also helps everyone speaking and listening properly thus enhancing the substance of the discussion.

The *Nama* session, *Sharai diya* and *Shakam*- religious rituals performed in the *Namghar* are followed by a tradition of consuming food items. The food and the criteria followed in having food demonstrate the democratic and scientific principles. Food in the *Namghar* consists of mung dal, gram and fruits- *Mah-Prasad*. It is followed by specially

prepared rice, curd and molasses, popularly known as *Jalpan*. All these items are served only in green banana leaves and in bowls made out of pseudo stem of the banana tree (*Khol*). Whatever may be the economic or social position of a person, he/she is never served the food in other utensils. This system clarifies two important things- the maintenance of equality in matter of having food and consciousness about health. Discrimination in respect of food and its service is a common tool of structural exploitation. Difference in food items and making separate divisions on the basis of economic status, class or caste often lead to frustration and aggressive behaviour. From this perspective, *Namghars* are found to be really modern and progressive.

The issue of health consciousness lies in the fact that the particular food items are found to be completely healthy, nutritious and light. Taking bath and cleansing clothes are the primary conditions of entry to a *Namghar*. During the chanting of *Nama*, people clap and move their body rhythmically. So after such light exercises, having dal and fruits is proved healthy and nutritious. Secondly, selection of the food items and the particular material for its service, shows that *Namghars* insist on the use of locally available resources. It is less expensive and easily degradable, without causing any environmental hazard. Village *Namghars* are surrounded by rows of trees, especially the banana trees. It has multiple functions; - fruits are used as food materials, leaves and stems as food servers and as a whole community forestation contributing to the environmental causes.

5.6. Social Capital and *Satras* and *Namghars*

Satras and *Namghars* offer a good example of the best possible use of social capitals to further the urgency of peace and solidarity. Social capital refers to the form of capital that exists within relationship among individuals. Social capital can be defined simply as the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them (Fukuyama: 1997). By drawing on the social capital resources in their relationships, individuals can further their own goals. So, social capitals refer to the use and benefits out of the sociability of individuals and groups. Just as more investments improve the quality and performance of physical capital, human capital can also be increased by enlarging an individual's skills or knowledge base. Social capital, then, is created when relationships are used to enable

actions by individuals to further their own interests. Social capital is defined as a social structural resource that is a capital asset for the individual. It is productive in the sense that it makes the actors possible to achieve certain goals that cannot be achieved in its absence, and it is constituted within social organizations often as a by-product of activities undertaken for other purposes (Colemn, 1988, 1990).

Social capital is different from traditional notion of capital in the sense that it is based on reciprocity and thus comes with the expectation that obligations will be repaid as requested by other individuals in the network. Social capital refers to the aspects of the social structure that are of value to social actors as resources that can be mobilized in pursuit of their interests and it is , located in the relationships and personal networks between and among social actors. So, though it may have different forms, they share the commonality in the facts that it always appears as an aspect of social structures, and the social actors are able to use social capital as a resource to achieve their goals within the social structure. The concept of capital makes social capital something investable for the fulfillment of certain goals.

In the light of Robert Putnam, social capital makes lives easier, cordial and reciprocal thus lessening the chance of personal opportunism and enhancing the self-confidence and trust (Putnam, 2000). *Satras* and *Namghars* are treasure houses of social capital. They build the social networks and norms that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam said that life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital for variety of reasons. In the first place, networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved. When economic and political negotiation is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism are reduced. At the same time, networks of civic engagement embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration. Finally, dense networks of interaction probably broaden the participants' sense of self, developing the "I" into the "we," or (in the language of rational-choice theorists) I enhancing the participants' "taste" for collective benefits (ibid, 1995).

In the context of the institutions of *Satras* and *Namghars*, most of the forms of social capitals are found to be functional⁷. For instance; the operational mechanism of the institutions relies heavily on reciprocal actions. These reciprocal actions create obligations and expectations on the part of its participants. Each “favor” is expected to be repaid, and those who can provide “favors” are expected to do so when requested. The faith, loyalty and love of the common mass is repaid in the form of non-violent and harmonious solutions to their conflicting issues. This form of exchange engenders social capital for the group member who has done many favors without collecting reciprocal favors in return. These unreciprocated favors create obligations that allow the favor-granting member to request help from the systems which are obligated to her or him. These unpaid obligations ensue in the form of social capital that the member can use. The resources, justice and maintaining law and order in case of *Satras* and *Namghars*, can be drawn on in the time of need because the people put their unconditional trust upon the institutions. Furthermore, it is the extent of outstanding obligations that denotes the amount of social capital an individual can draw on. Indeed, the overall number of outstanding obligations within a system can be a measure of its interconnectedness as members are obligated to one another. This connectedness also increases the resources available to each member.

Namghars and *Satras* carry out social capital in the form of Norms and Effective Sanctions. Within a social system, norms can support and provide rewards for specific behaviours. The Norms that prioritise the needs of the community than self-interest are an especially powerful form of social capital. By promoting certain activities, norms by nature constrain other activities. In case of the *Satradhikars* in the *Satras* and the seniors in the *Namghars*, social capital is available in the form of authority relations. When the villagers or a group is organized to address a specific issue, a leader often is chosen and given the right to make decisions and speak for the group. Thus, the members of the group transfer the “rights of control” to one individual, who then has access to an extensive network of social capital that can be directed toward a specific goal. When the

⁷ James Coleman identifies six forms of social capital: obligations and expectations, information potential, norms and effective sanctions, authority relations, appropriable social organizations, and intentional organizations. It was discussed in his 1990 essay *Foundations of Social Theory*, Cambridge, Mass. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

rights of control are located in one individual, the social capital of all the members is amplified. Both the institutions carry this form of social capital. The institutions also fulfil the norms of appropriable social organisation, as they are not limited to the religious needs of the Assamese people. Rather they have transcended its religious boundary and emerge more as larger platforms promoting peace and harmony.

The development of social capital is dependent on the stability of a social structure. *Satras* and *Namghars* are helpful in developing the social capital as they are stable structures and are not dependent specific individuals. They are institutions for all and exist everywhere. Moreover, the egalitarian ideologies of the institutions create social capital by influencing individuals to act in the interest of the whole rather than in their own interests. It is significant that *Satras* and *Namghars*, unlike typical religious institutions, is not dependent only on religious ideologies for this purpose. In the context of building peace, *Satras* and *Namghars* demand a critical attention because they were the first institutions of Assam to encourage the practice of reciprocity and co-operation in a platform outside of the family and kinship.

5.7. Observations from the field – the process of the research and experiences

The present study on the role of traditional institutions in peacebuilding has been centred on the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar*. Majuli- the river island in the district of Jorhat was selected as the area of study of the research. Selection of Majuli as the area of study is grounded on different reasons-

- *Satras* and *Namghars* were originated in the fifteenth century and have undergone numerous changes with the passage of time. But both the institutions in Majuli, in comparison to the other parts of the state, still retain its traditional characteristics and been existing as an influential institute. People of Majuli still consider the institutions as their representative institution.
- The geographical distinction of Majuli helps *Satras* and *Namghars* retaining their original nature intact. The material impact of modernity is still less influential in the island and it results in holding on to a traditional life style with great influence of the traditional institutions.

- Majuli is the place known as *Etaka Mahantar than*. It simply means that all the four sacred elements of *Bhakti-Guru, Deva, Nama* and *Bhakat*- exist in the four main *Satras* of Majuli. So ,if one of them is imposed the value of one anna,Majuli is the place where it is full in form in the shape of a taka- a complete rupee.The term is also interpreted as indicative of the number of *Satras* in Majuli. It is said that once there were sixty four *Satras* in Majuli so that giving one paisa to each of them amounts to a total of one rupee from which the term *etaka mahantar than* derived.The word Mahanta also refers to the nobles and wise men. So, Majuli is the *than* of the *mahantas*-the place of the nobles.
- Out of the 600 *Satras* of Assam, 64/65 *Satras* were in Majuli. While the other *Satras* are scattered in different parts of the twenty nine districts of the state, the tiny island itself had all the 65 *Satras* within its boundary. Even now the island is bestowed with 32 *Satras*. Concentration of the *Satras* in the region helps studying them in an introspective way. Moreover; it is economically and physically viable to conduct the research as all the *Satras* exist within the island itself.
- *Satriya* culture is perhaps in its real bloom in Majuli. Majuli and *Satriya* culture is found to be complementary to each other. Due to the influence of *Satras* and *Namghars*, *Satriya* culture is practised almost literally in every household of the island. People from different parts come to Majuli to learn cultural forms. Academicians, researchers, artists consider Majuli to be the custodian of the original *Satriya* form of culture in the real sense of the term. So, to study about *Satra* and *Namghar*, there cannot be a better choice than Majuli.

The process of the research was started with a pilot survey of some of the *Satras* and randomly selected *Namghars* in the island. The researcher has visited some *Satras* of the research field before the actual research. In case of the *Namghars*, informal discussions regarding issues like *Mel, Bharasha*, religious and cultural functions and festivals were conducted with the villagers in the respective *Namghar* premises. In this process, discussions were held with the village chiefs, selected villagers and *Satradhikars*. In case of *Namghars* villagers often started taking part in a spontaneous way. In case of the *Satras*, the *Satradhikar* introduced with experienced and designated residents of the respective *Satras*. Most of the discussions were held in the open space of the residence of

the *Satradhikars*. In this stage, it was an exploratory process to acquire information about the history, the economic status and the peacebuilding mechanisms in a general way. Four (4) *Satras*- Auniati, Dakhinpat, Chamaguri and Uttar Kamalabari were covered in the pilot survey. Ten (10) village *Namghars* were covered in the pilot survey.

Through this survey a general idea was acquired which was used for the continuous construction of the thesis. This study has helped the researcher to gain more systematic knowledge about the universe of the study. It was also helpful to know the strategies to be deployed for the later research. For example, the pilot study made it clear that only vernacular language should be used for the research work. The respondents informed the accurate time of field visit for the research as most of them remain busy in the months of May-June and November-December in agricultural activities. Similarly it helped taking utmost care in dealing with topics like issues of inter caste and inter religion marriages, elopement, inter village clash over funeral functionaries, conversion etc. The researcher came to know that the riverine areas and the villages situated out of the embankments should not be visited during the months of July, August and September due to the flood and erosion. The questionnaires and the interviews were framed on the basis of the knowledge of the field gathered through the pilot survey.

For the later phase of the research, thirty (30) village *Namghars* and ten (10) *Satras* were selected. The *Satras* were selected on random basis. In case of the *Namghars*, community profile, geographical location and demographic structure were the selection norms. The concept of caste was basically used to determine the inhabitation structure of the communities of Mishing and Deori. The geographical location refers to the physical existence of the villages. Majuli is a flood and erosion prone area and large number of villages acquire the identity of floating or migratory status as the villagers have to frequently change their inhabitation from here to there. Some of them are also identified as uninhabited due to the migratory nature. Many of the villages of the island are still not properly connected with roads. Villages settled in different *Chaporis* are literally disconnected in terms of roads. Small boats are the only medium of transportation and communication to such villages. Religion was not an issue in this process as the entire

island follows the Hinduism with slight variations according to their community characteristics.

Interview was the basic tools to collect information in the second phase of the research. Most of the interviews were conducted with prior information and consent of the respective respondents. In case of the *Satras*, interviews were conducted with the help of particular residents with whom the researcher had contacted personally or through telephonic conversations. The Gaoburah, Bardeuri, president of the *Namghars*, secretary or other officials of village clubs, officials of Mahila Samiti of the respective villages were instrumental in the process of conducting interviews of the village *Namghars*. In this process, school teachers were of great help as they enjoy good command and social status in the village life of Majuli. Interviews in the *Namghars* were mostly attended by elderly villagers. There were minimal presences of women inspite of invitation.

The Participant observation method was used to collect information and to observe the nature of some particular functions, activities and rituals of the institutions. Staying in the *Satras* were also useful to observe the daily religious activity of Prashanga, dance and musical practices, the number, nature and behaviour of the visitors to the institution, the relational pattern of the inmates, the vocabulary of the institutions and the nature of association of the *Satra* with the public. During this process informal and formal sessions of talk were conducted with many senior residents- Burha bhakats on historical and cultural issues of the *Satras*.

Note taking and audio recording were the primary modes of collecting information .Though photography was also allowed, most of the respondents were not in favour of video recording, especially in the Mels as they consider the matters to be sensitive. Women respondents hardly consent to reveal their identity in names or photographs. Photography was also not allowed in certain aspects of the *Satras* like the main idols of the deities (Dakhinpat *Satra*, Bengenaati *Satra*, Bhogpur *Satra*), historical things and documents preserved in the museum (Auniati *Satra*), etc. Entry to the Manikut of the village *Namghar* is not allowed. The researcher was also prohibited to sit in a Mel in Meragarh village where they discussed the issue of sexual assault of a minor girl .The issue was later briefed without revealing the identity of the parties. The researcher was

requested not to use camera and not to reveal the real names of the respondents in two Mishing villages.

Experiences in the field prove that the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* still enjoy immense loyalty and respect from the common people. Whenever the respondents refer to a *Satra* or a *Satradhikar*, they carefully avoid derogatory terms. While talking about the *Satra* or *Namghar*, instead of ordinary words, people use higher and respectful terms like *Tera (he)Jana (to specify the Satradhikar)*, *Prabhu Ishwar (Honorific term for the Satradhikar)*, *Garaki(term denoting authority)*, *Bachan (words)*, *Manastha (to think or to decide)*. Whenever the people visit to a *Satra* or whenever someone from the *Satra* visits a household, people maintain a courteous and disciplined standard which was really interesting to be noticed. This spontaneous devotion and awareness is found to be crucial factor in the societal sanction of the institutions and their position in the society.

All the *Namghariyas* or *Namlagoas* were found to enjoy reverential position in the village society. Economic status hardly matters for their position in the society. They take significant role in organising social functions, dealing with public issues, negotiating conflicting issues etc. The researcher had come through five specific cases where these officials solved hostility borne out of elopement of a girl without consent of parents, clashes between two villages regarding the distribution of flood relief items, cell phone theft, illegal fishing in a public fishery and funeral rituals. Three of the cases were inter-village clashes while the other two occurred within the same village. Public apology of their own mistake in the *Namghar* premise and moral counseling were common feature to all the resolution processes. Along with the public apology, monetary punishment was imposed in the cases of illegal fishing and cell phone theft. Representatives of both the villages were present in the issue of relief distribution. Here the elderly people and the *Namghar* officials used the method of historical analogical references and compelled the group of youths to give up their enmity.

Brilliant use of public space, spiritual leadership and good communication are found to be the catalysts of the popularity of mechanisms of *Namghars*. The ‘participatory and relationship focused’ (Ginty, 2008) approaches visualise peace to be the ultimate urgency and so try to transform the antagonistic relations into friendly ones. In this process, the

open, fearless, serene use of the public space matters a lot. Many respondents of the questionnaires refer to the two points as the ongoing popularity of the institution. Moreover the issues of culture (in terms of rituals like bowing down before the holy shrine, apology in front of village elders, offering Dakhina etc) were also marked as factors of the institution's existence. Interestingly, responses show that popularity of *Namghar* just because of a religious institution was not a matter of prime interest for them (See the Chart 1.1). The sentimental attachment can be felt in use of phrases like *amar Namghar, nijar anusthan, gaonar gaurav, Namghar Jana* etc. People never feel lost being among their familiar persons and familiar rituals. Religious and moral teachings help ease the process of repentance and apology. The psychological transformation here is a easier and more impulsive process in comparison to judicial verdicts. Interviewees often expressed that as soon as they enter the *Namghar*, they feel an unknown urge to tell the truth and pray for mercy. Crafted communication of the experienced seniors works as polishing factor. So, peacebuilding through the mechanisms of *Namghar* is found to be a more rooted and natural process. They do not have rules nor do they have fixed set of customary laws. But peace here is more approachable and inclusive.

The following charts summarise the experiences of the field regarding the role and effectiveness of the institution of *Namghar* in the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In this process semi structured questionnaires were distributed among respondents within the age group of 35-60. The charts summarise the respondents view about the popularity of the institution and the evaluation of the conflict resolution and justice mechanisms. Among the 376 respondents, majority of them marked the options – ‘time saving’, ‘rooted to culture, and ‘enjoy an open atmosphere to express views fearlessly’; as the basic factors behind the ongoing popularity of the institution of *Namghar*.

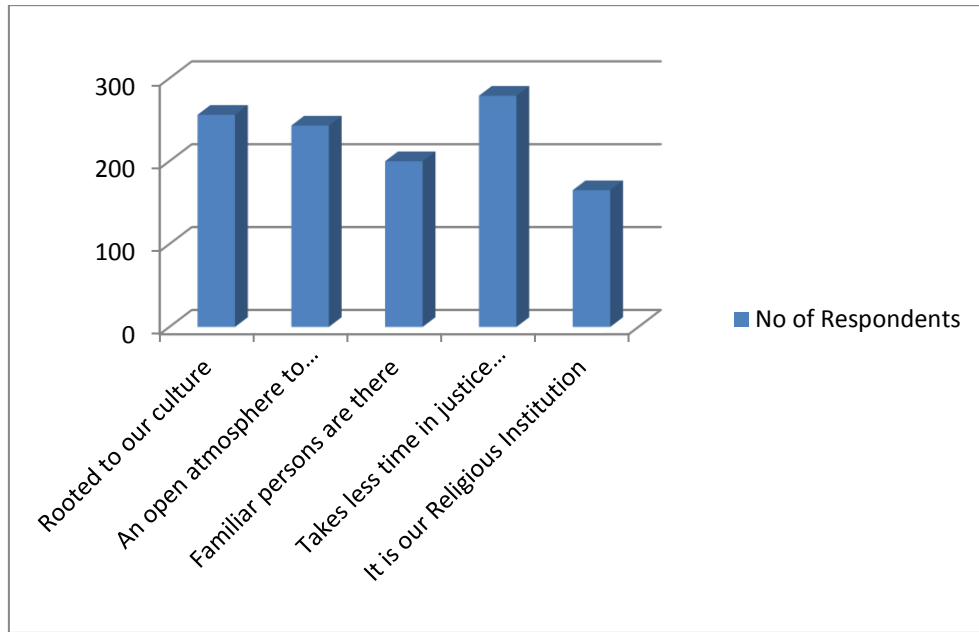


Chart1.1.

<i>Namghar</i> is still alive because -	Total no of Respondents-376
rooted to our culture	256
Enjoy an open atmosphere to express views fearlessly	243
Familiar persons ease the situation	200
Takes less time and less expensive	279
Justice offered keeping in mind of societal norms	165

Table 1 – Why the Namghar is still alive

Evaluation of Conflict resolution/Justice mechanisms of Namghar

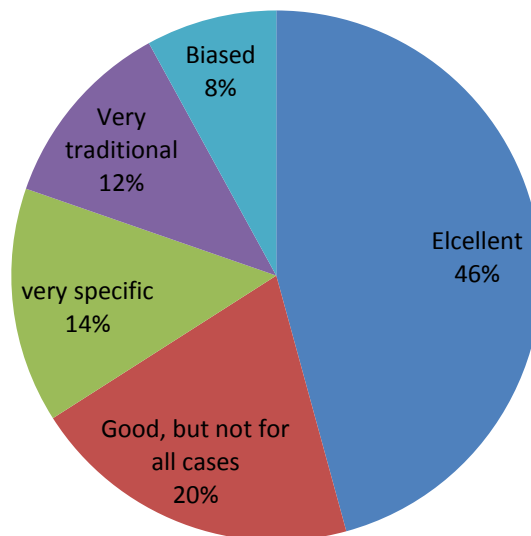


Chart 1.2.

The conflict resolution/justice mechanism of <i>Namghars</i> is-	Total no. of respondents-376
Excellent	173
Good, but not for all cases	75
Very specific	53
Very traditional	45
Biased	30

Table 2. – Evaluation of conflict resolution/justice mechanisms of Namghar

On the basis of the previous responses, the same respondents were asked to evaluate the resolution/justice mechanisms of *Namghars* with five options (See chart 1.2). Responses mark excellent as the highest and biased in the lowest. Respondents also mark it as good but not for all cases, useful only for specific cases and very traditional. Analysis of the data shows that elderly people are in favour of the justice mechanisms while young people find it traditional and specific. In case of the elderly people, emotional attachment and religious sentiments are found to be strong determinant in formulating the nature and degree of their evaluation of the institution. The interviews with the college and university students correspond with these responses as most of them consider the mechanism useful only for specific cases. They specifically mentioned it useful for cases like inter village clash over funeral issues, disrespect or misbehaviour towards elderly and women, clash borne out of use of community resources etc. The young people are found to be in favour of formal legal procedures for issues like domestic violence, property disputes, land disputes etc. They were found to be comparatively liberal in issues of inter caste or inter religion marriages and do not consider it to be a issue of conflict. But both the groups completely agree about the capacity building aptitude and inclusive nature of the institution in regard of the cultural activities.

Interaction with the women about the role of *Namghar* in their lives and in peacebuilding presents a different picture. Women respondents overwhelmingly express their loyalty and faith to the institutions. But at the same time, most of the women respondents express their absence of engagement in the decision making process, more particularly in decisions about conflicting issues. It has been clearly revealed that women hardly enjoy any role in the process of taking or making decisions whenever any kind of conflicting issue comes up. Issues of land clashes, clashes over resource distribution, community properties and religious disputes are exclusively dealt by the men folk. Not a single woman respondent is found to be associated with the issues. They are never called for their opinions in these issues. Literally speaking, all these issues are entirely handled by the men folk and in most cases they remain ignorant about the happenings. During the course of research, it was felt that due to their exclusion, women even from the respective conflicting family hardly show any interest in these issues. This indifference is the result

of the age old exclusion of the women folk from the decision making process. In issues related with marriage, love affair, physical or sexual assault, women are merely called for judicial purposes, mostly as witness. Discriminations are also felt in matters of judgment or offering punishment as women do not get much scope or space to express their views. In many instances, brothers or the fathers or any male representative from the women's side are found to represent her voice. But in such situations, there are ample chances of misrepresentation or incomplete representation. In issues of assault, relationship problems or family feuds, a male may not accurately represent the voice and view of the women psychology. But while asking the male respondents about this trend, they simply avoided the matter just by referring to tradition and society. Even mothers do not have much saying over her the decisions taken for her daughters. This situation is prevalent in both the institutions.

Apart from the decision making process, religious and cultural activities also provide lesser space for the women. Though Assamese women can easily enter the *Namghar* or can organise their functions, they have their limitations. Women hardly sit with the men in the *Shakams*. Moreover they never enjoy the front rows. Official designations like *Namghariya* – the central figure of a *Namghar* is never entrusted on a woman. Women seldom act in *Bhaonas* in a village *Namghar* along with the men. They perform their *Nama* sessions separately. There are separate *Namati* and *Deori* for women. Men never act as *Namlagoa* and *Deori* in the functions organised by the women. It is only during the month of *Bhadra*, women regularly chant *Nama* in the *Namghar* premise. Earlier, there were separate persons for distribution of food items for the women participants in a religious ceremony. Now-a-days, the system has undergone changes and women are also taking part in the distribution activities.

Experiences of the *Satra* were also similar in this aspect. *Satras* also present the same scenario regarding the engagement of the women. Women are not associated with any of the internal activities of the *Satra*. Monastic *Satras* of Majuli consist of unmarried male residents. In all the *Satras* of Majuli, role of women are limited to mere visitors or devotees. They are neither engaged in decision making process nor in cultural activities organised within the *Satra* premise. Women are allowed to learn any *Satriya* cultural

activity, but not within the *Satra* premise. Women do not take part in a dancing session or a Bhaona organised within the *Satra* premise. Though functions like Palnam, Rashleela or Fakua are organised in collaboration with the outsiders, responsibilities are mostly held by men. While male visitors are allowed to stay in the residences of the Bhakats, women are not allowed to stay in. Now-a-days, women can stay in the *Satra* premise just because of the provisions of the guest houses. *Satradhikars* and Bhakats, particularly in the monastic *Satras* of Majuli do not accept food prepared by women. In *Satras* like Dakhinpat, Kamalabari and Auniati, women audiences are not allowed to enjoy certain cultural programmes. It has a negative impact on the institution as it makes them mere places of mere religion and tourism for the women folk. *Satras* are found to be orthodox in this matter and fail to utilise the benefits of the capitals of loyalty and trust of this section of the society.

Unlike the *Namghars*, *Satras* are perceived to be comparatively isolated from the lives of the Mishing and the Deori community of the island. Experiences of the field suggest that both the communities perceive themselves excluded from the institution in different ways. The island of Majuli is a land of multi ethnic composition. Mishing and Deori communities have been occupying major part of the demographic profile. Most of the respondents of the Mishing community expressed their dissatisfaction with specific behavioural and ritualistic patterns of the *Satras* and their inmates. Society of Majuli is dominated by the institution of the *Satra*. It is famous as the hub of Satriya culture. Everywhere Majuli is described as the land of *Satra* and Satriya culture. But if analysed closely and objectively, it is found that the institution of *Satra* has some internal loopholes which prohibit the tribal people in inclusive assimilation with the institution. Ideologically, the institution does not have any barrier in accepting the tribal communities as their members. But, historically tribal people are excluded from enjoying equal space like the other communities. There are hardly any *Bhakat* from the tribal communities in the *Satras*. Earlier, people from tribal communities were not allowed to enter the central premise of the *Namghar* of the *Satra*. During the field study, it was found that senior residents of the *Satras* still maintain certain complexities in free assimilation with these people. Most of the tribal people are associated with the *Satras* as visitors and a few of them are engaged as labourers in different household activities

like ploughing in the field, cleansing, chopping fuel woods etc. Throughout the field, the researcher hardly encountered these people enjoying important designation or entrusted with significant responsibility. But Vaishnavism was equally influential among the tribal communities of the island. Introduction of customs like *Bor Sewa* or *Ratikhowa Protha* or *Digambari* -the highest form of their rite, performed in *Namghar* at night, *Risto* or *Sat-jonia*- the chanting of seven stanzas or hymns from the *Kirtan Ghosha* of Sankardeva or from *Nam Ghosha* of Madhavadeva wishing someone's good health and good luck during the time of adversity, *Ekoish-jonia*: chanting of *Nama* by twenty one *bhakats*, chanting *Nama* during burial and funeral rituals, observation of festivals like *Janmastami* or *Rashleela* or replacement of the *Miboos* with *Bhakats* for performance of rituals have been the result of the influence of Vaishnavism.

In spite of their close contact with Vaishnavism and loyalty towards the institution of the *Satras*, Mishings of Majuli still perceive to be alienated and deprived of adequate status in the institution. Behavioural discriminations in the form of restriction in entering houses, cleansing the place and utensils used by the tribal people, adherence to the concepts of purity and impurity, rejection of accepting tribal people as *bhakats*, using of discriminatory and abusive words towards these people historically created an invisible division between the institution and the tribal people. Respondents from the Mishing community frankly expressed their dissatisfaction with such attitudes of the institution and their officials. This indifference is cited to be the one of the main reasons behind the conversion of the Mishing people into Christianity. Religion in India is a matter of individual choice as it is a constitutionally secular republic. But in the context of Majuli, conversion of the Mishings into Christianity stirred huge controversy as it has been ascribed to the historical indifference of the *Satras* towards the community. It was found that almost thirty (30) churches are functioning in the Ujani Majuli Block. Charitable activities like relief fund during flood, financial assistance to poor students and establishment of residential schools have also been found to attract the community to this religion. Many respondents pointed that they find the rituals of the religion more liberal and easier.

Satras are perceived to be more ideological and divine places which sometimes affect them in attaining a closer space among the public. *Satras* of Majuli still maintain certain codes in their vocabulary, dress code, behavioural patterns, food habits etc. In sometimes leads to the creation of an invisible psychic distance between the common man and the institution and they start considering the institution as something higher, spiritual entities different from their lives. During the conversation with the residents of the *Satras*, the researcher could feel the difference in terms of the use of words and terms, manner of non verbal expressions like facial expressions, absence of derogatory or funny comments, crafted and sanskritised words etc. The residential pattern, relationship with the seniors, disciplined and punctual lifestyle of the *Satras* do project them as different from the lives of the common people. All these factors compel the common people to develop a different outlook to the institution which sometimes hampers the relationship. But due to their grandeur, cultural expertise and the leadership qualities of the *Satradhikars*, *Satras* of Majuli have been instrumental in many developmental activities for the island and its people.

Namghars are not suffering from these issues. Visit in the *Namghars* of Molual Miri, Ratanpur Miri and Pakajora Miri village show that they have been following the vaishnavite traditions in a well balanced manner by adding some elements of their own rituals. But residents of Karkichuk have been converted to the practices of *Do:nyi Po:lo Yelām Kebāng*. In other three villages there are *Namghars* and they have been enjoying the place of community hall, assembly house, venue of training- thus working as an agent of building relationship among the villagers.

5.8. Conclusion

Local participation, sustainability, restorative justice, more scope for engagement and implementation are some of the major factors in the rediscovery of interest in traditional institutions and their mechanisms of peacebuilding. Participation and sustainability here acquires wider meaning,

“Instead, local participation was to occur at all levels of a development or peace project. The implications of local involvement were thus profound: not only could

it guide how development was to be promoted (or peace secured), it had the potential to guide how development (and peace) could be defined... whereas “the logic of sustainability was that if communities could access their own resources and capacities over the longer term” (Ginty, 2015).

The issue of culture also gains rising popularity in this aspect and scholars have started identifying the crucial role culture can play in building peace and transforming conflict. Scholars start opining that culture plays significant constituent role in a conflict , “culture speaks to how people conceive of conflict, the meanings they take from it, how they process conflict, and so on”(Brigg,2010).Therefore, conflicts cannot be seen through a single lens. Rather, efforts to manage and resolve conflict should take account of differing interpretive frameworks – sometimes multiple and overlapping frameworks – associated with the culture(s) that individuals and groups bring to conflicts (Ibid, 2010).Issues of capacity building in the Grassroot level through strengthening the engagement of the common people, making them empowered to participate in decision making processes, more insistence on restorative justice are some other emerging issues in this area. Mechanisms opted by the *Satras* and *Namghars* are found to be endowed with almost all the elements. The power of religious and spiritual influence adds a more authoritative ability to the institutions. But mere romanticisation or glorification of the institutions cannot be welcome as it is also been charged with certain loopholes by its own followers. Therefore the institutions should try to engage themselves with newer issues of economy, politics and society. For instance, *Satras*, by dint of the public support and loyalty they enjoy, should come forward to raise voice regarding the issues of economic negligence towards the island. They can appeal the authority for grant of tourism packages or establishment of a cultural university in the island. They can collaborate with the surrounding village *Namghars* to work cooperatively as the representative body of the people of the island in issues like flood, erosion, poor infrastructure in terms of roads and bridges, introduction of supportive governmental schemes for agricultural or fishing sector etc.But changes in the institutions can help them retaining their present impact as socially responsible institutions working for the holistic development of the human beings.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Sustainability and bottom up approach dominate the present understanding of peace. Peace endures when it is nurtured by a society-wide network of relationships and mechanisms that endorse justices and address the root cause of conflict before they can regenerate destabilizing tension. The questions of escalation and inclusive engagement matter a lot in transformation of conflict and sustainability of peace. Therefore focus has been put on a frame of reference that provides a meeting point on the restoration and rebuilding of relationships. All sections of society are expected to participate in building peace so that the entire systematic and sub-systematic concerns of a conflict can be addressed while the resolution process is going on. Democratic, people oriented process to address the conflict, transparency in resolution and consequent outcome of enduring peace is what an ideal peace process should be.

Building strong interpersonal and intergroup relations throughout the fabric of society, making an ongoing commitment to people and to processes, respecting the cultural wisdom of all the parties and welcoming the creative interaction of different cultural ways are some major principles for making a peace process successful. If these are the basic norms for a successful peace process, the existing social institutions or customs are real catalysts of peace as they have been practicing all these elements since time immemorial. Traditional institutes are grounded for empowerment of the groups they are centered on and work on the principles of assistance, mutual trust and engagement. Aspects like flexibility, rejection of hierarchy, democratic principles and cultural knowledge of the traditional institutions offer an alternative track to deal with conflict and peace. If rootlessness and alienation are considered to be the prime reasons of failure of most of the peace initiatives, traditional practices do demand a serious mention as they are free from these limitations. Development of the field like Alternative Dispute Resolution, popularly known as ADR, consist of strategies of dealing with conflict in a non –policy based, ground level way. The origins of ADR trace to traditional societies. Traditional societies, without the trappings and paraphernalia of the modern state, had no coercive means of resolving disputes. So, consensus building was an

inevitable and necessary part of the dispute resolution process. The court system only developed as a necessary by-product of the modern state. Societies in Africa, Asia and the Far East were practicing non-litigious means of dispute resolution long before the advent of the nation state, for the building of long-term relationships was the bedrock on which those societies rested. So it becomes clear that in practice, traditional institutions have been nurturing and implementing these elements since their time of inception.

Emergence of rethinking on the practices and prospects of the mechanisms of conflict resolution and building peace of the traditional institutions is a relatively new concept. In this context, studies of the traditional institutions of the African countries have been playing the most pioneering role. In the earlier discussions it has been stated how a large number of literature from the African continent have been exploring the various methods of dealing with conflict. The subsequent study about traditional institutions often follows the directions paved by the research on African institutions. But it is also important to note that societies differ in their norms and so their institutions. Ethnic composition of the societies, geographical location, and demographic profile determine the cultural foundation of a society and it consequently results in their understanding and interpretation of issues like conflict and peace. Therefore a universal statement regarding the validity and utility of the techniques of the traditional institutions becomes as hazardous as the presumed universal applicability of the modern peacebuilding strategies.

During the course of the present research, tracing the literature on traditional institutions and their mechanisms for peace was the biggest challenge. Though Asian countries are rich in traditional strategies to settle different types of conflict and peace, they hardly have anything in written or documented form. Numbers of researches are comparatively few and available only in fragmented form. Especially, documentation on conflict transformation and peace mechanisms of the *Satra* and *Namghar* are totally absent. Researches on the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* are confined to their religious and cultural aspects. Literature on their activities in the field of Peacebuilding or settlement of conflict is a rare area. Even the institutions themselves hardly document these procedures. It was only during the field study, most of the respondents came

through words like peacebuilding, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, local ownership or sustainable peace.

With these limitations, the research was conducted with utmost care with the help of extensive field study where interviews, group discussions, participatory observation, formal and informal discussions were applied. The honesty, co-operation and encouragement of the respondents were great sources in leading the research. It was found that, though these institutions or the people involved with these institutions are unaware of the academic terminologies or the importance to document the peacebuilding methods they have been beautifully implementing these techniques from generation to generation. Success of these practices are found to be rested on the loyalty of the common mass on these institutions which is the byproduct of the assurance and transparency the institutions provide to them. Though there is the fear of repetition, still it should be mentioned that the simplicity and transparency of their strategies are the hallmarks of their enormous support among the masses. Interestingly *Satras* and *Namghars* have their popularity even among the educated, young generation. Though there is general belief that religious institutions have been enjoying lesser popularity among the youths, it is hardly felt in case of *Satras* and *Namghars*. It is felt that the loyalty to the institutions owe to the fact that they do not practice any mandatory guideline for their members. Though there are codes regarding outfit or seating arrangement, none has been mandated for regular visit nor for any regular ritualistic or ceremonial performances in these institutions. Spontaneity is respected the most. This results in natural loyalty and acceptance of these institutions among all classes of people. Respondents during field study and academicians interviewed during the course of research point out this flexible, democratic nature of the institutions as one of the most effective reasons behind their age old acceptance.

This acceptance eases the reception and success of their mechanisms for addressing conflict, transforming antagonism and building peace. The level of conflict in context of the traditional institutions is limited to local issues, in most cases intra or intergroup and communities. In case of the *Satras*, the level is extended up to a number of villages while *Namghars* are generally limited to one village and sometimes the

adjunctant villages. This bordering helps in establishing trust, gaining faith, lessening cost and enjoying loyalty. Familiarity with the social, cultural and economic environment of the surrounding makes the people feel ease to cope and co-operate with the initiatives taken for building peace. Failure of peacebuilding strategies often call for the peacemakers' critical distance from the environment and their inability to adjust with the new culture. In case of *Namghars* and *Satras*, these matters hardly come as everybody is familiar with everything. Process of peace clicks only when the stakeholder feel ease to participate and contribute in the process. *Satras* and especially the *Namghars* create the environment of ease for its members. It ultimately succeeds in their efforts for peace.

Flexibility is another determinant of the acceptance and sustainability of the *Satras* and *Namghars*. Though rooted to certain ethical and cultural norms, mechanisms and activities of these institutions welcome the changes and the demands of the changing time. Both the institutions are open to the demand of changing time in both their structural and ideological setups. In case of external changes, both the institutions warmly welcome the inclusion of modern materials. *Satras* of Majuli have been gradually equipped with electronic and architectural infrastructures, even with their own websites. The tourism potentiality of the region helps the *Satras* acquiring a new look of heritage sites where traditionality have been kept intact along with provision of modern facilities like electricity, internet facility, well designed guest houses, scientifically designed museums, well trained tour guides etc. Most of the *Satradhikars* and the resident *Bhakats* have undergone modern education system. Familiarity with modern legal systems, economic changes result in their approach with the conflicting issues. Therefore, *Satras* these days always invite a *Mandal* whenever they have to deal with the land clashes. All the respondents of the *Satras* are very much supportive towards inter-caste marriages. Instead of considering this issue as a conflicting one, *Satradhikars* rather try to make the people aware about the futility of caste divisions. Official from the *Satras* conduct awareness campaigns against superstitions and meaninglessness regarding caste system. *Satradhikars* of Majuli are found to take vital role in awareness against witch hunting which has been a major issue among the Mishing community of the river island. In their speeches in public meetings, *Satradhikars* constantly try to sensitise people about the misinterpretation of the holy texts through which caste system has been projected as a

valid concept. They themselves conduct ceremonial sessions in Mishing and Deori villages of the island in establishing *Namghar*, take part in their educational and cultural initiatives, organise educational campaigns. Experts of the *Satras* offer training of Satriya Dance and Music in all villages irrespective of caste and community. Staging of the Bhaona by a troupe of Islamic artists in the premise of the Auniati *Satra* on 2011 prove the trend of flexibility the institution go through.

Namghars too show their flexible nature through the ages. The changing pattern of economy is found to impact on the punitive measures of the *Namghars* while dealing with a conflicting issue. Now-a-days, monetary compensation is taking place of old compensatory measures. Instead of punishment in physical or agricultural forms, officials of the *Namghar* impose monetary charges for the wrongdoers which are later invested in public causes. As officials involved in the processes are often educated, they try more for counseling and reciprocation than offering punishments. Respondents often expressed that public shaming in the form of demotion of public designation and exclusion from social space are always aimed at repentance and restoration which reminds of the concept of restorative justice. In their infrastructural pattern too, *Namghars* have been undergoing tremendous changes. *Namghars* with concrete walls, tin roofs and electronically equipped materials are common sight in the state.

Peace in purview of *Satras* and *Namghars* are not viewed as something separate or dissociated entity from the daily life. If analysed closely, both the institutions actually try to teach that peace is something associated with our day to day lives. If human beings lead their lives with minimum nurturing of values of helpfulness, cooperation, forgiveness, brotherhood, compromise and respect, peace would automatically prevail in the society. In this context we can call these institutions as practicing the concept of Everyday peace. Unlike framing policies for peace, it should rather be incorporated in ones, daily routine just by following the basic social norms. Here peace is perceived as a product of the joint effort of society and individual. Individuals are reminded to be conscious about their duties towards the society and their fellow beings. Whenever an individual becomes conscious of his/her social responsibility, he/she also understands his role to maintain peace. In this point, it can be said that peace as per these institutions, is

more a social entity than an individualistic one. But, individual peace and happiness are confirmed by confirming the social harmony and social integration.

Cost efficiency, saving of time and scope of direct participation are some of the major factors of the popularity of mechanisms of the traditional institutions. While talking about the reasons behind the growing popularity of the Alternative Dispute Resolution methods, Albert Fied Joe says, “One of the main driving forces towards ADR is public dissatisfaction with litigation. It is not a secret that the search for alternatives to the adjudicative model through courtroom litigation has been fuelled by the growing client dissatisfaction with traditional legal methods. There are the usual complaints of spiraling costs, lengthy delays, increasing levels of litigation and court overload. ...also, there is the not uncommon feeling that the burning issue, which originally belonged to the disputants, becomes detached from them once it is placed in the hands of the legal system. In the process, the original, personal facts of the case are reconstructed to fit the relevant legal rules” (Fiadjoe,20048). Though *Satras* and *Namghars* do not act as the exact alternative to modern legal system, their cost effective nature matters a lot in making them more acceptable for the common people. Conflicting issues are dealt very promptly in these platforms. Litigation charges hardly cross beyond thousand. This minimal, bearable amount too helps *Satras* and *Namghars* being the primary choice for the people. The institutions hardly deal with serious/major conflicting issues. But in case of minor cases, people always go for these platforms as they get their solutions within a short time and without spending unnecessary money. The scope of direct participation in the process of check and cross check of the matter make people feel engaged actively in their search for justice. Methods of the *Satras* and *Namghars* can be termed as cooperative style as they are friendly, courteous and concessionary. It focuses on building trust and promoting relationships with direct and active engagement of the conflicting parties. It is tactful as it is aimed at respainment and conciliatory as it ends in reconciliation. Mechanisms of these institutions never end in disagreement; rather always try to reach a deal. It shares information and appeals to the reasonable instincts of the other side. Its primary objective is to achieve some sort of fair.

Moreover, mechanisms of the *Satra* and *Namghars*, while offering the resolution of a conflicting issue, do not provide one single option. Here, in an open environment, conflicting parties are provided different amicable options of solution and are encouraged to choose the option which best satisfy their interests without making an initial determination as to their suitability. So, the parties are encouraged to create and invent options without restriction, without criticism and without commitment. For instance, while examining the history of the resolution mechanism of the use of a community forest between two villages, stakeholders were provided with the options of – 1. Fodder collection in alternative years, 2. Fodder collection for six months to each of the villages 3. Fodder collection and grazing right on alternative month of the year 4. Fortnightly use of the forest resources. The villagers enjoyed the liberty to choose among all these options with a common consensus and after proper discussion among themselves they chose the third option. That way, the parties become more creative than usual. It ultimately reveals the win-win philosophy of the strategy. Moreover the acceptance of the option by the parties themselves compel them to be committed and responsible which help establish. Thus the entire process of these institutions are endowed with elements of positive psychological boosting to the common mass who otherwise feel lost in the traditional legal systems.

Study of the mechanisms of the *Satra* and *Namghar* also reveal the fact that culture can be very usefully utilised for the purpose of transforming relationship, fostering human values and creating conditions for peace. Different cultural activities propounded and practised by the *Satras* and the *Namghars* aim at developing the spirit of teamwork, inclusiveness, participation, nationalism, brotherhood, integration etc. As a source of identity, meaning and belonging, culture can both aid social cohesion and justify social exclusion. Amartya Sen has aptly captured this paradox: “A sense of identity can be a source not merely of pride and joy, but also of strength and confidence. And yet, identity can also kill – and kill with abandon. A sense of identity can make an important contribution to our relations with others. At the same time, it is important to recognize the fact that a sense of identity can firmly exclude many people as it warmly embraces others. The adversity of exclusion can be made to go hand in hand with the gifts of inclusion. Identity can be a source of richness and warmth as well as of violence

and terror.”(Sen, 2006). In the light of this statement, cultural activities of the *Satras* and *Namghars* are surely found to propagate the feelings of weness, which reduces the risk of violence and increases the possibility of peace. None of the cultural activities is practised singlehandedly. Most of these performances consist of troupe of singers, dancers, narrators, actors, instrumentalist and an anchor. In performances of Bhaona or Rashleela, the entire public has to contribute in different aspects. As discussed earlier, such performances become possible only when the entire villagers perform their respective duties well. So, it paves the way for interdependence, group identity and a surge of love and care for their fellow beings. This way, such cultural practices make the way for a harmonious existence. Minor misunderstandings or disputes are resolved just by hugging each other or in the mediation of elderly villagers. Interestingly, conflicting incidents like gang fight between groups of youths, passing abusive comments to girls or women, conflict due to gap between youth and elderly people, eve teasing are rare in the village life of Assam .The environment of social cohesion, social interdependence , brotherhood and social responsibility created by the *Namghar* has an important role in this aspect. *Namghars* and *Satras* have been playing a significant role in teaching the values of respect, cooperation, dignity which keep the societies under their grip by making them more controlled, socially respectful and reciprocal

But both the institutions are still found to be questioned in the issue of the engagement of the women in their comprehensive functioning process. Chapter 5 already illustrates the limited space enjoyed by the women in the institutions. The status of women in the peacebuilding initiatives has been a matter of global concern. In spite of being a vitally important dimension for creating peace women throughout the world hardly enjoys any significant space for taking part in these processes. United Nations, while reviewing the present architecture of peacebuilding activities, itself says, “...overlapping forms of discrimination and exclusion particularly affect women during violent conflicts, placing serious obstacles in the way of ensuring full participation...Empowering women and all groups of civil society concerned and promoting social inclusion and cohesion can be the best strategy for countering violent extremist narratives and acts...Ensuring the full participation of women in peacebuilding processes is a question of rights, but is not limited to that. It is, at last, becoming widely

recognized that the participation of women is also crucial to the success of economic recovery, political legitimacy and social cohesion (2015)’.

The perceived exclusion of the tribal communities is also a matter of serious concern. It does dismiss the status of the institution as the representative institution of the people of Majuli. However situation has been changed since the later years of the twentieth century. The growing popularity of Christianity and the decline of Vaishnavism have forced the *Satras* to review their policies towards the *Mishing*. Part of this was the declaration made by a *Satradhikar* that the *Mishing* are also eligible to become a *Satradhikar*. It is evident that the *Satras* in recent years are making an attempt to revive the lost interest of the *Mishings* upon the Vaishnavite culture. They seem to have been analysing the factors responsible for the alienation of the *Mishings*. It is a fact that unequal treatments offered to the *Mishings* through various means were to a great extent responsible for the losing popularity of Vaishnavism among the *Mishings*. Moreover the emergence of Christianity in the religious life of the *Mishings* of Majuli also seems to be responsible for the sudden change in attitude of the *Satradhikars*. Accordingly they have set up a cultural centre at Jengraimukh so as to train the *Mishings* the art of *Satriya* culture. It also has an educational institution in which the children of that locality are offered education at a low cost. In February, 2009 to mark the diamond jubilee celebration of Jengraimukh Higher Secondary School a *Bhaona* was performed by elderly people consisting of both *Mishing* and non-*Mishing* people. *Bhaona* is also performed occasionally in two-three years in the *Mishing* inhabited village of Cherpai Gaon and also in Kamalabari Dapak *Mishing* Gaon. The latter is under the influence of Kamalabari *Satra* and the people of this village are expert in *Bhaona* related programme *Sutradhar*- dance that marks the start of *Bhaona*, *gayan bayan*-dance in between the drama etc. Moreover in the *Bhaona* held at Jengraimukh the people of this village assisted them in above mentioned roles. On 24th January, 2011 a meeting of the *Mishing Senior Citizens’ Forum* was held at Jengraimukh. And to mark the occasion a ‘Cultural Lecture’ was held in which *Satradhikars* of different *Satras* like Uttar Kamalabari *Satra*, Bor Alengi *Satra*, Garamur *Satra* as well as former president of Assam *Satra* Mahasabha,

founder of *Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelām Kebang*¹ and other eminent personalities were present. They stressed on an attempt to revive the lost bonding between Satriya and *Mishings* culture. The *Satradhikar* of Bor Alengi *Satra* even encouraged the establishment of *Namghars* among the *Mishings* by the *Do:nyi-Po:lo Yelām Kébāng*. They also emphasized on the need to deal with outside religion. At the same time they also acknowledged that it is due to some of their own lapses that the *Mishings* have gradually alienated themselves from Vaishnavism. Thus they stresses on the need to change their approach to reinvigorate its popularity among the *Mishings*. To prove it they have even set up a primary school in Jengraimukh area in which they impart education at low cost and also arrange monthly health camp as well as *Satriya* dance workshop. *Satras* these days train young children the art of *Satriya* dance even in the *Mishing* villages. The initiative was taken by Auniati *Satra* as a result of which *Bhakats* used to visit different villages to train the youths the art of *Satriyā* dance. *Bhakats* of Auniati *Satra* have been training youths of the age group of 9 to 12 years were trained *Satriya* dance at Kumarbari *Namghar*. However the *Mishings* have also began performing *Bhaona* in their respective villages and in their own mother tongue. As on 7th January, 2012, a *Bhaona* was organized by local people of Jengraimukh at Kumarbari *Rangamancha* (cultural hall). The *Bhaona* was titled '*Sita Harana Bali Badh*' and was performed in their own local language in which people thronged to enjoy it. This *Bhaona* was held under initiatives of Assam *Satra* Mahasabha. The Sabha has accepted the fact that for long so many years the *Satras* have not been able to embrace the *Mishings* with an open heart and so this initiative is an attempt to erase such discrimination. On 2nd March, 2012 this same team performed the *Bhaona* at Sankardeva Kalakshetra Guwahati in which different tribes from the state performed *Bhaona* in their own mother tongue². The popular festival of *Sadau Asom Bhaona Samaroh*, organised by the Auniati *Satra* also include *Bhaona* performances by *Mishing* artists. *Bhaona* now –a-days have turned out to be a popular cultural programme in *Mishing* villages. This way, *Satras* have been trying to rectify the mistakes committed towards the *Mishing* communities and the communities have also been responding positively to these efforts. The role of cultural elements in this process of

¹ A socio-religious body of the *Mishing* community.

² Information collected during field visit to respective *Satras* and villages

restoration of social harmony, mitigation of social distance and integration is a significant area of concern.

Thus the institutions of *Satra* and *Namghar* have been undergoing phases of changes with the passage of time. The adaptability with the changing demands of time has made the institutions still intact in the Assamese society. No one can deny the role played by the institutions in strengthening the foundation of the social fabric, maintaining the social equilibrium by peacefully resolving the conflicting issues. But unfortunately, as discussed earlier, this area is hardly discussed in a serious note in the academic scenario. Academicians, policy makers, scholars, educational institutions or the intellectuals identify both *Namghars* and *Satras* more as cultural and religious organisations. Therefore discussions and literature on these institutions are confined only to their religio-cultural angle. In spite of its overwhelming existence throughout the state, holistic discussion on the institution of *Namghar* still remains in the nascent stage. Governmental approaches to the *Satras* are also grounded on their projection as mere cultural institutions. *Satras* and the *Satriya* culture have been enjoying both governmental and non-governmental recognition only because of their cultural contributions. Their role in managing and transformation of conflict and upholding the integrative values are still subsided in the mainstream academic discourse.

It leads to the conclusion that there is a strong need to look into the important aspect as well as to take urgent action to document and preserve these mechanisms in systematic ways. In this context, initiatives should be taken both from the institutions as well as the governments. Institutions, with support from government, higher educational institutions, research organisations, policy makers, on governmental organisations can initiate short term and long term projects to research, record and preserve these mechanism. Peace and Conflict study has been an emerging area of academics which has been dealing with multifaceted aspects of peace, conflict and relevant issues. Elements of flexibility, adaptability, amicable problem solving strategies, innovative negotiating skills, open communication make these mechanisms potential sources for wider application. There is the need of serious examination of these mechanisms in a conflict prone society like Assam. Policy makers should seriously assess

these mechanisms if they can be developed for further and wider contexts of conflict resolution. Mechanisms of the *Satra* and *Namghar* demand special attention in the field of use of culture and cultural elements for positive transformation and maintenance of social integration in a multicultural setting like Assam.

The existing universities of the state should take serious and productive action of introspective research in this area. *Namghars* and *Satras* and their role in the society and culture should be included in the educational curriculum of the schools, colleges and universities. The numbers of printed and electronic writings on the institutions are significantly less in number. Hence Government and the institutions, especially the *Satras* should encourage publication of books, monographs, research writings. Government should announce short time scholarships, fellowship schemes, major and minor research projects to do sincere research works on various aspects of the *Satras* and *Namghars*. It is mentionable that even within the cultural aspects, areas of wood carvings, mask making, handicrafts, organic painting are hardly discussed in details. So there is the need of properly planned comprehensive academic policy which will methodically document the ins and outs of the historical institutions.

The future of *Satra* and *Namghar* depends upon the young generation. A different perspective also can be used for the phenomenon of non representation. Experiences of the field suggest that inspite of being such influential and popular public institutions, *Namghars* and more particularly, the *Satras* are silent and unresponsive to some crucial issues of the changing time. Majuli has been facing lots of serious problems due to its distinctive geographical location. Flood and erosion has been causing havoc to the island every year. Besides these natural disasters, the island has historically been suffering political and social indifference. Even in the twenty first century; the infrastructural development of the island is very poor. The condition of the roads is very poor. Villages of the river banks, islets and out of the embankments are literally devoid of road in the proper sense of the term. There are still large numbers of villages without electrification, water supply facilities and sanitation measures. Implementation of governmental plans and policies is very poor in most parts of the sub division and there is hardly any vigilant initiative to look into these issues. Transportation and communication is still in the

primitive stage in the island. Students of Majuli still have to cross the river for their higher education. The entire sub division does not have any institution for technical or vocational education. There is hardly any industry in the island. Growing rate of unemployment leads to pathetic scenario in the households in the society. During the 90s, large numbers of youths joined anti national organisations leading the island to be the hub of anti national forces. In the recent period, unemployment and lack of employment avenues compel thousands of youths of Majuli to migrate to different states in search of petty jobs. This interstate migration of the youth forces, especially to states like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Chennai in search of petty jobs weaken the socio-economic structure of the island. So, influential institutions, particularly the *Satras* can take strong initiatives and raise voice about these issues to pressurise the state to opt employment measures in the island. Many respondents in the field express their dissatisfaction over the silence of the *Satra* and the *Satradhikars* regarding social issues like unemployment, lack of higher educational institutions and industries etc. Though *Satras* have been raising their voices in issues of protection of the island in physical or geographical terms, they are found to be silent on issues of political and economic issues. Being so authoritative and influential figures, *Satradhikars* of the island can initiate unified efforts to represent the growing dissatisfaction of the people of Majuli in the higher level. They can play the role of effective civil society in the island. There is no civil society body to look into the socio-political concerns of the island and its people. Therefore *Satras* can utilise this gap and can appear as strong representative civil society organisation to work for the fulfillment of the age old deprivations in the field of economy and political rights. *Namghars* can also be attached in the process as their subordinate bodies which can be used for mobilising the people in the village level. In this context, there is an urgent need to mobilize the young generation. Otherwise, the next generation would start treating these institutions merely as religious or antique bodies of tourist attraction. In this context, approaches towards the tribal communities should be more liberal and careful. It is the high time for the institutions to self assess their role in the society so that they can retain their impact over the people of the island.

So there should be well planned schemes to inform and engage the young generation with such institutions. Some *Satras* of Majuli are found to initiate innovative

schemes of approaching and inclusion of the young generation by well planned socio-economic activities like workshop on cultural activities, blood donation camps, health care camps, plantation programmes, symposium and seminars on Vaishnavite philosophy and ethical values and by opening NGOs. AYUSH of Dakshinpat *Satra*- an initiative to attract the youths, Kala Kendra of Uttar Kamalabari *Satra*, Rangabhumi of Bengenaati *Satra* have been successful examples of such progressive enterprises. It is mentionable that though cultural aspects of *Satra* are the mostly highlighted field, areas of wood carvings, mask making, handicrafts, organic painting are hardly brought into focus. So there is the need of properly planned comprehensive academic policy which will methodically document the ins and outs of the historical institutions. In this process, simple, short but suggestive history of the institutions, biography of the *Satradhikar*, narrative account of socio-cultural resources like Bhaona, Satriya Dance should be made available for children and youths. Organisations working in the field of literature like Asom Sahitya Sabha, Asom *Satra* Mahasabha, Publication Board of Assam, National Book Trust, Children Book Trust, India or private publication houses should initiate schemes and encourage writers to write books on these institutions for the young generation. Electronically disseminated information in the form of websites, e-books, inclusion of information in e-resources like Wikipedia will be of great help. Information about the institutions is very limited in the electronic media. Therefore, both the government and institutions should take effective steps to work in this aspect. Accurately composed notes, good photographs, statistical accounts of their different aspects should be made available in internet. .

Recently , department of Performing Arts of Dibrugarh university and Department of Cultural studies of Tezpur University are found to take serious interest in taking out the *Satra* and *Namghar* to the mainstream academic discourse. Similarly respective governments and governmental agencies like the Sangeet Natak Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi, Ministry of Cultural Affairs (State and Central wings) have also been initiating different plans and policies to encourage these institutional practices. But, in most of such initiatives, the cultural aspect has been overshadowing the social role of the institutions. So, separate and careful planning is necessary to look into this particular issue. The existing academicians, department of Humanities of the Universities and

Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, Mahapurush Sri Manta Sankardeva University, Nagaon, Tata Institute of Social Science, Guwahati, Assam Women University, Jorhat should come forward to work on this aspect. There is an urgent need of a research institution or a full-fledged research institution to work on the role and contribution of the Vaishnavite institutions in the island. During the course of research, all the public and the people associated with the institutions expressed the need of such an institution which exclusively works on these institutions. The *Satradhikars* and the public of Majuli are ready to collaborate and co-operate in such initiatives. During the field visit, *Satradhikars* of many of the *Satras* of Majuli expressed their willingness to co-operate with such initiatives. A well planned collaborative academic centre solely dedicated to work on the *Satra*, *Namghar*, Majuli and its social culture would be of great effect in boosting the upliftment of the *Satras* and *Namghars* for the near future.

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LIST OF EXISTING SATRAS IN MAJULI

Source- Field Visit, November 2013- January 2015

Table 3

Sl.no	<u>Name of the Satra</u>	<u>Location</u>
1.	Sri Sri Auniati <i>Satra</i>	Jugunidhari Village
2.	Sri Sri Garamur <i>Satra</i> (Bor <i>Satra</i>)	Garamur
3.	Sri Sri Garamur <i>Satra</i> (Saru <i>Satra</i>)	Garamur
4.	Sri Sri Dakhinpat <i>Satra</i>	Dakhinpat ,Naoshali village
5.	Sri Sri Adhar Mahara <i>Satra</i>	Kharjan Village
6.	Sri Sri Owa <i>Satra</i>	Kerela Village,Garamur
7.	Sri Sri Chakala <i>Satra</i>	Ahataguri Chakala Village
8.	Sri Sri Belesiddhiya <i>Satra</i>	Mohkina village
9.	Sri Sri Majuli Adi Alengi <i>Satra</i>	Balichapori Village
10.	Sri Sri Dakhinpat Grihashrami <i>Satra</i>	Naoshali village
11.	Sri Sri Alengi Madarguri <i>Satra</i>	South Ahataguri
12.	Sri Sri Alengi Takoubari <i>Satra</i>	Mudoi Bil Village
13.	Sri Sri Alengi BnahJengoni <i>Satra</i>	Kathamiya Village
14.	Sri Sri Alengi Narasinha <i>Satra</i>	Abhaypur Village
15.	Sri Sri Dikhomukh Bar Alengi <i>Satra</i>	Ratanpur Gayan Village
16.	Sri Sri Bar Alengi Bali Chapori <i>Satra</i>	Balichapori village
17.	Sri Sri Malual Bar Alengi <i>Satra</i>	Karatipar Village
18.	Sri Sri Majuli Bar Alengi <i>Satra</i>	Balichapori Village
19.	Sri Sri Bihimpur <i>Satra</i>	Tataya village
20.	Sri Sri Adi Bihimpur <i>Satra</i>	Rajgurubari Village
21.	Sri Sri Ananta Kalshila <i>Satra</i>	Rangachahi Village
22.	Sri Sri Punia <i>Satra</i>	Bongaon
23.	Sri Sri Chamarguri (Prachin) <i>Satra</i>	Chamaguri (old) village
24.	Sri Sri Dalani Chamaguri <i>Satra</i>	Dalani Chamaguri Village
25.	Sri Sri Natun Chamaguri <i>Satra</i>	Rawanapar village
26.	Sri Sri Bengenaati <i>Satra</i>	Bengenaati village
27.	Sri Sri Uttar Kamalabari <i>Satra</i>	Kamalabari,Dariya village
28.	Sri Sri Natun Kamalabari <i>Satra</i>	South Kamalabari
29.	Sri Sri Madhya Majuli Sri Kamalabari <i>Satra</i>	Deodiyaati Village
30.	Sri Sri Bhogpur <i>Satra</i>	Bhogpur village
31.	Sri Sri Sharjan <i>Satra</i>	Marituni village
32.	Sri Sri Ahnataguri <i>Satra</i>	Phakua Village

LIST OF VILLAGES UNDER FIELD VISIT

Period of Field Visit- November 2013- January 2015

Table 4.

<u>Sl.no.</u>	<u>Name of the Village</u>	<u>Name of the Panchayat</u>	<u>Name of the Block</u>
1)	Lahan Gaon	Ratanpur Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
2)	Baghar Gaon	Ratanpur Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
3)	Dakhinpat kaibarta	Dakhinpat gaon panchayat	Majuli
4)	Jengrai Mirigaon	Jengrai Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
5)	Barpamua no.1	Jengrai Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
6)	Majar Deori	Srimpuriya panchayat	Ujani Majuli
7)	Karkichuk	Phulani Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
8)	Ranghachahi	Ranghachahi Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
9)	Bhuramora no.1.	Ranghachahi Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
10)	Pahumara	Ranghachahi Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
11)	Bhuramora no.2.	Ranghachahi Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
12)	Gosaibari	Ranghachahi Gaon Panchayat	Ujani Majuli
13)	Dariya Gaon	Kamalabari Gaon Panchayat	Majuli

14)	Bhogpur Satra	Kamalabari Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
15)	Kerelagaon	Kamalabari Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
16)	Molual Kalita	Karatipar Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
17)	Molual Miri	Karatipar Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
18)	Garamur Satra	Garamur Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
19)	Mohkina	Garamur Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
20)	Dakhinpat Satra	Dakhinpat Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
21)	Karhal Gaon (1,2)	Dakhinpat Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
22)	Mudoichuk	Bongaon Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
23)	Mudoi Tanti	Bongaon Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
24)	Meragarh	Bongaon Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
25)	Burasensowa	Rawanapar Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
26)	Tataya gaon	Rawanapar Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
27)	Purani and Dalani Chamaguri	Bongaon Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
28)	Pakajora Miri	Pakajora Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
29)	Ratanpur Miri	Sri Luhit Gaon Panchayat	Majuli
30)	Bengenaati Purani Satra	Sri Luhit Gaon Panchayat	Majuli

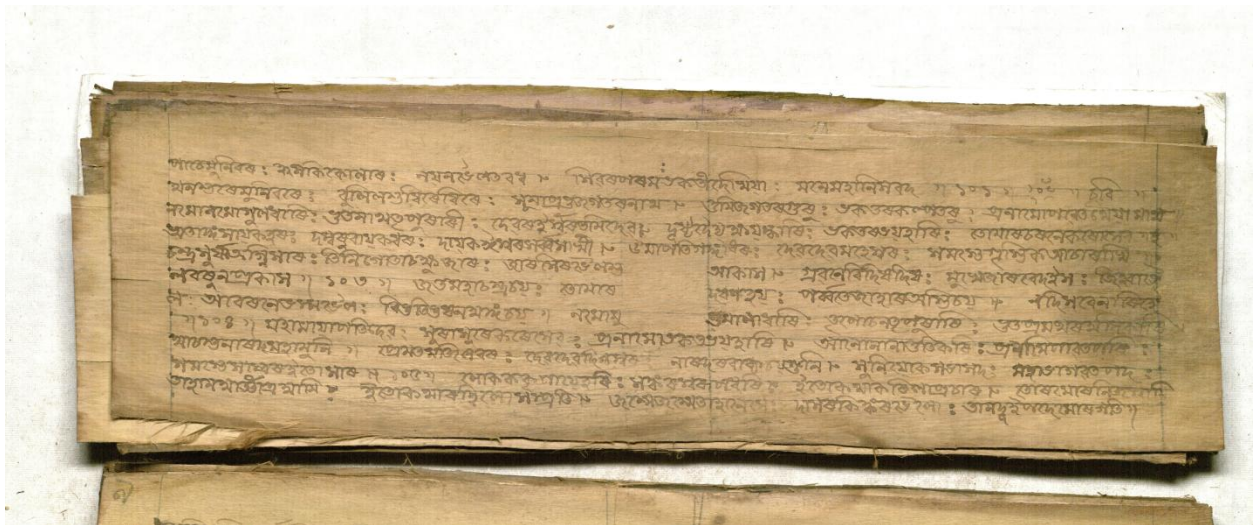
Photographs from the field



Pic.1.5: *Bhakats* chanting *Nama* in the *Namghar* of *Uttar Kamalabari Satra*
Source- Photograph taken during field study, 18/ 1/15



Pic.1.6: Group of women ready for interview in Mudoichuk village
Source: photograph taken during field study, 13/8/14



Pic: 1.7: Preserved Sanchi manuscript of *Smriti* in Dakhinpat Satra
Source- Photograph provided by Narayan Bora, the present *Kakati* of Dakhinpat Satra



Pic.8.: Interviewing Dehiram Burabhakat in Uttar Kamalabari *Satra*, one of the senior residents of the *Satra*

Source- Photograph taken during field study, 15/6/14



Pic .1.9: Interviewing residents of Dakhinpat *Satra*
Source – Photograph taken during field study, 6/11/14