

# The Historical Origin and Architectural Development of Barpeta Satra

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## **Abstract**

*The Barpeta Satra is one of the most remarkable Vaishnavite Centers of Assam which serves as a center of devotion and cultural preservation. The Barpeta Satra is situated in the heart of the Barpeta Township and it is approximately one kilometer away from the Deputy Commissioner Office, Barpeta. In the year 1583 A.D. Sri Sri Madhavadeva, the disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva founded the Barpeta Satra. The main objective behind establishing Barpeta Satra was to disseminate the Neo-Vaishnavite Faith of Srimanta Sankaradeva among the people and to develop art and culture to a great extent. In the period of the Ahom Kingdom, Ahom King Siva Singha has allocated some plot of land for the development of Barpeta Satra. At present, the buildings and houses of the Satra are mesmerizing and unique. There are 219 numbers of branches of Barpeta Satra in different places of Assam. The study deals with the historical genesis of Barpeta Satra by tracing its foundation, role of the key figures and the architectural evolution of Barpeta Satra over time by highlighting the unique features of the buildings and houses of Barpeta Satra. The study is based on Satra visit, secondary sources such as books published by different authors and internet resources.*

## **Keywords:**

*Barpeta Satra, Historical Genesis, Architectural Development, Neo-Vaishnavite Faith.*

## **Article History:**

Received on 27, November, 2025

Accepted on 30 April, 2026

## Introduction:

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a *Bhakti* Saint from Assam. He was a great Saint, Scholar, Socio-Religious Reformer, Polymath, Philosopher, Spiritual Leader, Poet and Playwright. The Saint was born in c 1449 A.D. in a village called Alipukhuri near Bardowa of the present district of Nagaon. He received education in the *tol* (school) of a Brahman scholar Mahendra Kandali (Neog, 1961/2021). Srimanta Sankaradeva established the Neo-Vaishnavite Faith or Neo-Vaishnavism or Neo-Vaishnavite Movement or *Eka-Sarana-Naama-Dharma* in Medieval Assam within the broader umbrella of the *Bhakti* Movement during the 15th and 16th centuries. The Neo-Vaishnavite Faith was epoch making in reforming the social, religious and cultural life of the people in Medieval Assam by establishing an egalitarian society without caste based discrimination.

The Neo-Vaishnavite Faith is strictly monotheistic and Srimanta Sankaradeva instructs people to completely self-surrender to and has faith in one Supreme God and this Supreme God is Lord Krishna, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The Neo-Vaishnavite Faith rejects Vedic ritualism, idol worship with its emphasis on *Bhakti* (devotion) to Lord Sri Krishna in the form of congregational singing (*kirtan*) and listening (*shravan*) to his name, deeds and activities. In his Neo-Vaishnavite faith, Srimanta Sankaradeva gave recognition to and accepted all people irrespective of caste, creed, gender and status. He taught people that Vedic rituals and sacrifices are not required to worship and realize God instead *Bhakti* (devotion) from pure heart is important to worship and realize God and to achieve spiritual strength. Srimanta Sankaradeva established the *Satra* (central monastery) and *Namghar* (the community prayer house) for the propagation of his Neo-Vaishnavite Faith (Rajkhowa, 2003/2012). Although all the Ahom Rulers did not provide help to the Vaishnavite Saints but from Jayadhwaj Singha (1649-1663) to Ratnadhvaj Singha (1679-1681) showed due respect and kindness to the Vaishnavite Saints. They provided grants and endowments for the development of the *Satras* (Gait, 1906/2014). The *Satras* are now found all over Assam and these were established to disseminate the Neo-Vaishnavite Faith of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The *Namghar* is a community prayer hall where the devotees gather together to perform prayer and it is found today in almost every village of Assam.

The Barpeta *Satra* is one of the most famous Vaishnavite Centers of Assam established during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the initial days, most of the people in Barpeta district had no fixed habitation but after the establishment of Barpeta *Satra*, they became connected with the *Satra* and started to live permanently nearby the *Satra*. During the British period, Barpeta was declared as a town and the Barpeta *Satra* was reorganized by covering all three numbers of main *Hatis* and 22 number of branch *Hatis* and people of these *Hatis* follow the rules and regulations of the *Satra* (Talukdar, 2010).

### **Objectives of the Study:**

The main objectives of the study are:

- To trace out the history of origin of Barpeta *Satra* in Assam
- To study the unique architectural development of Barpeta *Satra* over time.

### **Research Methodology:**

The study is descriptive and it is based on *Satra* visit, secondary sources such as books published by different authors and internet resources.

### **Research Questions:**

- 1) What is the historical origin of Barpeta *Satra*?
- 2) How has the architecture of Barpeta *Satra* developed over time?

### **The Historical Origin of Barpeta Satra:**

At the inception, Barpeta *Satra* was established by Sri Sri Madhavadeva in the year 1583 A.D. with the co-operation of his disciple Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata by constructing a *kutch*(raw) house with three rooms in a small plot of land donated by Ram Ladua Burha, uncle of Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata (Talukdar, 2010). Sri Sri Madhavadeva resided in the *Satra* for eight years and used one room for performing prayer and conducting religious discussion and that was the starting point of Barpeta *Satra*. Sri Sri Madhavadeva constructed the *Rangial Griha*, *Manikut*, *Sari Hati*, *Batchaura*, *Bhandar Ghar* etc. for Barpeta *Satra* and has written many great literary works. Thereafter, Sri Sri Madhavadeva left the *Satra* by giving its responsibility to his disciple Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata who later took care of the *Satra* and he became the first *Satria* of Barpeta *Satra* (Talukdar, 2010). By taking responsibilities of the Barpeta *Satra*, initially

Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata faced a lot of difficulties but later he managed to systematize the administration of the *Satra* which further led to the evolution of the Barpeta *Satra* and the region of Barpeta.

Many people came to the Barpeta *Satra* and accepted the Neo-Vaishnavite faith by which a new religious faith developed among the people of Barpeta. Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata has taken some right steps like *ChaidhyaPrasanga* (instead of earlier three *Prasangas*), introduction of *HatiPratha*, participation of people in the *Satra*, involvement of *Bora*, arrangement of *UdakhinBhakat*(Monk), enrollment of followers, meeting for the propagation of Neo-Vaishnavite Faith etc for the development of the Barpeta *Satra*.

It is worth mentioning that initially people of lower classes were not allowed to enter into the Barpeta *Satra* but a new change has been made to allow them to enter into the *Satra* with effect from 2nd October, 1947 (Talukdar, 2010). At present, the *Satra* is well developed, covering a plot of land with 18 *bighas* within the *Satra* campus and surrounded by big concrete walls of seven feet height. Moreover the *Satra* also has 1100 *bighas* in Barpeta town and some plot of area in Mandiya, Pathshala, Howli etc. The Barpeta *Satra* has three entry gates which are known as *Batchaura*. The front gate in the west side is named “*Dalan*” which is considered as the main entry to the *Satra* complex and the other two gates were constructed in the north and south sides and these are known as *UttarHatiBatchaura* and *DakhinBatchaura* respectively.

### **The Architectural Development of Barpeta Satra:**

After a period of time the *Satra* flourished and to cater to the multiple need of the residents as well as the devotees, many buildings were constructed within the *Satra* complex such as *KirtanGhar*, *BhajGhar*, *Satra* Music School, Sri Ram Ata’s *Bhiti*, Sri Burha Ata’s *Bhiti*, *Patchang*, *AtithiGriha*, *Math*, *SabhaGhar*, Badala Padma Ata *Bhiti*, *BhagawatGriha*, Mathura Das Burha Ata Library, Jagmohan *Griha*, *Doul*, *Khatkhati*, *RangaMancha*, *KewaliyaBhakat* Residence and Managing Committee Office.

*KirtanGhar* is known as the main prayer hall and it is almost located in the centre of the *Satra* campus. The main entrance of the *KirtanGhar* is located in the western side. There are two wooden pillars (traditionally called *TulashiKhuta*) inside near to the main west gate, serving as the foundation of the main building. In the end of the *KirtanGhar*, there are three *GuruAshans*.

These *GuruAshans* are connected with the name of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Sri Sri Madhavadeva and Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata, followed by a table and two big *Ghacha* (traditionally designed earth lamp stand). For *BurhaSatria* and *DekaSatria*, two chairs are present behind the *GuruAshan* (east corner) where they regularly perform their work. In front of the *GuruAshan*, seven *BarSarais* (traditional bale metal design food keeper) are present in a line. Except the statues of Garuda and Hanuman, no statues of any other Gods or Goddesses are present within the *KirtanGhar*.

The *BhajGhar* is also called *Monikut*. The *BhajGhar* is located in the eastern side. The *BhajGhar* is divided into two parts such as *GhaiBharal* and *Monikut*. Valuable jewelry of gold and silver as well as treasured belongings of the *Satra* are found within the *GhaiBharal*. In addition to it, a tank of storing mustered oil is also found. *Monikut* is the other part of the *BhajGhar*. Within the *Monikut*, idols of Lord Krishna and Rukmini are found. Within the *BhajGhar*, the *AkhayBanti* (earthen lamp) is consistently lighting up since 500 years.

The Barpeta *Satra* has also established a *Sattriya* Cultural Music school within the complex in the east-south corner. This school provides training to the students on Performing Arts. Sri Ram Ata's *Bhiti* (house) was built opposite to the house of Sri Sri Madhavadeva. Sri Ram Ata was a disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva. At present a well is also there and the water of this well is regarded as pure and it is also utilized in the activities of the *Satra*. Sri Burha Ata's *Bhiti* (house) is a mesmerizing house which is present within the north-east side of the *Satra* and inside the house the first *Satria* of Barpeta *Satra*, Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata stayed. Initially the *PatChang* was built by wood and tin but now it is transformed into concrete form. The *PatChang* was built parallel to the *BhajGhar* and floor of the *patchang* is five feet above from the ground level. Here some special meetings are conducted. Also discussions on religious and administrative issues of the *Satra* take place here.

*AtithiGriha* was also built within the *Satra* campus which is a huge guest house where tourists can stay at any time. Moreover, the *Satra* also provides the necessary grocery items to the tourists so that they can cook their own food. *Math* was also built later on in the residential area of Sri Sri Madhavadeva and its architectural design is similar to that of the Ahom Kingdom. In front of the *Math* people perform spiritual activities and the open space is known as

*MathorChotal*. The *SabhaGhar* is present in the north-west side of the *KirtanGhar*. The *SabhaGhar* is an open house where general meeting of “*SomohBhakat*” takes place

Badula Padma Ata *Bhiti* is a mesmerizing house which was rebuilt on the place where one of the dearest disciples of Srimanta Sankaradeva resided in the *Satra* complex. On the southern side of *KirtanGhar*, this house is present in between *AthithiGriha* and *BhagawatGriha*. *BhagawatGriha* is an open L shaped house which is present in the southern side of the *KirtanGhar* and it is utilized as a prayer house or *SastraAdhyanGriha* (holy book reading area). Within the *BhagawatGriha*, to listen to the *Bhagawatpath*, devotees sit together regularly in the evening time. Mathura Das Burha Ata Library is also recently built within the *Satra* premises where a huge number of text books written on *Sankari* culture are available

*JagmohanGriha* was also constructed on the north of *SabhaGhar*. The *Bhakats* (monks) held discussions on all kinds of issues in the *JagmohanGriha*. *Doul* was constructed as a wonderful seven steps building in the north-west side where the Kalia Thakur (Lord Sri Krishna) is kept during the time of *DoulUtsav* (Holi festival). People believe that after climbing the seven steps they can reach heaven. *Khatkhati* is a canal running to the eastern side of the premises of Barpeta *Satra*. In between the water of the *Jaan* (canal) statues of baby Krishna were built. In the canal, Sri Sri Madhavadeva bathed with other *Bhakats* (monks).

*RangaMancha* is a modern stage present within the *Satra* premises. Initially people performed cultural activities in an open area, but after the construction of *Rangamancha*, people take part in cultural activities over there.. *KewaliaBhakat* Residence is a building present within the *Satra* campus as the residential area of the *KewaliaBhakat* (Monk). Managing Committee Office is also another important building which is also available in the *Satra* complex for conducting meetings of managing committee.

### **Conclusion:**

It can be concluded that although Sri Sri Madhavadeva initially laid the foundation of the Barpeta *Satra* but it was his disciple, Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata who have developed the *Satra* in a systematic manner. With trust, Sri Sri Madhavadeva gave his disciple, Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata the responsibility to take care of the *Satra* and Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata did his part very well. Despite facing challenges, Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata never gave up and kept the words of

his *Guru Sri Sri Madhavadeva* by developing the Barpeta *Satrat* to a great extent in its initial stage with all necessary buildings and houses needed. The Barpeta *Satra* also gave homeless people the opportunity to live permanently nearby its campus. At present the Barpeta *Satra* is well equipped in all aspects. The contribution of Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata for the evolution of Barpeta *Satras* is highly appreciable as he did a great job by giving the *Satra* its final shape and actively developing the administration of the *Satra* which prove his dedication towards his responsibility. Hence the transformation of Barpeta *Satra* from a *kutch*(raw) house to a huge complex is really exceptional.

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