

## Revisiting the Heritage Materials of Sri Sridihing Na-Matisatra, Nazira

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### Abstract

For long, satras have played an important role in Assam not only as a religious and educational institution, but also a repository of heritage. First satra was established at Bardua/Bratatduwa by Mahapurush Sri SriSankardev, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. Since then, satras have been functioning primarily as a religious institution, but at the same time they are also responsible for continuity of satriya tradition which is also part and parcel of Assamese culture. Satras have preserved various categories heritage materials upon which their entire tradition depended in the past. Sri SriDihing Na-MatiSatra located in Sivasagar district is among the satras of Upper Assam where the antiquarian remains are at risk due to several factors. Apart from general discussion, this paper offers a need base approach with remedies and critically assesses the status of heritage materials of the satra after active participation in the survey and field work.

### Introduction:

The *Satras* are known as Vaishnavite institutions in Assam, first of which is said to have been initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva at Batadruwa in Nagaon district in the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The *Satras*, for long, have played a vital role in promotion and preservation of Satriya culture and ideology across Assam. However, the *satras* had to encounter numerous challenges. The life of *satradhikars* or the head of the *satra* institution was not bed of roses at all. They had to suffer a lot on account of political turbulence and conspiracy. Natural calamities such as flood stood as a dire threat to the existence of such institutions and as a result of which *satras* had to be shifted from one place to another. Despite of unaccountable hardship, the *satras* were able to consolidate their roots in almost whole of the state and eventually became a part and parcel of Assamese culture. The present *Satra* under discussion i.e. Sri SriDihing Na-matiSatra of Sivasagar is one of the notable *satras* in Upper Assam.

### Aims and Objectives:

1. To understand a firsthand experience of the *Satra* culture.
2. To document all antiquities
3. To identify the materials and study their historical value
4. To discuss the issues of conservation and remedy
5. To frame an action plan

### Methodology:

1. Interview
2. Survey and documentation

**Historical Background:** Sri Sri Dihing Na-mati Satra (Geocoordinates :N 26°54'31.38804", E 94°43'3.24408") is located about 3 kilometers from the Nazira town in Sivasagar district. As traditional belief goes, this *satra* was established in the year 1640 A.D. Till date this *satra* is credited to have witnessed thirteenth generations. Sri Sri Srikantadev, youngest son of Sri Sri Jadumonidev is the founder of the *satra*. He was succeeded by Sri Sri Srikantadev, Sri Sri Binandasyamdev, Sri Sri Premahardev, Sri Sri Sarvasiddhidev, Sri Sri Joynathdev, Sri Sri Lakshmikantadev, Sri Sri Harikantadev, Sri Sri Purnachandradev, Sri Sri Ghanakantadev, Sri Sri Jibakantadev and Sri Sri Trailokya Chandradevagoswami.

Detailed account of the missionary activities of the *satradhikars* is recorded in several *carit-puthi* of the *satra*. *Carit-puthi* are important source for reconstructing the history of that time. According to the testimony of a *Carit* text, Lachit Borphukan happened to be one of the disciples of Sri Sri Binandashyamdeva when the *satradhikar* stayed in Guwahati for quite some time, and in respect of his guru the Ahom general is said to have presented him an ivory craft resembling a human hand with intricate designs. Binandashyamdev is one of the *mahantas* of Namrup who faced exile during the reign of Gadadhar Singha. The king's policy towards *mahantas* compelled Sri Sri Binandashyam to travel to other kingdoms. Finally, he was welcomed by Caringiya Raja who granted him a land at Dihing Hapani for establishment of the *satra*. The fate of the *satra* remained insecure for a long time. On the long run, Swargadeo Lakshmi Singha donated 16 elephants and a land to the *satra* at Nazira. A seal inscribing "*Jadudeva Kuludva Sriharichandra Krishnanati*" was also given to the *satra* as act of recognition. A Naga chief who controlled the settlements at Joboka, Longhu and Khulun was given *sarana* at this *satra* by Sri Sri Purnachandradeva.

**Area of Influence:** Besides Sivasagar district, disciples of the *Sri Sri Dihing Satra* are scattered in various districts of Assam namely Tinisukia, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon, Kamrup and Tezpur. A good number inhabitants from nearby Bosagaon, Bhakatgaon, Achalpathar, Balighat, Upar-nazira, Maoutgaon, Simaluguri, Dorikiyal and Lakuwa are the disciples of this *satra*. Total number of disciples in and around Nazira alone stands about 1500.

**Specialty about the Satra:** The *Sri Sri Dihing Na-mati Satra* has held a reputation for long as an expertise institution providing teaching of *Mridanga* for several generations. The *satra* has been traditionally performing *Bhaonas* (Vaishnavite Drama), song and dances in association of *Mridangas*.

**Philosophy:** *Kalasanghat* founded by Sri Sri Gopaldevais one of the four *sanghat* or branches prevalent in Assam and is followed at the Sri Sri Dihing Na-Mati Satra as well.

**Salient Features of Satriya tradition observed at the satra:**

1. In earlier days, the headship of the *satra* usually went to the son of the *satradhikar* which became hereditary. But presently, the headship and responsibility is determined and acknowledged on seniority basis.

2. The *sevaks* of the *satra* considers *guru* as *Ishvar*. The chief aim of the *bhaktas* is to realize and observe *navadha bhakti* (nine ways of devotion) through which a *guru* may be satisfied.
3. The main aim of the *satrais* to spread among *bhaktas* the Vaishavite doctrine and principles of Srimanta Sakardev, Sri Madhabdev, Sri Gopaldev and elders of the *satra*.
4. The *Janmastami*, *palnam* and *tithis* of four *gurus* are observed with community participation.
5. From time to time, special session is reserved for intellectual discussion.
6. Several *sashtra* are read every year, in the month of *Bhado*. *Nam* is observed on the last day of the month.
7. *Bhaona* is performed at the *satra* at least once in a year.
8. The *prasanga-pranali* of the *satra* remains unchanged since the time of Sri Sri Gopaldev. Three types of *prasanga-pranali* are observed and widely celebrated on *tithis* and other occasions.

#### Architecture and plan of the *satranamghar*:



Figure 1: Front view of the *satra*

The *satranamghar* consists of two parts: *monikut* and *sabhaghar*. Out of these two only the *sabhaghar* has retained its previous architecture having two rows of four pillars raising the roof. Each pillar is constructed with bricks and three bands forming an abacus are given towards the finial. The year of construction of the *satra* is born by the front pillar on the right.

### Status of Heritage Materials:

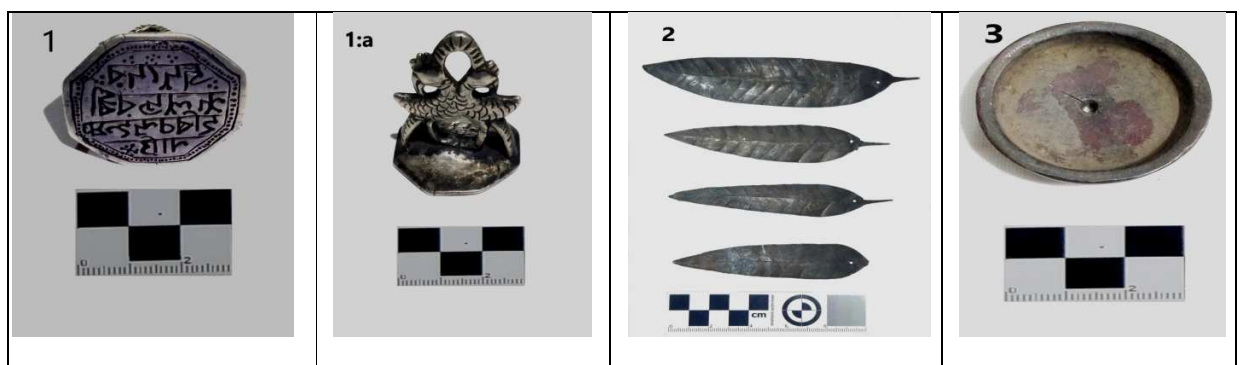


Figure 2: Manuscripts kept in a wooden book

The heritage materials of the *Sri SriDihing Na-matiSatra* have been found in unscientific state of preservation. The heritage materials have been kept without any care which is a common trajectory among the *satras* of Assam. Most of the manuscripts have incomplete folios which got damaged due to mishandling or inadequate storage. Growth of mildew and other microbiological organisms have been noticed in the manuscripts. Some manuscripts were brittle and fragile. Insects like cockroaches, centipedes and silverfishes were found while inspecting the manuscripts. *Betupaat* or the cover in most of the manuscripts except for the *Kirtanta* was either lost or damaged.

**Documentation of the Museum Objects:**The museum objects of the *satra* are categorized into four groups. The documentation of objects done at the *satra* is important not only for listing the number of artifacts found but it also shows the status of the artifacts with scope of further researches.

### Metal Objects







1. Stamp: The seal is inscribed with “*JadudevaKuludvaSriharichandraKrishnanati*” and thus bears important information of the lineage. The seal is octagonal and has two peacocks in back to back position (figure 1: a).

2. *Ampaat* or mango leaves: These leaves are carved on the sheets of silver. These leaves are called *ampaat* as they resemble a mango leaf. The length of the measures 15 cm, 12cm, 12cm and 10 cm respectively. All parts of a mango leaf viz., veins, midrib, petiole, and base are given a natural look. *Ampaat* are used on auspicious occasion.

3. *Tema*: It is a small container (diameter: 4 cm, height: 0.7 cm) which contains a paste to be used *astilok* on forehead.

4. *XaraiSafura*: This is a dish on stand made of brass (height: 52cm). It is traditionally used on religious occasion and marriage ceremonies.

5. *Xarai*: This is a dish on stand made of brass (diameter: 29cm, height: 30cm). It is traditionally used on religious occasion and marriage ceremonies.

6. *Tal*: It is used in *namprasanga*. The diameter is 36 cm.

7. Dragon: It is a small dragon in a seated position. The base measures 3cm x 3 cm. The height is around 6 cm.

8. *Vingar*: It has a spout. It is used on religious occasion. The height is 24.5cm.

9. *Bhogjara*: It is a decorated spouted object for pouring water. It is used on religious occasion. The height is 35cm.

10. *Choria*: It is used for washing hands. The diameter is 29cm and the height is 10cm.

11. *Bati* or bowl: It is called *hatikhujiyabati* because of its size of an elephant's leg. The diameter is 26cm and height is 8cm.

12. *Banbati*: It is bowl on stand. The diameter is 19cm and the height is 12.5cm.

13. *Bankahi*: It is dish on stand. The diameter is 33cm and the height is 17cm.

14. *Bota*: It is a traditional tray for serving *guwa-paan*. The diameter is 25.5cm and the height is 16cm.

15. *Lota*: It is a water pot.

16. *Kakoi*: It is a comb (Length: 14cm). It had 20 dents. The upper part has beautiful designs. Both ends are adorned by *magora*.

17. *Safuratema*: The diameter of the base is 12.3cm. The height is 11cm.

18. *Kah*: It is beaten in the morning and evening. The diameter is 29cm and 31cm. The height measures 4 cm and 4.5 cm

19. *Koldil*: These are banana blossoms with a natural look. The length measures 9cm, 9.3cm, and 85 cm respectively.

### Metal Objects



### Wooden, Leather, Bamboo & Cane Objects

1. *Doba*: It is a kind of drum made from wood and leather. It is beaten before *prasanga* in the morning and evening. Beautiful decoration is seen towards the rim. The beating sticks are made from *sisutree*. The diameter of the *Doba* is 72 cm.

2. *Udal*: It is used for grinding medicinal plants. It is made of timber of *kathal* tree. The diameter is 22cm and the height is 40cm.

3. *Tema*: It is a container (Diameter: 10cm, Height: 9 cm) made from bamboo strips. It is very smooth and has an outer coat painted in red. The cap is also coated in red.

4. *Merdhari*: It is a circular mat (Diameter: 74cm). It is a symbol of honour. Whenever, an elder or *satradhikar* visits the *satra*, he is given to sit on this mat.



### Ivory object





**Figure: Composite Craft of Ivory**

The object is a masterpiece of the *satra*. It has beautiful minute carvings. Three parts may be joined together into a single piece of craft (Length: 40.5cm). One part represents a hand and other a *mogar* whereas the central part has four peacocks carved alternately one on each other. The *mogar* has two tusks like elephants.

### **Manuscripts:**

At the predocumented stage, the researcher found some manuscripts on the slabs of the walls inside the *monikut* of the *Satra*. Most of the manuscripts were infected by dust and fungus due to the gloomy environment. Considerable parts of the manuscripts have already been damaged by insects and rodents. Other manuscripts kept in a wooded box are also found infested by insects.



**Figure: Monitoring the manuscripts**

Once upon a time, the *Sri SriDihing Na-mati Satra* had a large number of manuscripts, mostly made from *Sanchi Paat*. But due to negligence and lack of proper preservation,



most of the manuscripts either got damaged or lost. At present, only 20 manuscripts have been found in readable condition. To utter surprise, most of the manuscripts were not found in complete.

In absence of complete folios, it is difficult to find out the name of the manuscripts. The researcher has tried to recognize the name of texts on basis of the word or phrase/phrases suggesting the central theme or core of the text. The size of the manuscripts is different from one another. Among the lengthy manuscripts are the *Kirtana* (L-47.5 cm, B-14.5 cm) and the *BhagawataDakhamMahapuram*(Length- 47 cm, Breadth- 15 cm). Next is the *Mahabharata* (L- 46 cm, B-15 cm). Two texts among the manuscripts- the *BhagawataMahapuramDakhamSkandha* and the *Mahabhrata* have same breadth, i.e. 15cm. A ratio of 3:1 between the length and breadth seems to be common among the manuscripts.

Although manuscripts are primarily prepared from Sanchi paat, occasional use of paper was also seen. Attempts of replacing the lost pages by paper were seen.

List of manuscripts found at the *satra* are as follows:

Sl No	Text	Size	Folios	Number of Pages	Language	Script	Year
01	<i>Ghosha</i>	L- 41.5 cm B- 10 cm	34	68	Brajawali	Assamese	-
02	<i>BhagawataMahapuramDakham (10<sup>th</sup>) Skandha</i>	L- 47 cm B- 15 cm	38	75	Brajawali	Assamese	-
03	<i>BhagawataBhabarthaDipika</i>	L- 41 cm B-13 cm	74	146	<i>Sanskrit</i>	Assamese	-
04	<i>Ramvijay Nat (Drama)</i>	L- 44.4 cm B- 11.5 cm	19	38	Brajawali and Sanskrit	Assamese	-
05	<i>Ghosha by Sri SriGopaldev and Sri SriJadumonidev</i>	L-30 cm B-7.5 cm	17	34	Brajawali	Assamese	-
06	<i>AkhyanaPuthi</i>	L- 17 cm B- 5 cm	12	21	Brajawali	Assamese	-
07	<i>SatraBuranji</i>	L- 18 cm B- 7 cm	2	4	Brajawali	Assamese	-
08	<i>Krishna Sahashranama</i>	L- 19.5 cm B- 6 cm	12	23	Brajawali	Assamese	-
09	<i>ChaitraPuran</i>	L- 31 cm B-12 cm	61	120	Brajawali	Assamese	-
10	<i>Gitamirita</i>	L- 38.1 cm B- 11 cm	59	117	Brajawali	Assamese	-

11	<i>Kirtana</i>	L-47.5 cm B-14.5 cm	102	203	Brajawali	Assamese	-
12	<i>Mahabharata</i>	L- 46 cm B- 15 cm	65	130	Brajawali	Assamese	-
13	<i>Ghosha</i>	L- 32.1 cm B- 9.3 cm	81	162	Brajawali	Assamese	-
14	<i>Mantra</i>	L- 24.5 cm B- 7.8 cm	17	34	Brajawali	Assamese	-
15	<i>Sri SriGopalDevCh aritra</i>	L- 33 cm B-8 cm	60	118	Brajawali	Assamese	-
16	<i>AkhayanaPuthi</i>	L- 9 cm B- 6.5 cm	17	34	Brajawali	Assamese	-
17	<i>Sri SriNidanPush ta</i>	L-17.3 cm B-7.3 cm	25	49	Brajawali	Assamese	1790 Saka Era
18	<i>Gunamala</i>	L-15.4 cm B-5 cm	27	53	Brajawali	Assamese	-
19	<i>Bhakti Pradeep</i>	L-39 cm B-12.5 cm	17	34	Brajawali	Assamese	-
20	<i>Bhagawata</i>	L-36.7 cm B-9 cm	76	130	Brajawali	Assamese	-

### Importance of the manuscripts:

In fact, the manuscripts are the most precious treasure of the *satra*. They are the witness of the development of the age-long tradition of writing. They are also the repository of traditional knowledge system. The huge bulk of manuscripts throw light on several crucial historical and socio-economic issues. Contextualizing manuscripts in true historical perspective is definitely a sign of positive research.

The preparation of manuscripts is a matter of lengthy process which requires continuous effort right from the acquisition of *Sanchi Paat* and then processing the material, preparation of ink, writing the text and finally storing. Magnitude of manuscripts indicates that the respective tradition was still followed and an attempt was made to transmit the information to the next generation.

Although, the museum objects found at SriSriDihingNamatiSatra reveal some common aspects of the *satra* culture, but some of these artifacts are quite rare and unique.

**Problems in Conservation:** As of now, there is practically less advances in the scientific conservation of *Sanchi paat* manuscripts in India in general and Assam in particular. *Sanchi paat* is specific to Assam and has been traditionally used in preparation of manuscripts. But in its own native environment, such a rich treasure is highly at risk due to several factors. Mishandling of manuscripts and lack of knowledge of preventive conservation are two such major factors. Certain critical issues such as the anatomy and

stability of *Sachipaata*, the rate of deterioration, durability of the ink etc are involved in the conservation of *Sanchi paat* manuscripts. Only trained professionals should resolve the issue of conservation of manuscripts. Therefore, basic preventive conservation steps and proper handling of the manuscripts may be taken up by the custodian of heritage material.

### **Suggestions:**

1. The *satra* should have at least the basic infrastructure such as spacious rooms for keeping the artifacts. There should be separate *almirahs* for each category of the collections. The antiquities should not be overcrowded and should be placed scientifically with proper cover and label.
2. Preventive conservation should be applied to the existing objects. It includes proper ventilation in the room with minimum chances of temperature fluctuations, recommended light arrangements, proper housekeeping, timely monitoring etc.
3. The *satra* should be cautious of any unexpected disaster to the museum objects. Safety from fire, rodents, insects, fungus etc should be ensured.
4. Digitization of manuscripts should be carried out as per the guidelines of National Mission for Manuscripts or similar agencies.
5. The *satra* should take steps for the publicity of its rich heritage, educational and cultural programs.
6. The Indigenous and Tribal Faith and Culture Department, Assam should be approached for financial assistance.
7. Immediate measures should be taken for the preservation of heritage materials of the *satra*. The *Srimanta Sankardev Kalakhetra*, Guwahati and other government organizations like INTACH or Manuscript Conservation Centers of National Mission for the Manuscripts, New Delhi may be sought for assistance.
8. Awareness program is an essential need. Professional art conservators and those who are associated with conservation of heritage properties may launch heritage awareness programs at the *satra*. *Bhaktas* may be given the basics of preventive conservation so that the heritage properties of the respective *satra* could be saved to some extent.
9. NGO's, intellectuals and academicians may assist the *satra*.

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