

# Madhupur Satra: A Study of Cultural Preservation and Institutional Dynamics

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## Abstract

This paper explores the historical evolution, cultural practices, and current challenges of Sri Sri Madhupur Satra, a prominent center of Eka Sarana Vaishnavism established by Srimanta Sankaradeva. Through a combination of ethnographic observation, interviews, and document analysis, this study provides an in-depth examination of the Satra's significance, leadership evolution, and contemporary issues.

**Keywords:** Madhupur Satra, Srimanta Sankaradeva, Eka Sarana Vaishnavism

## Introduction

Sri Sri Madhupur Satra, also known as Madhupur Dham, is an important centre of the Eka Sarana Vaishnavism sect. It was established by Srimanta Sankaradeva, a renowned polymath of the 15th-16th century. Sankaradeva was a saint, scholar, poet, playwright, dancer, actor, musician, artist, and an iconic figure in the cultural and religious history of the Bhakti movement in Assam.

Geographically, Madhupur Satra is situated in Cooch Behar, West Bengal, India. Nestled amidst the fertile plains of the region, its exact coordinates are **26°36'35"N 89°37'82"E**. While currently within the borders of West Bengal, it's important to note the historical context of its founding during the Koch kingdom, which encompassed parts of both Assam and West Bengal.

## Objectives of the study

- To investigate the historical evolution of Sri Sri Madhupur Satra, focusing on its establishment, the role of key figures such as Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, and the impact of political and social changes on the Satra.
- To analyse ethnographic cultural and religious practices within the Satra community.
- To study the social interactions and organizational structure of the Satra, including the roles of leadership positions to gain insight into the functioning and communal life of the Satra.

## Methodology

This ethnographic study utilized a qualitative approach. An in-depth understanding of the Madhupur Satra community's way of life was sought by living alongside and participating in the Satra's activities. It yielded valuable insights that other methods might not have provided.

An extended period of residence at Madhupur Satra was undertaken. Participation in daily activities alongside the monks and community members, such as prayer ceremonies, meals, festivals, and any other ongoing projects, was facilitated. Detailed field notes were compiled throughout the observation period, documenting interactions, rituals, behaviours, and the overall atmosphere of the Satra.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of individuals. This included senior monks who provided historical and cultural context, whose experiences within the Satra were explored, and devotees and community members who visited or were affiliated with the Satra. An interview guide was developed beforehand to ensure consistency, while also allowing for flexibility in exploring emerging themes.

Religious texts, historical documents, and any other relevant materials related to Madhupur Satra were collected from the Satra's archives. These documents were analysed to gain insights into the history, rituals, and functioning of the Satra. Examination of valuable artefacts preserved in the Satra was also conducted to understand their cultural and religious significance.

Thematic analysis was employed on the data collected from participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. This involved coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns. The analysis was an ongoing process throughout the research, allowing for the incorporation of new insights as the study progressed.

### Historical Origins

During their reign, the Koch Kings generously supported the establishment of numerous Satras in Cooch Behar (Bhakat 1991). Prominent among these royals were Naranarayana, Chilarai, Laxminarayana, Birnarayana, and Pranarayana. They provided extensive patronage by donating land and materials necessary for the Satras' construction and maintenance (Neog, 1969).

In North Bengal, especially in Cooch Behar, the Madhupur Satra holds immense significance as it preserves the legacies of the revered Vaishnava saint Srimanta Sankaradeva and other gurus. Madhupur Satra is located in the village of Madhupur, near Cooch Behar town in North Bengal. The Torsha River washed away the Satra's original site, approximately 10 kilometers northwest of Cooch Behar town. The current site is about 4 kilometers south of the original location (Bhakat, 1991).

Local legends recount that during Sankaradeva's pilgrimage to the Jagannath Temple in Puri with 120 disciples, he stopped at this place, which was then named Madhupur (meaning 'place of honey') after collecting honey from the area. This site was deemed ideal for spreading Vaishnavism. Prior to this journey, Sukladhvaja (Chilarai) had already become Sankaradeva's disciple, and King Naranarayana admired Sankaradeva even though he was not a disciple. Sankaradeva endured persecution from the Ahom King, leading him to settle in Patbaushi, near Barpeta. During this time, Naranarayana was the King of Cooch Behar, and his brother Chilarai served as the commander-in-chief. When a conflict arose with the *Karmakandi Brahmins*, Sankaradeva took refuge with Chilarai. Chilarai arranged a public debate between Sankaradeva and the Brahmin scholars, which Sankaradeva won, showcasing his profound knowledge of religious scriptures.

This victory impressed King Naranarayana, who subsequently appointed Sankaradeva as a court counselor and requested him to stay at a specially constructed satra in Kakatkuta. Sankaradeva moved to Kakatkuta, and after two years, he embarked on his second pilgrimage. Upon his return, he, along with his close associate Madhavadeva and other disciples, settled permanently at Kakatkuta Satra until his death in 1559.

After Sankaradeva's demise, Madhavadeva assumed the role of principal disciple at Barpeta, and Sriram Ata assumed responsibility for the Madhupur Satra. During this period, Madhupur Satra continued to flourish, maintaining its religious and cultural activities smoothly. However, Raghudeva and Laxminarayana became the respective kings of Cooch Hajo and Cooch Kamata after Chilarai's death in

1581, dividing Cooch Behar. Both kings continued to support the Vaishnavite tradition. Laxminarayana, in particular, provided significant patronage to Madhavadeva, who then established another satra at Bhela, near the Torsha River. Madhavadeva resided at Bhela Satra until his death in 1595. According to local tradition, after Madhavadeva's death, the erosion of the River Torsha swept away both the Kakatkuta and Bhela Satras. The King and his mother, Queen Aaidhai, advised disciples from both satras to relocate to the Madhupur satra, where they preserved all the personal belongings of the two preceptors, Sri Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The followers of the Madhupur Satra regarded them as sacred relics and mementos. During this period, Burhir-Po-Gobinda Atoi was the head of the Madhupur Satra.

Following Maharaja Laxminarayana's death, his son Birnarayana ascended to the throne of Cooch Behar in 1627 A.D. He also supported the Satras in his kingdom. During the reign of Pranararayana, son of Birnarayana, after the passing of Gobinda Atoi, the two prominent disciples, Damodar Atoi and Niranjana Atoi, claimed the pontiff position in the Satra. Over time, Niranjana Atoi departed for Baguan, taking with him the Vighraha and other holy articles, while Damodar Atoi went to Bhutan. Hari Atoi traveled to Baguan with Niranjana Atoi. As a result, the significance of the Madhupur Satra gradually decreased. Niranjana Atoi established a satra in Baguan. After residing there for an extended period, he divided the holy articles brought from Madhupur. He instructed Hari Atoi to keep one part at Ramraikuti and preserve the other part at Madhupur itself. Niranjana Atoi passed away at Baguan Satra. In due course, Hari Atoi placed the sacred articles back in their designated locations, as ordained by Niranjana Atoi. It was only then that the Madhupur Satra began to regain its former glory.

During this period, Gopinath Atoi arrived at Madhupur Satra and became its head. After three years, Gopinath Atoi left Madhupur for Jarabari at Janji upon the request of the devotees from the Jarabari area. During that time, Madhupur also had twelve other chief followers, namely Kanu Atoi, Paramananda, Sanatan, Keshab, Satananda, Murari, Gopal, Krishna, Joyram, Jayantiya, Madhav, and Madhuram.

Under the support of Koch King Naranarayana and his successors, Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Damodardeva, and Harideva established several Satras. Prominent Vaishnava followers like Hari Ata and Harihar Ata later built additional Satras, adhering to traditional practices. Though many of these Satras are now in decline.

Several Satras in the region, such as Phulabari, Gagan, Chari, Chaukhuti, Marichbari, Srirampur, Betria, Godadharpar, Mathabhanga, Bara Itari, Baneswar, Mainaguri, Jalpaiguri, Ghugumari, Kaljani, Baharbandha, Bhitbandha, and Salbari, have become extinct (Bhakat 1991). Although some Satras like Mainaguri, Jalpaiguri and Kaljani have been revived by few Bhakats and Satradhikars of Assam.

Originally, Madhupur Satra had four lines of houses for devotees to use as their hostel. However, over time, influence from other sects led to the loss of these houses. Now, only the foundations, known as "*Daha Mukut*" (ten prominent devotees of Sankaradeva), remain, which were established by Gopinath Atoi, symbolizing *charihati* tradition. (Nath, 1964)

These holy spots are determined as follows:

The '*Chitta Mukut*' foundation in the east: Cherengia Sri-Ram Atoi and Poaram Atoi

The '*Jiwan Mukut*' foundation in the northeast side: Sriram Ata and Harihar Ata

The '*Param Mukut*' foundation in the north: Janardan Atoi and Gopal Atoi

The '*Hiyar Mukut*' foundation in the south: Burhir-Po-Gobinda Atoi and Bura-Jayananda Atoi

The '*Bandhan Mukut*' foundation in the west: Bar-Baikuntha Atoi and Bar Tulashiram Atoi

Over a period of time Madhupur Satra buildings became old and nearly in disrepair. Harmohan Poddar, a devotee of the Vaishnava faith, generously took the initiative to personally fund the repair and reconstruction of the Satra in Cooch Behar. Two other men from Barpeta, Lakrising Bengal and Bhedal Kayastha, assisted him. Tolan Atoi, the Satra's head, led the repair work to completion in 1903. Later, under the leadership of Laxmi Kanta Atoi, the next head of the Satra, a group of Vaishnava devotees from Assam, including Mahim Chandra Atoi, Harmohan Das, Harinarayan Dutta Barua, Chandra Kanta Misra, Krisnananda Brahmachari, and Nilamani Phukan, began planning for the Satra's future building. They recommended establishing a supervisory committee to actively oversee the Satra. Finally, the former Chief Minister of Assam, the late Bimala Prasad Chaliha, and the late Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, acting on behalf of the supervisory committee, concluded a pact stipulating that the supervisory committee would oversee the construction of the Satra. In 1960, in Shillong, the then capital of Assam, the Assam Government officially registered the Satra Committee as a registered society. Following completion of the work, the late Raja Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhupa Bahadur, the last monarch of the Cooch dynasty, officially inaugurated the Satra's current buildings in 1964.

The Mahapurushiya Vaishnava community's traditional structural designs guide the construction of the main Satra building, its other temples of worship, and the main Namghara (the hall of devotional songs). The Satra, as a place of worship and religious activities, retains five main parts:

1. Batchara (main gate)
2. Kirtanghar or Namghar (prayer hall)
3. Gurugriha (the house inhabited by Sankaradeva)
4. Bhajghar or Manikuta (sanctum sanctorum)
5. Charihathi (dwelling unit of devotees)

In 1903 AD, the then head of Madhupur Satra, Tolan Atoi, 's non-payment of revenue led to the auction sale of all landed properties donated to the Satra by the Cooch King. This led to a severe financial crisis, during which the Satra struggled to afford mustard oil for its lights (banti). An earnest devotee, Haramohan Poddar of Cooch Behar, rescued the Satra by donating land through a registered trust deed. This land, covering about 500 bighas, came from the villages of Madhupur and Kachuban and sustained the Satra's expenses until the formation of a supervisory committee. Laxmikanta Burha Bhakat succeeded Tolan Atoi, but the financial situation did not improve, prompting another auction of 250 bighas of land. By 1951, only 65 bighas remained as Satra property, with 185 bighas recorded as Laxmikanta Atoi's personal property. Laxmikanta Atoi sold the remaining land to meet the Satra's expenses, leaving only 65 bighas as the Satra's property. (Bhakat, 1991).

### **Evolution of Leadership: From Burhabhakat to Satradhikar**

The position now known as Satradhikar was not always designated as such; historically, the head of Madhupur Satra was referred to as the *Burhabhakat* (Chaudhuri, 1903). According to local sources, it was during the tenure of Fatik Chandra Adhikar that the title of Satradhikar was formally introduced. According to the records preserved in the Satra, the names of the head of Madhupur Satra are as follows:

1. Burhir-po Gobinda Atoi
2. Niranjan Atoi
3. Gopinath Atoi
4. Harivallav Atoi
5. Joyram Atoi

6. Joy Atoi
7. Damodar Thakur
8. Krisnanath Thakur
9. Ramnath Thakur
10. Gopinath Bapu
11. Gangaram Bharali Burha Bhakat
12. Pacha Bharali Burha Bhakat
13. Kinaram Atoi
14. Niran Atoi
15. Tolan Atoi
16. Laxmikanta Atoi Burha Bhakat
17. Fatik Chandra Adhikar (Hazarika)
18. Lakhikanta Mahanta (Lakheshwar Hazarika)

### **Festivals and Observances**

The main festivals observed in Madhupur Satra include:

1. Birth and death anniversaries of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva
2. Death Anniversary (*Tithi*) of Burir-po-Gobinda Atoi, which falls on shukla dvitiya day in the month of Magha of the Assamese calendar
3. *Rasa-Purnima* (Full moon day when Sri Krishna performed *Rasa-leela*)
4. *Doul Utsava* (Holi)
5. Death anniversaries of other ata-purushas (saints & former heads)

### **Sacred Articles and Religious Significance**

The sacred articles of worship preserved at the Madhupur Satra include the *Chaturbhuj Vighraha*. This wooden image, which is deep blue in color and 1.5 feet tall, is situated in Kirtanghar on the right side of the Guruasana in a sitting position. The *Chaturbhuj Vighraha* was placed at Madhupur Satra by Banamalideva during the reign of Pranalarayana.

The Other Sacred Articles in the Gurugriha include *asthi* (relics) of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, *paduka* (footwear) of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, a silver inkpot and pen set supposedly used by Sankaradeva, a piece of *Narayani* coin, *Tilak* with a pot, dust of the feet of Sankaradeva collected by Madhavadeva, *Mala Vastu* (chanting beads) used by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, few strands of *Vrindavani Vastra*. The Satra has few manuscripts of *sanchipata* and *tulapata* most important being Gunamala, Guru Bhatima, Buri Dasam (10<sup>th</sup> Canto of Bhagavata), Bhakti Ratnavali etc.

The *bhajghar* behind the *manikut* has idols of *Madanmohan Thakur* the presiding deity of the Satra. It also had few Shaligram shilas which were stolen few years ago.

### **Financial Status and Challenges**

Madhupur Satra owns 42 bighas of cultivable land outside its premises. Additionally, the Satra receives a mere monthly assistance of Rs. 500 from the Debutter Trust Board of Cooch Behar. Primary income is generated from the guest house, which is available for rent, providing a steady flow of funds. Moreover, regular donations from devotees contribute to the Satra's financial stability, ensuring the upkeep of its activities and facilities. Despite the traditional sources of income for Madhupur Satra, the institution faces

challenges in collecting contributions from its land holdings. Many people who are supposed to provide rice from the fields as part of their obligations are not doing so, leading to a shortfall in expected resources. Additionally, the management of land revenue is not being organized properly, which further strains the Satra's finances.

Recent developments at Madhupur Satra highlight significant government investments aimed at transforming the site into a major cultural and tourism center. On September 7, 2018, Assam Governor Jagdish Mukhi laid the foundation stone for a Rs 2 crore infrastructure development project, which included a guest house with a capacity for 500 and a 'bhog ghar'. This was part of a broader initiative to elevate Madhupur Satra as a cultural tourism destination. Further, in February 2024, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced a substantial Rs 30 crore renovation plan for the 16th-century Satra, emphasizing its importance as a seat of Vaishnavite learning and a center for preserving the teachings of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev and Sri Sri Madhavdev.

### **The Satradhikar Crisis at Madhupur Satra**

The Madhupur Satra, a prominent religious and cultural institution in Assam, faced a significant leadership crisis following the death of its Satradhikar, Lakhikanta Mahanta, on March 9, 2023. The crisis stemmed from a dispute over the rightful successor to the Satradhikar position, which led to a tense situation not only within the Satra but also across the broader Assamese society.

The controversy began when a young boy named Mrinmoy Bora, who had been brought to the Satra as a lay disciple at a young age, claimed that he had been chosen by the late Lakhikanta Mahanta as his successor. Mrinmoy Bora, now known as Madhavdev Mahanta, asserted that Lakhikanta Mahanta had legally appointed him as the heir to the Satradhikar position. This claim, however, was contested by the fact that there was already an established Deka Satradhikar (Assistant Satradhikar) named Pitambar Bhakat, who had been serving in that capacity during Lakhikanta Mahanta's tenure.

Madhavdev Mahanta's claim to the Satradhikar position created a divide within the Satra and among the Satradhikars of other Satras in Assam. The situation escalated as two factions emerged: one supporting Madhavdev Mahanta and the other backing Pitambar Bhakat. The conflict gained widespread attention and led to concerns about the potential impact on the stability and sanctity of the Madhupur Satra.

In response to the escalating crisis, an emergency meeting was scheduled on April 23, 2023, at the conference hall of the Dhubri district commissioner. The meeting was presided over by the Guardian Minister of Dhubri district, Jayanta Malla Baruah, and was attended by Satradhikars from various districts of Assam. During this meeting, the previous committee of Madhupur Satra was dissolved, and the Chief Minister of Assam was selected to be the president of the newly formed committee.

Despite the formation of a new committee, the appointment of a new Satradhikar was delayed. The delay was due to the complexities surrounding the candidates: Pitambar Bhakat, who was considered uneducated, and Madhavdev Mahanta, who was deemed young and inexperienced. As a result, the Satra remained without a formal Satradhikar for several months, leading to further uncertainty and tension.

After months of deliberation and waiting, a crucial meeting was held at Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra in Guwahati. During this meeting, a resolution was finally reached: Pitambar Bhakat was appointed as the new Satradhikar of Madhupur Satra, while Madhavdev Mahanta was designated as the Deka Satradhikar. This decision was seen as a compromise that aimed to maintain the balance and harmony within the Satra while addressing the concerns of both factions.

The Satradhikar crisis at Madhupur Satra was a significant event in the religious and cultural history of

Assam. It highlighted the challenges of succession in traditional institutions and the impact such disputes can have on the broader community.

The author believes that the resolution of the succession crisis at Madhupur Satra was politically motivated, designed to maintain a status quo that benefited both factions while ultimately allowing the government to exert greater control over the institution. By appointing Pitambar Bhakat as Satradhikar and Madhavdev Mahanta as Deka Satradhikar, the government effectively avoided making a decisive choice, ensuring that both sides were appeased. This maneuver is seen as part of a broader strategy to take over the Satra, aligning it more closely with government interests and facilitating the continuation of rampant corruption that has plagued the region for years. Since the 2010s, significant funds have been sanctioned by the government in the name of development, but the progress made has been far less than anticipated, raising suspicions that the ongoing mismanagement and corruption are being deliberately overlooked or even encouraged by those in power.

### Conclusion

Sri Sri Madhupur Satra is not just a religious institution but a pivotal center of Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism, most revered as the final resting place of both Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva, along with other great saints of the tradition.

This Satra serves as a significant representation of the deep-rooted historical and cultural bond between Assam and Bengal, encapsulating the common spiritual legacy of these areas. Situated strategically in North Bengal, Madhupur Satra has encountered distinctive obstacles, as no singular administration has assumed complete responsibility for its maintenance. The absence of a well-defined succession protocol has resulted in conflicts over leadership, hence worsening the Satra's internal administration. In addition, the local population has occasionally taken advantage of the Satra for economic benefit, which has made the preservation of the Satra more challenging. These concerns highlight the intricacies of managing an institution in the present time, where the importance of history and spirituality must be weighed against the practical difficulties of leadership and financial viability. Notwithstanding these difficulties, Sri Sri Madhupur Satra continues to serve as an important centre of Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism and showcasing the cultural fusion between Assam and Bengal.

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