

An Aesthetical Study On The Divine Sculptural Representations In The Vaisnavite Monasteries Of Assam

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Abstract: In North-east India, the Vaisnavite Monasteries or Satras of Assam became one of the most influential and revolutionized force in the socio-religious and cultural sphere. Established in the 16th century to carry the Bhakti ideals to the people at large, they are unique socio-religious, cultural and heritage institution of Assam. In Satras we find the aesthetical effect on the exquisite forms, motifs and meanings of the divine sculptures represented and derived from the forms and the disposition within the Indian culture. The study is based on the aesthetical sphere of the sculptural representation its evolution, development and ramification in the visual narrative that creates interactive discourse among the varied ranges of aesthetic domains. The Satras sculptural base has some specific fractions supported by various exquisite wood carvings, door panels, sculptures of mythical figures, divine beings, animals as well as floral motifs. The organic body of the Vaisnavite sculptural representations are composed of several essential elements based on the environmental sphere, cultural domain, religious realm and materials availability which unite to form the elegant structure. The sculptural representations in wood carvings also evoke some similarity or influences with other cultural domain. The practice of sculptural representations in the Satras shows the values of religious beliefs externally, but it carries an internal resistance to the elite art practices through its direct communications with the regional folk. It stands as a critique to the norms of so-called cultural stereo types and rigid religious aspects by making the performance beyond the structure of religion and enhance the benevolence of humanism. The sculptural representations of the Satra have contributed immensely towards the socio-cultural as well as religious domain. They are precious ancient treasures which the Government must preserve and protect.

Keywords: aesthetical, representations, resistance, satra, sculptures.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian culture is grounded unwaveringly on diverge geographical plains, legion of races, languages, spiritual beliefs, ritual practices and intricately compiled up social structure that have contributed in creating the unparalleled prospect of visual narratives in miscellaneous art forms. Assam is located in the extreme frontier of the North-East India. Assam province boundaries measures about 78,438 kms and upholds a population of 30.94 million (2012). The Himalayan orbit of Tibet and Bhutan covers up the northern zone along with Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Arunachal in the vicinage of Burma and of China on the eastern zone and the southern zone and of Bangladesh on the western zone. "As indicated earlier, there has been the

dominant presence of Aryan-Hindu modes and more since early times. Within Hinduism, again, Saivism, Saktism, and Vaishnavism have been influential at different times, in different degrees." (Datta, 2012) The evolution and development of the Satras, the preachers of the Vaisnavite cult of Assam dating back to more than five centuries has been fraternity house of the socio-cultural, spiritual, ethical and artistic arena.

"The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw the burgeoning in Assam of a remarkable social and cultural resurgence in the wake of the neo-Vaisnavism Bhakti movement. It was spearheaded by the uniquely versatile preceptor Sankaradeva (1449-1568) and his equally gifted disciple Madhavadeva (1489-1596)" (Datta, 2012).

Assam *Vaisnavism* is eminent and superordinate in nature surmounting the *Vaisnavite* cult persist and practiced throughout the country. This new religious cult formally known as “*Ek-Saran-Hari-Naam Dharma*” and drew its teachings from the ancient Hindu Sacred Scriptures contemplating on *Vaisnavism*. This *Bhakti* cult never aimed to seek or concentrated on attaining *Moksha* or *Nirvana* but to dedicate oneself selflessly into *Bhakti* towards *Visnu* (Neog, 2011). According to eminent scholar Dr. Banikanta Kakati of Assam highlights, “*the Ekasarana system is not a religion of bargain and barter between God and men or of sacrifice and easy recompense; it is one with exclusive emphasis on slow spiritual outlook by laying flesh and sirt in the hands of the Lord.*” (Datta, 2012). Assam *Vaisnavism* stands firm on the four basic elements: *Deva* (Lord), *Nama* (Prayers), *Bhakats* (Devotees) and *Guru* (Mentor). The *Satras* institutions are unique institution with multidisciplinary socio-religious, cultural, art and architectural domain with its distinctive characteristics, specific organizational set up and ideological valour derived from the *Bhakti* movement (Borkakoti, 2005).

“*In fact a very notable feature of the neo-Vaishnava movement in Assam was that it made the fullest use of the diverse types of creative and artistic media- literature, music, dance, drama, painting, sculpture, architecture, and so on- and made them integral parts of the new faith and its order. And thus it is that some of the finest treasures of Assamese art and culture owe their efflorescence to this movement. To this day the influence of the movement pervades the entire field of traditional Assamese life and culture, even cutting across religious and sectarian beliefs and practices*” (Datta, 2012).

II. BACKGROUND OF THE VAISNAVITE MONASTERIES OR SATRAS OF ASSAM

Assam has a rich cultural heritage starting from the ancient times till date. Assam holds credit in flora and fauna, the mighty red river Brahmaputra, fertile soil, natural picturesque scenery and exquisite climatic condition. The Assamese culture is more than two thousand years old with an acculturation of diverse, unified and merged up socio-cultural, political and religious population. Assamese culture is developed during the first millennium AD, under the great dynasties of *Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa*. Since, ancient times Assam is transcribed and identified by several names in the History as well as in the Holy Scriptures.

“*In ancient days, Assam was known as Pragjyotisha and later as Kamarupa. It is by these two names that Assam has been referred to both in epigraphs and literature. Several theories are put forward regarding the origin of the name Pragjyotisha, which referred to both the country and the capital city.*” (Baruah, 2013)

Assam is developed due to acculturation and immersion of different ethno-cultural groups under various socio-political systems in different periods of history (Gait, 2013). In the terminal part of 15th century, a socio-religious and cultural movement embroiled the integral Assamese society, under the leadership of the great *Vaisnavite* Saint, *Srimanta Sankardeva*. The *Vaisnavite* period in Assam, started in the last quarter of

the 15th century and attained its supremacy during the 16th and 17th centuries (Datta, 2012).

“*The religion which was widely known as Visnuism in the mediaeval period had a long history of evolution before it attained its final state. Various petty cults and thought processes had contributed to it and their synthesis finally brought into existence a religious system which was destined to play a very important role in the religious life of the whole nation*” (Desai, 1973). *Vaisnavite* movement is a kind of “*Rebirth*” of Assam that reawakened an era of socio-cultural ambit, humanitarian in discourse, popular in configuration, contour in literature and excelled in visual arts. The movement was enforcing in nature and revolutionary in terms of its impingement. It is not established on intolerant rigid norms, irrational values and cognitive excursive logic. Instead it emphasized to a greater extent on social reform, spiritual uplift and ethnic consolidation through a comprehensive cognitive modality of sacred acquit based on indigenous elements of the region. It was revolutionary in the sense that *Vaisnavism* in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life (Borkakoti, 2005). It has been said by *Sankardeva* himself that a “*Vaisnava should not worship any other god except Vishnu, he should not enter any other god’s temple, nor should he partake of the offerings made to any other god. In so doing bhakti would be vitiated.*” (Barua, 2009)

To preach his new religion ‘*Eka Saran Hari Naam Dharma*’, *Sankardeva* travelled through the entire Assam and founded the *Vaisnavite* Monasteries known as *Satras*. The *Satra* institutions are accompanied by a prayer hall and rows of cloisters for the fraternity. The prayer hall is known as “*Namghar*” and the rows of cloisters known as “*Hatis*”. The *namghar* houses the various religious discourses, congregational prayers, recitation of the *Bhagavata-Gita* as well as other sacred texts and also various religious dramatic performances (Barua, 2009). The term *Satra* is derived from Sanskrit and it has two significations:

“*firstly in the sense of an alms-house or charitable institution and secondly in the sense of a sacrificial session lasting for several days or more. The latter sense is responsible in lending the nomenclature to the Vaisnavite institution of Assam....The fact that a sacrifice called sattrra proceeded concurrently with the act of expounding the Bhagavata easily led people to think that sattrra and an assembly of devotees listening to the exposition of the Bhagavata are identical*” (Sarma, 2001).

The *Satras* preaches the *Vaisnavism*, one of the *Bhakti* cults of India in terms of its unique and progressive in lineament that shared values of fraternity, equality, humanism and democracy in order to create an elitist civilian society.

“*But the ideal bhakata would never seek or accept nirvana or any other form of moksha as much as he would beseech the Lord to bestow on him the unending privilege of bhakti; only let there be no vagaries of maya, manas (the mind), and ahankara (the ego)*” (Neog, 2011).

The *Satras* solely believe of taking refuge with the one and only mighty creator, *Visnu*, known as *Vasudeva*, *Narayan*, *Krsna*, *Gopal* etc. *Vaisnavism* transmitted the preaching of the religious discourse in the visual narratives of the *Satra*.

“*Vasudeva-Krsna is one of the most intriguing characters of Indian mythology. For centuries his legends have enjoyed*

immense popularity among the Indian masses, and it is no wonder that ever since the Indologists were attracted to the religions of India, he should have commanded their major attention." (Jaiswal, 1981)

The *Satra* institutions and fraternity are approachable to all the individuals regarding birth, sex, religion, caste or creed. There are no such intolerant practises and comprehensive theocratic norms followed by the *Satra* and its fraternity. There is no Idol worship and blood sacrificial ritual in the *Satra* institutional province (Neog, 1998). The *Satras* believe in praying the amorphous feature of God by realising him through prayers.

"The spiritual obligation gave people a dignity, a balanced view of life and an attention for details, and made them god-fearing and moral beings. The acceptance of the faith indicated to them that others of it were to be treated as equals rather than as victims of social stratification." (Neog, 2011)

III. DEVELOPMENTS OF THE VARIOUS ART FORMS AT THE SATRAS

The spiritual movement of the *Bhakti* led to arouse of the new faith "*Ek-Saran-Hari-Nam Dharma*" in the *Satras* of Assam, rooted with the evolution and development of socio-cultural and spiritual florescence in a new realm. It also cultivated and concentrated around the progression of the various facets of art form developed in the enhance aesthetic sphere. The growth and development of the various art forms at the *Satras* got compiled with the *Bhakti* narratives of the sacred scriptures. The enhance aesthetic art forms represented and reacted as the *Bhakti* narratives of the *Satra* institutions. There are nine modes of *Bhakti*: hearing, chanting, remembering, worshipping, feet-worship, servanthship, friendship, obeisance and body sacrifice. Out of these nine modes the *Vaisnavite* Saint *Sankaradeva's Ek-Sarana-Hari-Naam Dharma* laid emphasis on chanting, hearing and servility (Baruah, 2014).

"It should be noted that the satras work both as seats of religious learning and residential schools...Besides religious education and monastic practices, the bhakats are engaged in secular learning such as cultivation of arts and crafts. Since converts are drawn mainly from the villages, they naturally bring with them the skill and technique of their village crafts" (Barua, 2009).

There are various facets of art forms developed and practiced in the *Satras*, notably the art of wood carving, mask making, manuscript paintings, *Satriya* dance, drama, music and many more. In *Satras* the superficial art forms, its motifs with sacred meanings and exquisite detailed account has captivated and mesmerized the mind of the Kings, nobles, saints and devotees as well. In the art forms there are numerous stylistic features, unique motifs, highly decorative narration, precisely arrangement compositions, particularized characters, varied ranges of colour, secular and religious themes (Neog, 1998).

"Starting from the head of the satra, called the adhikar, down to the ordinary initiate, called bhakat, the life of all the inmates of the satra is steeped in matters artistic, in as much

as highly refined forms of music, dance, and drama as well as arts and crafts are integral to the satra way of life" (Datta, 2012).

Consequently, the art forms development begins in the *Satras* in order to preach *Vaisnavite* religious cults, education and ethics to the society. These religious institutions also acted as residential school for the learning and welfare of the fraternity as well as to the common people. Among the varied art practices in the *Satra*, the art of wood carving is one of the most remarkable artistic acknowledgements produced by the *Vaisnavite* monks. Out of these art forms, these *Satras*, *Bordowa Than* of Nagoan district, *Garmur Satra* of Majuli, *Kamalabari Satra* *Hati Satra* of Suwalkuchi, etc holds much acknowledgements of preserving the hundred and hundred years old traditions of Assam's unique art of wood carving. The art of wood carving of Assam differs in every sphere of its form, content, coherence, expression and consistency. These *Satras* has earned the great credentials backgrounds by dint of bringing forth and preserving the art of wood carving.

IV. EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCULPTURAL REPRESENTATIONS AT THE SATRAS

The *Satra* institutions lay much emphasis on the devotion towards god through action with religious cognition. The wood carving was one of the significant fields which evolved in the direct response to the movement and the *Bhakti* cult began to flourish as an essential element of art of the people. It was headed by an immediate urge to decorate the places of alter, so the local artisans created aesthetic and stylistic variation in the medium of wood. As wood was quite available and easily accessibility from the local environment furnished back up towards the growth and development of the art forms at the *Satras* (Kalita, 1985). As the *Satras* art forms evolved with the propagation of the "*Eka-Sarana-Hari-Nama Dharma*" faith, which laid to the immediate foundation of the prayer hall known as *Namghar*. The *Namghar* houses the various religious discourses, congregational prayers, recitation of the *Bhagavata-Gita* as well as other sacred texts and also various religious dramatic performances (Barua, 2009).

"It is believed that every individual of the Vaisnavite society surrounding a satra or the satra where he is initiated, should contribute his might in whichever way he can, to share piety. And thus a collective consciousness was created among the khanikars to decorate the satra and the namghar so as to make it look like Heaven (vaikuntha samasara) at least with a piece of work of their own hands. As a result of such a consciousness working vigorously in the popular mind most of the satras and even many of the village namghars with the gifts of painted manuscripts, or other manuscripts, wooden sculpture and other bamboo, cane and metal art objects became museums of art and sculpture" (Kalita, 1985).

Along with that in and around the *Namghar* and the *Satra* some exquisite, elegant wood carvings are seen. *"The wood carvings in which the satras flourished mostly include arches, door frames, holy thrones of lions, Garudras and peacocks, icons of Visnu and His various incarnations, images of Krsna and panels of his childhood playfulness, floral designs carved*

on posts, beams of namghars (laikhuta, phulcoti), sarais or trays, thaga or lecturns etc. Besides these, the images of deities, standing figures of dvarapals (gatekeepers) kneeling figures with folded hands like Garudas, Hanuman, Jaya Vijaya, Cari-siddhas (the four wise men) adorn in the entrance of the namghars or manikutas of the satras” (Majid, 1903).

The sculptural art forms are also related with the architecture structure which is based on peculiar traditional Assamese domestic home flavour. It is the definite facade of construction at the commencing level, later on several architectural structural areas and motifs compiled to provide a new architectural dimension with sculptural representations.

“From the early days, an essential adjunct of the neo-Vaishnava order in Assam has been the satra institution. Satras are monasteries that represent the organizational set-up originally developed to propagate the new religious faith and its social ideals, but which also turned into centres for the cultivation and dissemination of all kinds of art and refinement.” (Datta, 2012)

However, the Satra architectural structure developed has its own symbolism and icon with a couple of religious discourses in the background, supported by the wooden decorative carvings, different sculptural motifs with unique structural representation formed as a part of these discourses. In few decades of the last century, the architectural structure has undergone some drastic changes with new facades compiled with the old structure. The basic Assamese traditional architectural pattern and the element has carried its ancient significance but due to imprudentness and catastrophe, the architectural structure and artefacts had to endure several changes. The catastrophic result of this enduring reflected in the context of wood carving and other divine sculptural artefacts supporting the architectural structure of the Satra.

V. UNIQUE STRUCTURAL PROCESS, REPRESENTATION AND AESTHETICAL CONCERN OF THE WOODEN SCULPTURES

In the Satras of Assam the Khanikars (artists) followed method followed a unique method of carving wooden sculptures was known as “charaikhuliya” in which “charai” means bird and “khuliya” means carving. It was one kind of deep incision inside the wooden panel. It is similar to the natural process applied by the woodpecker to digging holes in the tree. (Kalita, 1985)

“In this method, the uncut portions of wood remain raised to give the pattern of the objects. All objects require to be executed in two distinct phases. The first phase is called kondhowa meaning slicing off the surface in flakes. In the final stage, further work is done upon the patterns to give finish to the objects. Thereafter, the sculptures, whether relief or in the round, are painted with colour” (Kalita, 1985).

The wood carvers are expertise in creating and shaping primitive carpentry with a limited number of handmade tools that consists of axe, knife and few batalis or chisels of various sizes and shapes. These handmade tools incorporated to a greater extend for creating amazing and awe-inspiring texture with some striking imprints of the edges on the sculptures. The

intensive practice of carving sculptures in wood was elementary remarkable phenomenon of the Satras, which conceptualize the technique, the style and the subjects of the wood carving. However, this brilliant technique of art circulated to the village orbit, even though it could not rise at the equal level and grand scale like the Satras in the embellishment of the village Namghars (Kalita, 1985).

“Besides religious education and monastic practices, the bhakats are engaged in secular learning such as cultivation of arts and crafts. Since converts are drawn mainly from the villages, they naturally bring with them the skill and technique of their village crafts” (Barua, 2009).

The Manikut, is an essential adjunct constructed parallel at the eastern edge inside the Namghar. “It serves as a prayer hall as well as the seat of all meetings and discussion. The actual shrine where the image of the deity and the sacred scriptures are kept is called manikut” (Sarma, 2001). The Manikut literally means ‘the house of jewels’. The Manikut consists of Pabitra Simhasana or the Holy throne which is a kind of cubic structure that is highly decorated with divine religious motifs, painted scenes, and hybrid animals (Neog, 1985). The Simhasana itself is an aesthetical representation of wooden sculptural and architectural structure with interesting form, motifs and meanings to study. The Manikut is the most sacred space and it is attached to the eastern direction of the Namghar. It is the actual holy shrine or the garbha griha, where the main deity resides. Along with the main deity the Manikut houses the ancient Holy Scriptures and illustrative manuscript paintings, wood carvings, precious gold and silver items, inscribed copper or bronze plates, and various valuable historical artefacts. The Simhasana is represented in a very fascinating and laboriously carved way. It is of pyramidal shape with a square basement firmly standing on its four pillars (Neog, 1998). There are seven steps in the Simhasana. At the basement of each pillar there are lions fighting with elephants. The seven lions on each elephant sum up twenty eight representations of the seven heavens or Sapta Vaikuntha. The dedicated altar at the peak of the Simhasana’s seat holds for the Holy Scriptures. “In the simhasana the maneless lion is always found as the killer of the elephant which symbolises the idea of sin being destroyed by nama (name of God)” (Mahanta, 2007). The whole structural concept is ascending spiritual knowledge and attainment. According to the Holy Scriptures, it is believed there are seven heavens and seven earths. The elephant is represented as ‘paap’ or evil deeds. The elephant because of its heavy mass considered as one’s evil deed, so in order to overcome, purify, and dominate the evil deeds. The lion motif is placed over it as a sign of strength and domination, i.e., good over evil. The lion motifs are considered as auspicious and divine (Plate-1). These motifs are quite common in the Satras of Upper Assam, but in the Satras of Middle Assam and Lower Assam we find some additional animal motif of lion dominating deer, peacock, tiger etc. (Plate-2) with various meanings represented in the Simhasana. In the Simhasana of Narowa Kuji Satra of Nagoan we find such attractive and interesting motifs. The Simhasana are specially designed for the Satras like the royal thrones. In the Barpetta Satra there are four legs of the Simhasana beautifully carved with Gaja-Kachchapa motifs while the rest followed the usual pattern as in the case. Other

than lion, elephant, tortoise, deer and peacock motifs, we find the aesthetical representation of Garuda and other divine creatures in the *Satra*.



(Courtesy: Khatpar Satra, Sivasagar)

Plate 1: Detail of Simhasana



(Courtesy: Narowa Kuji Satra, Nagoan)

Plate 2: Detail of Simhasana

“The areas of namghar is systematically arranged for its numerous functions and also in reverence to the various deities, that preside over the site space is determined by a host of ceremonial requirements- places for offering, place for the asana (wooden pedestal with the sacred scriptures), the large wood-carvings of Garuda, Hanuman, Jaya-Vijaya are clearly chalked out” (Barkakoti, 2001).

The Garuda (Plate-3) is placed at the end of the Namghar's entrance facing towards the Manikut. The Garuda is always represented in a Bhakti mode of conduct, joining both his hands in a praying posture. The sculpture of Garuda is considered as a symbol of selfless Bhakti and destroyer of pride. In most of the Satras of Assam, the Garuda sculpture is projected.



(Courtesy: Bordowa Than, Nagoan)

Plate 3: Garuda

In the Bardowa Than of Nagoan district retains a huge precious collection of wood carvings of the past tradition in the mini-museum now run by the Directorate of State Museums at the Than premises. The wooden artefacts are affiliated to the Vaisnavite Satras of Assam which were closely linked and parallel to the developments in literary tradition. (Kalita, 1985) “But these objects have never been considered to be ritualistic although the artisans’ preference for subjects narrated in religious scriptures, viz, the Bhagavata-purana and the Ramayana, etc., was beyond question” (Kalita, 1985). The walls of the Kirtanghar of the Bordowa Than constitute the primary areas for the display of the mesmerised sculptural wood-carvings. The wooden sculptural artefacts and panels are mainly based on the thematic review of the Bhagavata-purana, the Ramayana and also the day-to-day life activities of the common people. The wooden sculptures around the Kirtanghar are the Garuda in Bhakti posture, Hanuman carrying Rama and Laxmana etc., are projected and among the wooden panels the Kali-damana, Kalki, Hari-Hara, etc are remarkable. The Kali-damana is the lone specimen recovered from the hive of wood-carvings belonging to the prayer-hall of Bardowa Than. There are as many as nine images of seven incarnation representation of the Lord Visnu. Each and every image is carved in high relief tone and is provided with a separate picture-frame in some continuous friezes. The Khanikers precisely maintained the space and composition in a very limited picture-frame providing them with pictorial depiction. The image of Narasimha is carved in a balanced composition. The image is portray he is caressing his long tail with his both hands above his head (Kalita, 1985). “His stance reminds one of the atitandava form of Siva of classical dance tradition. His feet with the toes slightly raised and the heels deeply planted on the ground represent vigour, while the upper part of his body appears static with the exception that his profile head makes the figure animated” (Kalita, 1985). Here, Buddha and Parasurama are represented in an uncommon hair-style delineated by some furrowed strokes. Again in the final incarnation panel of Lord Visnu, mighty Kalki is portrayed riding on his horse back with an upraised sword in one of his hands seems full of valour, energy and dynamic. (Kalita, 1985)

“The Bardowa panel depicting the composite image of Hari-Hara is interesting for the physical presence of the

vahanas of Hari and Hara along with the image at the centre. In illustrating the image the carver deviated from the standard iconography and followed contemporary improvisations derived from the local idiom." (Kalita, 1985)

The *Bardowa Than* also preserves a few rare specimens of pillars illustrating some mythical divine and semi-divine beings in life-size wooden carvings of *Brahma*, *Visnu*, *Siva*, *Narada* and *Ganesa* constituting like the pillar-statues. Although looking like tribal totem-poles, they do not represent any belief associated with tribal society in the *Namghar*. The carvers derived their images from the local literary tradition and the cylindrical format of wood contributed to their forms marked by sensitively rounded and plastic volumes. (Kalita, 1985)

The *Satras* of Assam lack preservation and protection because of many essential factors. Therefore in order to preserve and protect the wooden sculptural artefacts, the Government have housed some of them in the Assam State Museum, Guwahati. There are lots of wooden sculptures as well as panels are found among them a *Garuda* sculpture from *Majuli*, another typical carved panel from the *Kamalabari Satra*, *Majuli* which depicts *Ganesha* is sitting on a mouse under a cinquefoil niche. It is one of the customary with mediaeval Assamese art (Gupta, 1982).

"Here as elsewhere a single figure and sometimes even a group is always placed under one or more foiled arches according to the number of figures they frame. This same arrangement applies to wood carvings, stone panels, terracotta plaques and even miniature painting" (Gupta, 1982). The figure has some kind of naiveté which relates with folk art. The face is in profile view, and the body is in frontal conforming to mediaeval Assamese tradition. The figure occupies a narrow vertical panel with its four stretched out arms elegantly serves to connect the whole figure to the panel. The back portion of the panel figure is cut away like fret work figures. The arch is exquisite and to the proportion. Finally, there is a narrow handle type projection from the apex of the arch served as a join the panel with the wooden wall surface (Gupta, 1982).

"Each of the satras in the past maintained an atelier of artists, which the village nam-ghars lacked. These artisans were professional scribes, master painters, designers and make-up men in the traditional theatre and sculptors, besides being the carpenters responsible for building constructions. Moreover, they were psychologically more closely associated with the intellectual development of the satras, which supported them in creating something grand in whatever medium they took to work" (Kalita, 1985)

Along with the beautiful wood carvings, floral designs, ornamental motifs, various geometric patterns are also included. The paints used by the *Khanikars* (artists) on the *Simhasana*, *Garuda*, carved door panels and other wooden artefacts consist of the traditional hues made of natural ingredients, such as vermillion (*hengul*), yellow ochre (*hiatal*), indigo (*nil*), chalk (*dhal*), lamblack (*Kajal*) etc. These natural hues are bright in nature, last longer and provide a fresh glaze.

VI. STUDY ON THE WOODEN SCULPTURES: THEMES, MOTIFS, MEANINGS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The wooden sculptures have different themes, motifs, meanings and some external influences or some similarities of a kind with other culture. The wooden sculptures thematic review or subject matter is mainly concerned with the preaching of *Vaisnavism* and it carries an internal resistance to the elite art practices through its direct communication with the regional folk.

"Quite naturally, the themes for the bulk of the painting (and carvings) in the satras are drawn from the Vaishnav religious world- Vishnu and his various incarnations; characters and episodes from the Bhagavata-Purana and from other holy texts, including the two epics; the great Vaishnav sages and devotees; and so on" (Datta, 2012)

There are various divine motifs used in the sculptural representation of the wooden sculptures in the *Satras*. The representations of celestial beings *Garuda*, *Hanuman*, *Jaya-Vijaya*, *Magara*, *Mayura*, *Hamsa*, lion etc are projected in the *Namghar* of the *Satra*. The *Garuda* representations may differ based on different geographical locations, cultural factors and religious customs but the themes, motifs and meanings remain the same. The Lord *Vishnu's* divine vehicle *Garuda*, the divine bird is considered as an auspicious, guarding, destroyer of pride and absorbing the negativity motifs are very common in South-east Asian countries, especially Mongolian culture. The lion motifs are very beautifully and distinctly described in the *Simhasana*. In the *Simhasana* the lion is always depicted as a dominant to the elephant which symbolises the idea of sin being destroyed by *nama* (name of God). (Mahanta, 2007) Other than lion and *Garuda* motifs, the use of *Magara* motifs is widely seen in architectural structures as well as in illustrative manuscript paintings and wooden artefacts. *Magara*, an imaginary creature half crocodile and half fish considered auspicious too. This motif is used in Indian culture as well as is seen portrayed in the South-east Asian or the Mongolian traditional. These motifs have several auspicious meanings.

"One is continuously integrated with classicist philosophy of Indian religion one more distinctive feature of the sattriya wood carving is the presence of the figures of flying lion, magara or sea monster with the head of a crocodile and the tail of a fish in addition to Garuda, mayura (peacock) and hamsa (goose) about which we have already mentioned. Among these, the flying lion, the magara and even the Garuda remind us of the dragon like figure common with the Mongoloid art tradition. The flying lion and the magara symbolise greatness and energy, the Garuda and the mayura both being snake hunters symbolise the destroyers of pride whereas the hamsa stands for wisdom (hamsarupe kari lila jnana prakasila). Thus all of them finally are revelations of various facets of omnipotent God" (Mahanta, 2007).

The representation of *Magara* in the door frames and the arches creates a dynamic force that has lyrical-rhythm and aesthetic beauty which creates the cognition in the realisation of *rasa* and *bhava*. *"It may be remembered that the magara is found to be profiled in Vaisnavite literature always due to its artistic form and beauty. Primitive simplicity of folk art both*

in terms of material and style is revealed in the flat profiles of the face and nose of the figures with fat and heavy body structures” (Mahanta, 2007).

VII. CONCLUSION

The present research is based on existent, historical, documental as well as observational research. The effect of *Vaisnavite* renaissance on Assam concealed the socio-cultural, spiritual and political sphere. It has bestowed its blessing towards the prosperity of the Assamese culture and society. The art forms developed in the *Satra* are the evidentiary prodigious force of socio-cultural and sacred domain that should be treasured. The Government must make a detailed review, take measures and overhaul on the preservation and protection of these ancient treasured domain. It must be secularized along with the other prevalent various art forms evincing the visual narratives. The art forms are confined within the walls of *Satra* culture. It is not academically explored and there are lots of aesthetical, philosophical and analytical enhance realms of these art forms that are yet to be assumed and explored. The art of sculptural representations can be considered as an important form of medium that records, gathers data both of past and present, to its outmost level as a form of aesthetical visual narrative. Also, the divine and aesthetical visual narratives reflected in the sculptural representations shows the values of religious beliefs externally, but it carries an internal resistance to the elite art practices through its direct communication with the regional folk. The aesthetical study on the sculptural representations excogitate with unique forms, motifs and meanings that resists the hierarchical practices of mainstream arts and has challenged the occupation of galleries over the visual psyche of the common people. The intention of the aesthetical art forms, its motifs and structural representation is also to search in conventional medium against such stereotype, high/low art or classical art which is generally practiced in the urban culture. The traditional practice of sculptural representation stands as a critique to the norms of the so-called cultural stereo types and rigid spiritual facet by making performance beyond the structure of religion and enhance the benefaction of humanism. Above all, the visual narratives of the divine sculptural representation are based on ingredient of socio-cultural and religious facets of the *Satra* organizational system and therefore they should be preserved and protected.

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