



# A Case Study on the Education System of the Uttar Kamalabari Monastic Satra of Assam

Babli Choudhury

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

Corresponding author: bablichoudhury2010@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

The Satra, a neo-vaishnavite religious institution in Assam, India is almost five centuries old. The Satra institution has faced many changes in the growth and extensions throughout a long course of history. During a long time the Satra institution has multiplied in a large number and it has become a special feature of Assamese society and culture. Sankaradeva, the great Vaishnavite saint of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries was the guiding spirit for the initiation and development of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. The Satra is a religious institution in Assam, India, are the Vaisnava monasteries, symbolic entities of the Assam Vaismisrn, which are the residential places of the Vaisnava friars called the bhakats.

In this paper, basically the education system of Kamalabari Satra is presented. The impact of Satra institutions in Assamese society is duly analyzed through this paper.

**Keywords:** Satra, Hati, Bhakat, Baha, Bhaona

Education is significant to the progress of humankind. Since the ages, education has been imparted both formally and informally worldwide. Schools are the institutions mainly through which formal education is imparted. They are designed to allow and encourage students to learn under the supervision of teachers. Most countries have their own system of formal

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education. In ancient India, schools were in the form of gurukuls. During the Muslim rule, madrassas were introduced, whereas under the British rule, the government as well as the Christian missionaries from England and USA and some other European countries established schools throughout the country. These schools marked the beginning of modern schooling in India and the syllabi and calendar they followed became the benchmark for schools in modern India.

In medieval Assam, formal or institutional education in different branches of learning was imparted in tols, chatuspathis and pathsalas by gurus or adhyapakas. It was mainly confined to the upper stratum of the society- the Brahmanas, the Kayasthas and the kalitas. Again, it was the privilege of male folks only. Moreover, another institution named the satra, which emerged in the medieval times, also became an important institution for educating the people.

The satra was brought into existence by the Vaishnavite saints headed by the great religious and social reformer, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev (1449 AD -1568AD) as a centre for religious propagation and discussion. It is still functioning as a living organization for propagating and diffusing Vaishnavite ideals with an imperishable impact on religion, culture, fine arts, education and social life of people of Assam, particularly of the Bramaputra valley of Assam. It is influential even on the economic and political life of the people. It also serves as a frame of reference for philosophical, moral, ethical and religious values of the people of Assam.

### **Origin and Evolution of the Term Satra**

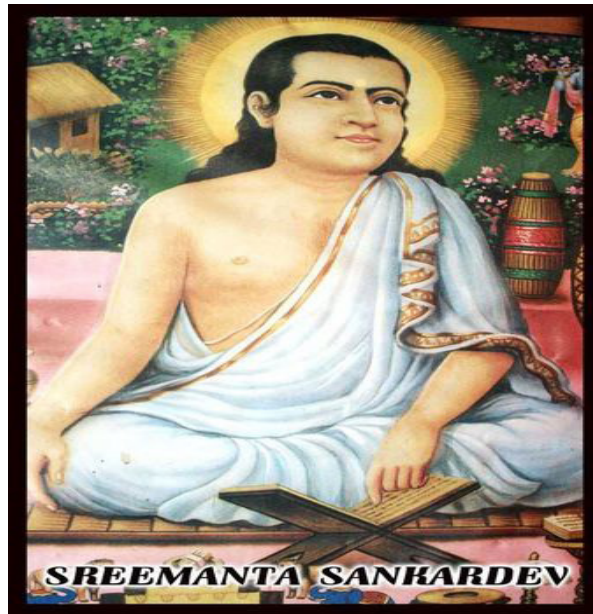
The word satra is derived from the Sanskrit word sattrā and the use of the term in the sense of Vaishnavite institution appears to be a new one in the religious history of India. In Sanskrit literature the word has been used in two senses, one is in the sense of “alms house” and secondly in the sense of a “sacrifice lasting from a few days to a year or more” (Sharma S.N., 1999).

The word satra, used in connection with the Vaishnavite monastery in Assam, appears to come from the Sanskrit word sattrā (Sharma S.N., 1999). The word was used in the Satapatha-Brahmana in the sense of a sacrificial session. The etymology of the word is, an association or a sitting (sad+tra) or an institution to liberate the noble (sat+tra). The word sattrā very naturally became satra in Assam.

### **Stages of Evolution of the Institution**

The growth and development of satra right from the initial stage to the full-fledged status covered a long period. On the basis of the character and nature of the growth and development of this institution, it can be divided into 3 stages.

**First stage:** The first stage begun with Sankardev. At the initial stage the satra was not a regular institution of a permanent nature and it was not known in any of the early biographies of Sankardev whether the chari-hati and manikut existed or not. But the biographies of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, notably the *Katha-Gurucharit*, speak of the existence of chari-hati and manikut (Sharma S.N., 1999). During his lifetime about 60 temporary satras were established in different places of Brahmaputra valley. He himself established at about 30 satras and his prime disciples established about 30 and these were listed in the first phase of the growth of the satras of Assam (Neog, M. (Ed.) 1969).



**Fig. 1:** Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev (1449 AD -1568AD)

**Second stage:** In the second stage, the disciples of Sankardev expanded the neo-vaishnavite movement and the satras were established in different parts of Brahmaputra valley; with notable changes in both external and internal spheres. It was in the time of Madhabdev (1489-1586) and Damodardev (1488-1598) two most distinguished disciples of Sankardev that the satra institution attained the second phase of its growth.

**Third stage:** The satra was placed on a sound economic footing with the extension of royal patronage in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and this was the final phase of its evolution. The structural feature of satra received the final shape during this period. Towards the end of the Ahom rule in Assam, the Burmese invasion (1817-1825 AD), practically threw the

entire Assam out of gear. The satras were sacked and set on fire, adhikars and disciples fled for their lives. As a result, many valuable manuscripts and other treasures of art etc. lost forever. While the advent of British rule in 1826 AD, the adhikars and disciples returned to their original satras. The British government also granted lands free of revenue or nominal revenue to the satras.

### **Structural feature of the Satras**

Satras are generally quadrangles in shape surrounded by palisades or walls. The selection of the site of the satra was determined by the availability of food-stuff (grains, vegetables, crops and fish) in the locality and some sort of isolation, although an eye was kept on the closeness to the water-routes provided by Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Each principal satra is marked by physical features, i.e., Namghar or Kirtanghar, Manikut, Hatis and Karapats.

### **Division**

The satras of Assam are classed into four sub-sects, each called a samhati. So long Sankardev was alive; there was rift among his followers. But later on, his followers divided mainly into four groups:—

1. The brahma samhati (brahmanical Group): This sub-sect was originally constituted by the followers of Damodardev.
2. The Purusa-samhati: this sub-sect was constituted by the followers of the grandson of Sankardev and their successors.
3. The kala-samhati: It was originated from Gopal Ata (1514-1611 A.D.) of Bhawanipur, one of the important disciples of Madhabdev.
4. The nika-samhati (the purist group): This sub-sect is consisted of the followers of Mathuradas, Padma Ata and others.

### **Types of Satras**

The satras are mainly of two types- monastic and non-monastic. But there are some monastic satras which have non-monastic elements and again some non-monastic satras with monastic elements. Hence the satra establishment of Assam has four types:—

- (i) Purely monastic satra where the adhikar and devotees live a life of celibacy.
- (ii) Non-monastic satra where the adhikar and devotees lead households' lives.
- (iii) In the third type the adhikar and the deka adhikar remain as celibates. But they do not detach themselves from the family.
- (iv) The fourth type is an admixture of the first and the second type where the adhikar and

the deka adhikar are married, but their devotees consist of both celibates and none celibates.

## **The Monastic Satra**

The monastic satra is a place, where the adhikar and devotees live a life of celibacy. Here, the adhikar and devotees live within the satra campus. In each satra there are some huts called baha for devotees. In each baha, a group of bhakats of different age lives like a family. The head of each baha is called burha-bhakat. The burha-bhakat is responsible for imparting all religious, moral and practical training to the child. He is the person who teaches the child everything from code of conduct to cultivation and cooking. Special emphasis is given on cleanliness, hygiene, values, proper attitude, good manners, respect to elders, discipline, punctuality etc.

In Assamese, a celibate monk is called 'kewaliya' or 'udasin' bhakat. The word kewaliya means 'unmarried, despising worldly happiness or celibates'. Sankardev, the founder of Assamese vaishnavism was married but his chief disciple Madhavdev, who was the real organizer of the order, was a celibate. It is supposed in some quarters that his celibacy worked as an attractive ideal to the vaishnavas of Assam (Lekharu, U.C. (Ed.) 1995). Again, according to S.N. Sarma, the satra institution undertook a monastic turn during the time of Madhavdev and Damodardev, disciples of Sankardeva (Sharma S.N., 1999).

Out of the four sub sects of the satras, only the Brahma and the Nika samhati have monastic satras. In true sense the monastic satras only can termed as ideal satra because of their environment, day to day life of bhakats, the adhikar and his daily activities, their cultural, economic and moral life and their structural features (Nath, D. 2009).

## **Statement of the Problem**

The monastic satra itself is a unique institution and the education system prevalent in it is responsible for the growth of wholesome personalities. Hence the need of a study of the satra is felt by the investigator and the study has been entitled 'A case study on the Education System of the Uttar Kamalabari Monastic satra of Assam'.

## **Operational Definition**

1. *Education System*: The investigator has used the term Education System to mean the total educational environment of the satra institution. It includes all the formal, informal and non-formal education that a young inmate receives from the satra.
2. *Monastic Satra*: A satra where the adhikar and the devotees live a life of celibacy.

## Objectives

The present study has been designed keeping the following objectives in view:—

1. To know about the life style of the inmates.
2. To study the education system of the monastic satras in relation to —
  - The type of education
  - The subject matter taught by the satra.
  - The examination system of the satra
  - The mode of discipline.
  - The teacher pupil relation.

## Significance of the study

The present society and its progress are hindered by utter laxity of social and moral values, especially among the young generation, who carve for easy money and a life of material pursuit only. This erosion of moral values in today's world has raised serious doubts regarding the effectiveness of modern school system in the training of young minds in the right path of productive action.

The childhood and adolescence period is very much crucial for a child's development. Normally, apart from formal schooling, parents play an important role in grooming their children in the right path. But in monastic satras instead of real parents, the foster father takes that responsibility and a child is brought up in a homely environment under the utmost care of the burha bhakat or ata of the Baha and the other members of the satra. The members of the satra are taken into the fold very early in life and the entire responsibility of their upbringing rests upon the burha bhakats who are like father figures to all the inmates.

The education system of the monastic satra is unique. Besides laying a great emphasis on religious and moral education, different art forms like devotional songs and dances and expertise on different musical accompaniments and various arts and crafts are also taught. Importance is also given to the cultivation of good qualities and training on various household and economic activities. That such a unique institution has been thriving for so many centuries and making immense contribution to society by producing competent individuals is a remarkable phenomenon worthy of in-depth study, more so, in this era of moral degeneration.

Moreover, from the review of related literature, it is found that much study has not been done in this regard and therefore a through probe into the working of the monastic satra- its organization, teachings, problems and its contributions can not only seek to find solutions to many social problems which causing decadence of our present times but also should be essential knowledge.

## Delimitation of the Study

The present study has included:—

1. Only the Uttar Kamalabari monastic satra of Assam.
2. Although the satra plays a diverse role in all spheres and has made manifold contributions towards the Assamese society, in the present study prime importance has been given to its education system only.

## METHODOLOGY

For the present study “Descriptive Method” of research has been applied. The type of descriptive research method applied in the present study is the “Case Study” method.

## Population

The present study is basically aimed at depicting the education system of the monastic satras of Assam. From the time of its inception, the satra had to go through several hardship i.e., political, economic, social, geographical and even internal dissension. Although it still exists as a living organization, the number of the satras have been reducing day by day and at present there are only 12 monastic satras belonging to Brahma-samhati and Nika- samhati in Assam.

The following table showing the list of satras :

Sl. No.	Name of the satras	Year of establishment	Samhati
1	Belaguri satra	1516	Nika- samhati
2	Bhogpur satra	1528	Nika- samhati
3	Jarabari satra	1541	Nika- samhati
4	Badula satra	1636	Nika- samhati
5	Iswarhati satra	1650	Nika- samhati
6	Auniati satra	1653	Brahma- samhati
7	Dakhinpat satra	1654	Brahma- samhati
8	Kamalabari satra	1673	Nika- samhati
9	Uttar Kamalabari satra	1837	Nika- samhati
10	Natun Kamalabari satra	1936	Nika- samhati
11	Jinkata Rajahua satra	1967	Nika- samhati
12	Madhya Majuli Kamalabari satra	1977	Nika- samhati



## Sample of the study

For the present study the investigator has selected Uttar Kamalabari satra as the sample of the study. The age structures of its inmates are shown below –

Age structure of the bhakats										
Less than 10 yrs	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-80	81-90	Above 80	Total
7	17	15	11	6	2	6	3	1	3	71

## Location

The Uttar Kamalabari Satra is located in the central part of the Majuli Island. The Satra belongs to the Nika Sanghati which gives leverage to Naam (te deity) as compared to the other components of the satra like Dev, Guru and Bhakat.



**Fig. 2:** Image of entrance of Uttar Kamalabari satra



**Fig. 3:** Map of Assam locating Majuli

## Sources of data

- ❖ The investigator has collected the primary data from the Charit-puthis written by Vaishnava saints, scriptures written by Sankardev and Madhavdev and a few Buranjis of medieval Assam to know the history of the monastic satras and the philosophy of the religion. Primary data was collected from field survey also.
- ❖ As secondary source the investigator has consulted various literatures and research works on satra and on the history of education.



## Tools

- ❖ **Interview:** The investigator has adopted structured interview method in order to get information of the various aspects of the Uttar Kamalabari satra and its education system. Interviews were conducted with the adhikar, deka adhikar, samuhiya burha bhakat and other burha bhakats, teachers and other officials of satra.
- ❖ **Observation:** The investigator had visited the satra several times and stayed there for number of days in each visit. During this period the investigator tried to collect the facts and information of satra like community life and family life in the satra, the religious activities, rules and rituals followed by the celibates, discipline, behaviour etc.
- ❖ **Findings:** After a careful review and analysis of the collected data and information, it has been found that the Uttar Kamalabari satra monastic satra of Assam, have been playing a very great role in the all round of development of its inmates and the society at large. Though it seems to a general observer that the satra only provides religious and moral education and has no relevance in today's scientific and technological world, the present investigation revealed many interesting facts. Though in some respect the ways and means of upbringing the young celibates in the satra are uncommon to that of normal family life, yet its systems are dynamic and multi-dimensional in approach. The total environment of the Satra has been maintained in such a way as to inspire everyone to follow the rules and regulations, maintain discipline, develop qualities like politeness, obedience, good manners, respect for others, apathy for fellow human beings, helping attitude towards the poor and needy and many other such positive qualities.

The findings of the study are enumerated objective wise:

### Objective No. 1

- (A) **General Characteristics:** The Bhakats are normally brought to the Satra at a very tender age so that they can adjust themselves to the celibate lifestyle both mentally and physically and are trained to lead a life of devotion and simplicity. They are indoctrinated in such a way that they cultivate moderate food habits, lead a life of simplicity and adopt gentle behavior and speech pattern.
- (B) **Economic management of the Satra**  
Source of Income—
  - The revenue free lands originally granted by the kings were subsequently confirmed and recognized by the British government. After independence, the government of Assam has acquired major portion of the devottor land of the Satras. Annual payments given as compensation are inadequate to meet the expenses.

- The Second source is the religious tithes contributed by the disciples. But During field visits it has come to notice that most of the satras including this satra of Nika samhati do not collect tithe nowadays. Some satras however, regularly collect this revenue.
- The third source of income is the occasional gifts offered by visitors.

*Ownership and property:* In the satra, the ownership of property is vested in the community of devotees where the adhikar acts as a formal head.

*Properties of Monks:* There is no provision of sahar, the baha gets a portion of land for cultivation and to build a house. The tax of this land will be provided by the baha itself. The head of the baha will be the owner of this portion of land. With his death the ownership will go to the next head of the baha. The original family of the dead man cannot claim that property. If a celibate leaves the satra, he can sell or donate his portion of land to any member of the satra but not to an outsider. But once he leaves the satra, he cannot claim any right on his property within the satra. Again, a celibate monk can collect as many properties outside the satra and the satra will never have a claim upon them. The Satra also helps the monks in times of need.

- (C) **Celibacy:** celibacy is very strictly maintained as long as the bhakats are within the fold of the satra. However, they have the liberty to leave the life of celibacy at any time if they find it irksome and to lead a householder's life.
- (D) **Initiation of Ordination (saran):** The process of formal initiation into the religion is known a 'saran'. The process of initiation has two parts- Saran and Bhajan. Bhajan is kind of higher ordination. The inmates of satra go through these formal initiations at a very early age.
- (E) **Food habit:** The vaishnavas of Assam as well as the inmates of monastic satras are very careful in taking food. Initially, earthen pots were used for cooking which could be discarded after one meal. However, with the passing of time, cooking has come to be done in utensils made of brass or bell metal. Before cooking one need take bath and during cooking and eating certain religious rules need to be followed. The inmates of monastic satra normally take all types of fruits, vegetables, milk and milk products, rice and rice products and fish.
- (E) **Dress:** Normally a celibate devotee wears three pieces of garments made of cotton and sometimes silk- a chadar, a dhoti, and a gamocha in all seasons. During ceremonies additional cloths are worn, like couga and capkan. Initially, inmates of satra used to wear only paduka or phanti. Today, they use modern shoes and sandals. But wearing shoes within the satra campus is strictly prohibited not only for devotees but also for outsiders.

- (F) **Furniture and other article of use:** even today as per the earlier traditions, the celibates still use some traditional furniture such as thanga, kath,, pati and dhara made of grass, bamboo slits, mattress and ribs of withered plantain leaves. High stools are still never used. In some satras though the inmates were use wooden beds for sleeping at night, at daytime they use only kath and pati for sitting purpose.
- (G) **Offence and punishment:** Even today, the monastic satras try to maintain purity in the moral and religious spheres by enforcing strict discipline. Acts of moral turpitude and religious delinquency are not tolerated and devotees involved in such offences are not only to pay monetary fine but they run the risk of being expelled from the satras even if the offender is a deka adhikar. In every satras there is a sort of council consisting of senior devotees with the Adhikar as the presiding member to judge the offence. If the offender is the adhikar himself the council will invite some other adhikar from nearby satras.
- (I) **Amusement and entertainment:** The satras are also centers of all sorts of cultural and performing arts and scriptural studies. Inmates of satras engaged themselves in the practices of group or individual dance and music for most hours of the day. Ankiya bhaona are frequently held on all important occasion. The satras have their own schedule of performance either by way of nitya or by naimittika. Apart from that many other forms of arts and crafts are practice by the inmates. These includes painting, musk making, fan making, boat making, needle work, bamboo work etc. at present, there are provisions of radio and television but they basically use them to enjoy religious movies, songs and watch news.
- (J) **Obsequies rituals:** When a celibate monk dies, his dead body is cremated like other hindu communities of Assam. The aldharas performs obsequies of the burha bhakats and other member of the baha.

## Objective No. 2

- ❖ **Type of Education:** all the three types of education are prevalent in a satra. It is a harmonious blending of formal, non-formal and informal education. The religious, moral and other practical training are given in an informal way by the burha-bhakats and other member of the satra. The foster father, the burha-bhakat, plays the most significant role in upbringing and educating the child.

The second type of training, the training of a particular art form, is given in a non-formal way. Though there is no fixed time table, duration of course and examination, classes are taken by the adhyapaks regularly. The time and duration of classes are changed according to the convenience of both the teacher and the taught. The speed of teaching-learning also depends upon the quality of the student. Examinations are held in the form

of practical performance in front of a body of experts constituted by adhikar, joramaliks, burha-bhakats and adhyapaks. In case of bar-bayan and bar-gayan, experts from other satras are also invited.

In spite of having informal and non-formal education in the satra, the young disciples nowadays also have the opportunity to avail formal education from schools and colleges. The expenditure for such education is the responsibility of the burha-bhakatas. At present there are many highly educated inmates in all the satras.

- ❖ **The subjects taught in the satras:** In each satra importance is given on teaching of various elements of the Eka Saran Nama Dharma, Satriya dance, Singing, Puthi parha and Namlagowa etc. Each subject has a definite curriculum and course list. Apart from these, craft, drawing, sacipat making, sacipat puthi writing, animal husbandry and cultivation are taught in an informal way.
- ❖ **The mode of discipline:** The results of questionnaire analysis reveals some very interesting facts about the mode of discipline. In a baha, though the burha-bhakat gets angry sometimes, he makes suggestions with love like a father and use corporal punishment only in rare cases. But in the classrooms, most of the adhyapaks use corporal punishments.
- ❖ **The teacher pupil's relation:** Though the teachers are very strict, they are equally cautious for wholesome development of the pupils. Interview reveals that they are always ready to help their students and students can also approach them at any time. From direct observation the investigator found that the teaching- learning sessions are often full of fun and mirth, though at the same time there is sincerity and devotion.

## CONCLUSION

From the present study we can conclude that —

- ❖ Satra has a well-balanced organizational and educational system.
- ❖ The inmates of the satra are leading simple but encouraging lifestyles. Special emphasis is given to the teaching of discipline and manner.
- ❖ Burha-bhakats help develop the proper and positive qualities within the child and thus successful in producing good human beings.
- ❖ There is a harmonious blending of tradition and modernity in the lifestyle of the satra.
- ❖ In the present-day society where degradation of values is affecting every spare of life and people have become very much self-centered and un-social, monastic satras still provide training to be social and to love people.
- ❖ Hence, we can conclude that though the boys are brought up in a completely different environment, they receive proper education (in formal, informal and non-formal way) which help them to utilize all the valuable qualities of their personalities.

## GLOSSARY

<i>Adhikar</i>	Head of the vaishnava monastery or satra.
<i>Adhyapak</i>	Teacher
<i>Aldhara</i>	Attendant
<i>Ankiya nat</i>	One-act devotional plays written by Sankardev and Madhavdev (Anka= an act, a type of drama).
<i>Baha</i>	A hut or residence of a bhakat in the monastic satras.
<i>Bahir-hati</i>	Row or rows of huts beyond the boundary of the huts of celibate monks.
<i>Batchora</i>	A gate-house (bat-way, chora=hall).
<i>Bhajan</i>	The ceremony of ordination after the first ordination (saran) to vaishnavism.
<i>Bhakat</i>	A vaishnava celibate devotee.
<i>Bhaona</i>	A dramatic show of vaishnavite dramas.
<i>Burha-bhakat</i>	The senior most bhakat of a baha.
<i>Chapkan</i>	A long flowing garment used by male.
<i>Chadar</i>	A wrapper for upper part of the body.
<i>Choga</i>	A type of waist-coat.
<i>Devottar</i>	Revenue free lands gifted for erection and maintenance of the temples and satras.
<i>Dhuti</i>	A garment used by the male to wrap the lower part of the body.
<i>Eka-sarana</i>	He supreme surrender to one God.
<i>Gamocha</i>	Towel
<i>Hati</i>	Rows of huts for celibate devotees.
<i>Joramalik</i>	The leader of a group of gayan-bayan.
<i>Kewalia bhakat</i>	Unmarried devotee; one whose only occupation of life is the rendering of service to god.
<i>Manikut</i>	A small house attached to the namghar in which the idols or the sacred books are kept.
<i>Muktiyar</i>	An agent or spokesperson of the adhikar.
<i>Namghar</i>	A prayer hall of Assamese people.
<i>Paduka</i>	Wooden foot wears.
<i>Phanti</i>	A type of sandals made of coir.
<i>Sahar</i>	Village
<i>Sahar phura</i>	Visits to sadar or villages of householder disciples.
<i>Samuhiya burha bhakat</i>	Chief of the burha bhakats of a satra.
<i>Saran</i>	The initiation ceremony in which a neophyte is required to surrender himself absolutely to the four fundamental principles.

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## PHOTO GALLERY:



Strutural features of Satra







**Activities and functions of Satra Foreign visitors to the Satra**



The present state government of Assam and central government have appreciated the educational function of the *satras* and assured to bring excellence in heritage education of Assam



