

Hegemony and Legacy: A Critical Study of the Dakhinpat Satra in Assam

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Dakhinpat Satra, one of the four Raj Satras of Assam, through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. While the Satra has historically played a pivotal role in shaping Assamese culture, religion, and politics, it has also exercised significant influence that can be interpreted as a form of religious hegemony. Drawing on historical sources, interviews with the satradhikar and bhakats, and a survey conducted in neighboring villages, the study analyses how the Satra's authority has evolved from the seventeenth century to the present day. Findings reveal a tension between the Satra's enduring spiritual appeal and growing public dissatisfaction, driven by caste-based practices, conservative policies, and changing lifestyles of its religious functionaries. The paper argues that unless the Satra adapts to contemporary socio-cultural realities while retaining its spiritual ethos, its social relevance may continue to diminish in a postmodern, globalized Assam.

Key words: Satra, Religion, Hegemony, Neo-Vaishnavism, Consent

INTRODUCTION:

“When history develops through stages which, though ever more complex and richer in significance and value, are nevertheless similar”. (Gramsci: 2000, 34)

Studying hegemony within a well-established religious institution invites significant challenges. Before delving into the core arguments, it is important to reflect on the contemporary nature of such institutions. The satra institution of Assam, while enjoying global recognition in the present century, simultaneously confronts substantial threats from modernity in its varied forms. Rapid modernization across education, technology, and social life has begun to challenge the norms of these age-old institutions.

To adapt to changing times, satras have had to embrace new values, resulting in the gradual decline of several traditional features. Today, bhakats (monks or male disciples) pursue education in schools and colleges and make use of modern facilities in science, technology, and information systems. If satras were to rigidly deny younger bhakats access to modern education and resources, many would simply leave the institution. This creates a serious challenge, especially for the udashina (celibate) satras. Therefore, drawing critical conclusions about people's attitudes towards the satra institution in the present century requires a careful analysis in the backdrop of modernity.

Since the sixteenth century, satras have influenced Assamese society and culture in multiple ways. Their impact extends beyond spiritual philosophy to encompass art, culture, and even politics. Historians remind us that while the satra institution emerged from the Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by Srimanta Sankardeva in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, several major satras eventually followed a different path. Damodardeva, a chief disciple of Sankardeva, created a distinct order known as the Brahma sanghati. Unlike Sankardeva—who rejected caste distinctions, undermined the supremacy of Brahmins, and advocated worship of a single God (Vishnu) through congregational prayer rather than idol worship—Damodardeva reinstated Brahmin authority by appointing them as satradhikars (pontiffs).

Significantly, the four Raj Satras—Kuruwabahi, Auniati, Dakhinpat, and Garamur—were established on these ideals under the patronage of the Ahom kings. However, royal attitudes towards the satras were not uniform and often depended on the king's political and diplomatic priorities. King Jayadhvaj Singha (1648–1663), for example, provided extensive patronage, sponsoring three major satras in Majuli: Auniati (1653–54), Dakhinpat (1654), and Garamur (1657–58). While some sources claim that Dakhinpat Satra was established in 1662 (Sarma, 1888), other historical evidence points to the earlier date. Jayadhvaj Singha, deeply inclined towards Brahmanical Vaishnavism, invited Banamalideva as the first satradhikar of Dakhinpat Satra, granting him 300 puras of land along with many servitors, and even became his disciple.

Although Assam's satras developed into four sanghatis (kala, brahma, purusha, and nika), those led by Brahmin pontiffs (the Brahma sanghati) ultimately dominated. Supported by extensive royal patronage, they prospered in wealth and power, imitating the aristocracy of the Ahom court in lifestyle and practice. This marked the beginning of a legacy that closely resembled a form of hegemony exercised by the Raj Satras.

One example illustrates this process: Misradeva, the successor of Vamsigopaldeva at Kuruwabahi Satra, lived in great luxury, adorned himself with royal ornaments, and held court-like assemblies in the Satra. Such activities provoked King Pratap Singha, who eventually imprisoned and executed him (Guha, 2011). Although feudalism in medieval Assam was not as pronounced as in Europe, the Raj Satras displayed hierarchical power structures resembling feudal tendencies. The Dakhinpat Satra's administrative framework included posts such as adhikar, deka adhikar, bor bharali, chawol bharali, kakoti, moktar, and hatimota. The adhikar acted as the custodian of land on behalf of the Satra, while the rajmedhi collected taxes annually from disciples.

In addition to royal endowments, most Raj Satras—including Dakhinpat—developed traditions of tax collection, a practice that continues in a reduced form today. Such practices raise important questions: if the primary objective of the satras is to spread the spiritual ideals of Neo-Vaishnavism, why are they so concerned with tax collection and economic pursuits? Historically, Raj Satras often mirrored the functions of the king's court, exercising authority not only in religion but also in politics and the economy. Can such activities be read as hegemonic? Do they persist today, and if so, how do they influence public perceptions of the satras? Might they even undermine the institution's spiritual image among common people?

This paper focuses on these questions with particular attention to the Dakhinpat Satra. It attempts to examine the power politics of the institution and assess whether its activities can be interpreted through Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

METHODOLOGY:

The study employs a qualitative and descriptive research design, relying on both primary and secondary sources. The methods include:

1. **Survey through questionnaire** administered in neighbouring villages of Dakhinpat Satra.
2. **Interviews** with the satradhikar and bhakats of Dakhinpat Satra.
3. **Descriptive analysis** of historical documents, chronicles, and relevant secondary literature.

Together, these approaches provide a holistic understanding of the Satra's historical role, contemporary practices, and public perceptions.

Authority and Power: The Legacy

Historically, Dakhinpat Satra maintained authority not only through spiritual influence but also through systematic economic control. Up to the time of its fourteenth adhikar, Harideva, the Satra regularly collected dupura paddy, adon rice, one gamosa, and one rupee and four annas as tax from each disciple across Assam. In an interview, the present satradhikar, Sri Noni Gopal Dev Goswami, revealed that the Satra currently claims more than eight lakh disciples in Assam, insisting that the number of devotees has not declined.

Economically, the institution once controlled vast resources. At its peak, the Satra owned 42,000 puras of land. In 1973, it surrendered 35,770 puras and bighas of land to the state government, on the condition that the revenue generated would continue to be paid to the Satra. Since its establishment in 1654 under the patronage of King Jayadvaj Singha, who invited Banamalideva as its first satradhikar with an initial grant of 300 puras of land and numerous servitors, royal support enabled the Satra to accumulate wealth and power. Successive Ahom rulers—including Chakradhvaj Singha, Udayaditya Singha, Ramdhvaj Singha, and Ratnadvaj Singha (Lora Roja)—were disciples of Banamalideva, further strengthening the Satra's prestige. Beyond the Ahom court, rulers such as Prannarayana of Koch Behar and Krishna Chandra of the Kachari kingdom also became devotees, adding to its property and wealth.

Notably, Banamalideva and his bhakats were deeply involved in politics and administration. Historical accounts suggest that Banamalideva was instrumental in enthroning Chakradhvaj Singha and that bhakats from Dakhinpat were employed in administrative positions. Benudhar Sarma even notes that

bhakats fought as soldiers in royal armies during times of war. Such roles suggest that the Satra was not only a religious center but also a political and military force.

The growing power of the Raj Satras provoked opposition from certain Ahom rulers. King Gadadhar Singha (1681–1696), alarmed by their political interference and economic dominance, took severe measures against them, including Dakhinpat. At the time, the Satra possessed numerous paiks (bonded laborers), generated income from guru taxes, and enjoyed exemptions for its bhakats from state duties—conditions that weakened the state’s revenue while strengthening the Satra’s autonomy. Gadadhar Singha perceived this as a direct challenge to royal authority.

Ramdeva (Rambapu), then adhikar of Dakhinpat Satra, openly defied Gadadhar Singha’s legitimacy because Lora Roja was his disciple. In retaliation, Gadadhar Singha confiscated the Satra’s wealth, destroyed its deity, and punished Ramdeva by blinding him, even executing several bhakats to curb the Satra’s influence. Despite this repression, the Satra regained prominence under Rudra Singha, Gadadhar’s son, who restored royal patronage. Under his reign, Raj Satras under Brahmanical adhikars flourished again, creating rifts with satras of the kala sanghati such as Mayamara Satra, which adhered more closely to Sankardeva’s egalitarian ideals.

The Moamariah Revolt (1769–1805) illustrates the extent of political involvement by Raj Satras. Amelendu Guha (2011) observes that bhakats from Garamur and other brahma sanghati satras took up arms against the Moamariahs in 1784, only to be defeated, with their institutions destroyed. The adhikar of Dakhinpat fled during the conflict, confirming Benudhar Sarma’s assertion that Raj Satras exercised armed power when threatened.

Nevertheless, successive crises—including the Moamariah Revolt, the fall of the Ahom kingdom, Burmese invasions, and British colonial dominance—gradually eroded the Satra’s political role. Tax collection became irregular, and landholdings diminished. At present, the Satra owns four tea gardens in Assam and continues to receive revenue for land transferred to the government in 1973. However, the economic

condition of the bhakats remains fragile, leading to a gradual decline in their numbers.

Hegemony and the Gramscian Lens

Gramsci (1971) conceptualized hegemony as the dominance of a ruling group achieved not merely through coercion but by manufacturing consent within civil society. Applying this framework to Dakhinpat Satra, its base clearly rests in religion and spirituality, but its superstructure has historically encompassed art, culture, politics, economics, and even military functions.

While the Satra does not directly map onto Gramsci’s distinction between political society and civil society, it performed roles across both domains. It exercised spiritual authority over common people while simultaneously influencing kings and state affairs. Through practices like tax collection and the provision of socio-religious guidance, the Satra positioned itself as an intermediary between ruler and subject.

This authority was sustained through a guru–sisya hierarchy. Disciples (sisyas) were obligated to pay taxes to their guru, failure of which was considered sinful. Such a relationship mirrored that of ruler and citizen in feudal society, though without overt coercion. Instead, it was embedded in mysticism and spiritual reverence. As a result, the Satra secured popular consent rather than mere compliance.

Gramsci further argued that organic intellectuals of a ruling class sustain hegemony by creating philosophical and cultural systems that reinforce authority. In Dakhinpat Satra, this role was fulfilled both by the satradhikars who produced religious-philosophical thought and by bhakats who institutionalized and transmitted these ideas through cultural forms such as nam-prasanga, bhaona, and sattriya nritya. The discipleship of powerful kings like Jayadhvaj Singha further legitimized this hegemony, making common people more inclined to follow the Satra.

Thus, the Satra functioned as a hegemonic apparatus, shaping ideological consciousness while intertwining spirituality with politics and economics. It did not rely on overt coercion but rather fostered belief, reverence, and loyalty—a form of “religious hegemony.”

Contemporary Decline and Public Perception

Although the Satra once exercised formidable influence, its hegemonic authority has weakened. The economic insecurity of its bhakats, combined with reduced political relevance, has eroded its capacity to dominate.

A field survey conducted in three neighbouring villages—Dakhinpat, Karhal Gaon Mudoichuk, and Bongaon—revealed mixed public perceptions. Respondents came from diverse professions, age groups, castes, and genders.

No	Questions	Yes (percent)	No (percent)
1	Do you visit Dakhinpat Satra?	100% *	0%
2	Do you support/like the recent activities of the satradhikar/ bhakats of the Satra?	47%	53%
3	Do you attend the religious or cultural functions of the Satra?	80%	20%
4	Does the Satra help you in any respect?	30%	70%
5	Does the Satra perform any social-cultural work in your area?	33%	67%
6	Whether people in your area converted into any other religious trends such as Sankar Sangha, Krishna Guru or into extra religion?	47%	63%
7	Do you like the Satra?	60%	40%

(* It varies as some people visit the Satra once in a year or some other people visit twice or thrice a year)

The findings highlight a paradox. While all respondents continue to visit the Satra, nearly half are dissatisfied with its current activities, and two-thirds deny its socio-cultural contribution. The presence of competing religious trends, such as Sankar Sangha or Krishna Guru, further suggests weaknesses in the Satra's ability to retain exclusive influence.

Despite these shortcomings, many respondents still expressed reverence for Jadavray, the Satra's deity, demonstrating enduring spiritual appeal even as institutional credibility declines. The satradhikar himself noted that tourist numbers are increasing, possibly due to Majuli's growing global prominence. Yet unless the Satra reforms its socio-religious policies, its influence among indigenous communities is likely to diminish further.

Challenges to the Satra Institution in the 21st Century

Discussions with respondents revealed several reasons why people in Majuli and surrounding regions express growing dissatisfaction with satras, including Dakhinpat Satra, in the present century. These reasons provide valuable insight into how the once-hegemonic authority of the satras has eroded under the pressures of modernity, social change, and competing value systems. Broadly, three major issues can be identified: caste practices, conservatism, and the contemporary activities of bhakats and satradhikars.

I. Caste Practices and Exclusionary Structures

One of the most frequently mentioned criticisms is the persistence of caste-based practices within the satras. Historically, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries sought to reduce caste barriers by emphasizing devotion to a single God, Vishnu, through congregational prayer. However, in practice, many of the larger satras, particularly those belonging to the Brahma sanghati such as Dakhinpat and Auniati, have reinforced caste distinctions in their internal organization.

For instance, Auniati Satra currently houses 344 residential bhakats. Among them, 43 are Brahmins, one is a Kayastha, 188 are Kalitas, 71 are Koch, and 42 are Keot. The key administrative and spiritual positions—the Satradhikar, Deka Satradhikar, Borpujari, and Bhagwati—are invariably reserved for Brahmins. Similar patterns are visible in Dakhinpat Satra. Moreover, caste-based food practices remain intact: a Brahmin inmate does not accept food prepared by a Shudra inmate, and even within the Shudra category, those from higher sub-castes refuse to take food cooked by those from "lower" sub-castes.

Respondents linked these rigid practices to a broader alienation of marginalized groups. For example, the Mising community of Majuli, feeling excluded from participation in satra life, has shown significant rates of conversion to Christianity in recent years. While conversion is often a complex process influenced by education, missionary activities, and socio-economic opportunities, the persistence of caste hierarchies in satras undoubtedly contributes to the disaffection of non-dominant groups.

From a Gramscian perspective, this reflects a weakening of hegemonic consensus. Hegemony depends upon the ability of a ruling class—or in this case, a religious institution—to universalize its ideology so that subordinate groups willingly accept its authority. By continuing to enforce caste divisions, the satras undermine their ability to present themselves as representatives of a shared spiritual community. Instead, they reproduce divisions that alienate potential followers, weakening their ideological leadership.

II. Conservatism and Resistance to Modern Development

Another major source of dissatisfaction is the perceived conservatism of satradhikars. A striking example is the opposition expressed by several satradhikars, including that of Dakhinpat, to the proposed bridge connecting Majuli with Jorhat. Their stated concern was that the bridge would “damage the satriya heritage” of the island. While this perspective emphasizes the need to preserve cultural traditions, many ordinary residents of Majuli regard the bridge as vital for economic development, access to healthcare, education, and trade.

For local people, therefore, the satras’ opposition represents an outdated conservatism that prioritizes institutional self-preservation over community welfare. Several respondents expressed frustration, noting that while satradhikars enjoy prestige and resources, they fail to support initiatives that could materially improve the lives of ordinary people.

From the standpoint of hegemony, this resistance to development highlights a contradiction. For hegemony to remain effective, institutions must not only maintain cultural influence but also respond to the material needs of the people. Gramsci emphasized that the ruling group’s ideas must be flexible enough to incorporate changing historical circumstances. By clinging rigidly to tradition and rejecting modern development projects, satras risk alienating their followers, thereby eroding the consensus upon which their authority rests.

Moreover, in a postcolonial, globalized society, where development discourses are deeply intertwined with aspirations for progress and equality, such opposition can easily be interpreted as regressive. Younger generations, in particular, often view these attitudes as obstacles to their socio-economic mobility. This generational divide further accelerates the decline of satra hegemony.

III. Activities of Bhakats and Satradhikars in the Modern Era

A third source of dissatisfaction stems from the activities and lifestyles of bhakats and satradhikars themselves. Traditionally, bhakats were expected to embody discipline, austerity, and devotion. However, modernization and exposure to globalized lifestyles have influenced contemporary bhakats in visible ways. Respondents noted that many bhakats now adopt consumerist lifestyles, making use of technology, fashion, and entertainment practices that earlier generations would have deemed incompatible with monastic life.

While modernization is inevitable, this shift reduces the aura of sanctity that once surrounded bhakats. For ordinary devotees, the bhakats no longer symbolize spiritual discipline but appear increasingly similar to laypeople. This blurring of distinction diminishes the institution’s moral authority.

Additionally, respondents criticized the proliferation of “self-styled” satras. Some individuals who were once loosely associated with satras now establish their own institutions, calling themselves adhikars and claiming satra status without fulfilling traditional requirements. Often, the primary motive is to secure government financial aid. Such practices dilute the spiritual and cultural authority of authentic satras, leading to public disillusionment.

Respondents also argued that satras have failed to significantly contribute to social development in education, healthcare, or livelihoods, despite their historical wealth and influence. This perceived indifference contrasts sharply with the expectations of people who believe that such powerful institutions should play an active role in community upliftment.

From a hegemonic standpoint, these criticisms reflect a crisis of legitimacy. Hegemony requires the creation of moral and intellectual leadership, not merely domination. When satradhikars and bhakats are seen as self-serving or disengaged from social progress, they cease to function as “organic intellectuals” of the community, thereby losing their capacity to inspire consent.

Can These Be Read as ‘Hegemonic’?

The three issues—caste practices, conservatism, and the questionable activities of bhakats and satradhikars—can indeed be interpreted through the lens of hegemony, albeit in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, these practices reveal the persistence of hierarchical authority structures. By enforcing caste

hierarchies, opposing modern development, and retaining exclusive privileges, satras continue to exercise a form of dominance. They reproduce a cultural logic that legitimizes the authority of the satradhikar and maintains the guru–sishya hierarchy.

On the other hand, these very practices also signal the decline of hegemonic consensus. For Gramsci, hegemony succeeds only when subordinate groups consent to their subordination because they believe it reflects a broader common interest. Today, however, many people question the relevance of caste-based discrimination, the rejection of development, and the perceived hypocrisy of bhakats. Instead of securing voluntary consent, these practices increasingly generate resistance, disillusionment, or quiet withdrawal from satra life.

Therefore, the hegemony of satras in the 21st century appears fragile and contested. While they continue to exercise influence through spirituality, ritual authority, and cultural heritage, their legitimacy is being eroded by modern values of equality, development, and accountability. The persistence of respect for deities such as Jadavray shows that the spiritual core remains powerful. Yet, without significant reforms, satras risk becoming institutions respected from afar but not deeply engaged with the daily lives of their devotees.

CONCLUSION:

The historical trajectory of the Dakhinpat Satra demonstrates how a religious institution can accumulate and sustain influence through a combination of spiritual authority, economic resources, and political alliances. From its origins under royal patronage to its current role in the socio-cultural fabric of Majuli, the Satra has maintained a position of prominence. Yet, the findings of this study indicate that its hegemonic hold—once grounded in unquestioned spiritual consent—is no longer absolute.

Survey results reveal a complex relationship between the institution and the local community: while respect for the Satra's heritage and spiritual functions persists, significant dissatisfaction exists regarding its caste practices, perceived conservatism, and limited engagement in social development. These concerns are amplified by the visible lifestyle changes among bhakats and the emergence of alternative religious movements in the region.

Applying Gramsci's framework, the Satra's historical dominance can be read as a form of religious hegemony—rooted in consent rather than coercion—shaped by cultural leadership and reinforced through symbolic and material means. In the contemporary context, however, this hegemony is under strain. For the Dakhinpat Satra to remain socially relevant, it must critically reassess its role, shed exclusionary practices, and embrace inclusive strategies that resonate with modern aspirations while preserving its spiritual core.

In doing so, it may transform its legacy from one of hierarchical dominance to one of adaptive cultural stewardship—ensuring that the institution continues to thrive in a postmodern, globalized Assam.

Notes:

1. D. Nath. *Satra Society and Culture Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garamur Satra*. Guwahati, DVS: 2012, pp.8
2. *ibid*, pp.17
3. *ibid*, pp.18. According to the writer, even the satras of kala sanghati gradually started enjoying royal patronage, except Moamara Satra .
4. *ibid*, pp.14.
5. Benudhar Sarma. *Dakhinpat Satra*. Guwahati, *Asam Jyoti* : 1888 sak, pp. 16-17. The writer shows 57 such positions in Dakhinpat Satra.
6. *ibid*, pp. 17
7. *ibid*, pp. 10
8. D. Nath. *Asom Buranje*. Guwahati, Arun Prakashan : 2009, pp.189
9. Amalendu Guha. *Vaishnabbador Pora Mayamariya Bidroh*. Guwahati, Students Stores: 2011, pp.78
10. from interview with the bhakats.

11. David Forges (Ed.). The Gramsci Reader Selected Writings 1916-1935. New York. New York University Press: 2000, pp.30
12. D, Nath .The Majuli Island: Society, Culture and Economy. Delhi, Anshah : 2008, p.186-187

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10. Sarma, Benudhar. Dakhinpat Satra. Guwahati, Assam Jyoti : 1888