

# Paal Naam: A Historical Analysis of the Congregational Prayer Festival in Assamese Satra Tradition

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## Abstract

The Paal Naam, a distinctive congregational prayer festival within the Assamese Satra tradition, represents a profound manifestation of Neo-Vaishnavite spiritual and cultural practices. Originating in the 16th century through the pioneering efforts of Srimanta Sankaradeva, this ritual embodies a unique form of devotional expression characterized by continuous, rotational chanting of divine names. Specifically prevalent in the Auniati Satra of Majuli, Paalnaam emerged from complex historical circumstances, including interactions with Ahom royal authorities and spiritual resistance.

The festival, typically lasting 24-48 hours, transcends mere religious observance, functioning as a comprehensive socio-cultural institution that reinforces community cohesion and spiritual solidarity. Rooted in the principles of Ek Sarana Nam Dharma, Paalnaam symbolizes absolute submission to Krishna through collective recitation and spiritual contemplation. Its historical significance is deeply intertwined with local resistance, community preservation, and the transmission of religious and cultural knowledge.

This review explores Paalnaam's evolutionary trajectory, its intrinsic cultural significance, and its enduring role in maintaining the rich spiritual heritage of Assamese Vaishnavite traditions.

**Keywords:** Paal Naam, Majuli, Ek Sarana Nam Dharma, Auniati Satra

## Introduction

The Satras are Assam's most prominent and important societal institution. Satras, which originated in the early years of the Sankardev-founded movement, disseminated the Neo-Vaishnavite doctrine. Assamese customs and culture today have their roots in the Satras. From the beginning of the 16th century until the arrival of the British, the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement—which eventually came to be expressed through the body of Satra—had a significant impact on the development of Assam's artistic heritage in terms of acceptable craftsmanship, scholarly endeavors, and, of course, research and cultural assets. Sankardev established the first Satra, or prayer house, at Bordowa, which is near Nagaon. He later established Satras in several places while visiting the eastern part of Assam<sup>1</sup>

A notable aspect of Assam that is closely linked to the state's culture and traditions are the Sattra institutions. The Navabaishnav Bhakti Movement led to the formation of these institutions during the Middle Ages. The theistic devotional movement that arose around this time, particularly in Hinduism, is known as the Bhakti movement. The Sattra and Namghar (Temple) has been emerging throughout Assam at various times since the late 1950s. One approach to explain the Sattras' external features is to start with Batsora, which is the main entrance, followed by Kirtan-ghar, Bhajghar or Manikut, and finally Sabhagriha (the assembly building). The Bhagawator statue of Lord Sri Krishna is situated in a particular area known as Ashan or Thapona in the Kirtan-ghar or Manikut. Lights, an incense stick, holly books, benzoic incense, and other items are stored in front of the Ashan. In addition to these, DouL Mandap, devotee rest areas, and rooms for other purposes make up Sattra's surroundings. A chilly, spiritual atmosphere is created throughout the region by the holly prayer, the sound of various musical instruments like the doba, the khol (a unique kind of drum), and the borkah (a kind of disk played with both hands). Outside of the Sattra region is where devotees live and raise their families. This organization is made up of these devoted followers as well as other local residents. With this exterior characteristic, the Sattra is a social organization that discusses religious beliefs and cultural practices. Additionally, these satras serve as the peasants' court and are very important. In essence, a Sattra creates a wholesome society.<sup>2</sup>

As it is said in the Bhagavata purana and Gita, Lord Vishnu assumes incarnations in various forms from time to time with a view to redeeming the world as well as to graze his devotees. Narayana is one such incarnation that is hailed in the Bhagavata-purana as well as in the Gita. Ek sarana-nam dharma is the absolute submission to only one who is none other than Krishna and it consists in the performance of name, i.e. the recital or singing of the acts of Lord Krishna and listening to his glory. It is glorified by two aspects of recital of and listening to the glory of Lord Krishna for which it is aptly called Nam-dharma.<sup>3</sup>

Paal naam is a religious festival organised by the Satras of Majuli, especially of Auniati Satra, Paal Naam is a combination of two words, 'Paal' means turn by turn and 'Naam' means congregational prayer or chanting the name of God. Consequently Palnam means organising the continual congregational prayers or chanting the name of God from the text of Bhagawata, Kirtan Ghosa, and Namaghosa by the 'Bhakats' devotees of the Satra in rotation. Generally, Palnam is a continuous event organised for 24/36/48 hours or even more.

Paal Nam is a characteristic feature of Vaishnava Culture. Srimanta Sankaradeva was first to organise it. The main reason behind was to offer prayers for safe return of his disciple Madhavadeva. In Auniati Sattra first Paal Nam Festival was organised by 5th Sattradhikar, Hari Dev Goswami, in 1695. Since then Auniati Sattra is organising this festival every year on 25th to 29th Kartika month. This festival is also a kind of prayer for world peace and wellness of every living being.<sup>4</sup>

In Assam, the Satras are a special kind of multifaceted socio-religious and cultural establishments where a guru dwells with followers and imparts knowledge through literature, art, communal prayer, religious talks, and holy cultural customs. In fact, it is a sacred philosophy of Neo-Vaisnavism that institutionalizes socio-religious harmony. The four main parts of Satra are Batchora (Main Gate), Namghar or Kritanghar (Prayer Hall), Monikut (House of Jewels), and Hati (Like a Hostel of Bhakat and followers).

**Batchora (Main Gate):** The Batchora is main entrance of Satra, is known as Karapat. Some Satra is two gates with a small house on same way. This small house use on mane popups like rest in rain, take away footwear entry to Satra etc.

**Namghar or Kritanghar (Prayer Hall):** Namghar or Kritanghar is prayer hall. The Namghar or Kritanghar is constructed in the center of would Satra campus.

**Monikut (house of jewels):** Monikut is 'house of jewel' and its attested eastern end of Namghar or Karitanghar.

**Hati (Hostel):** Hati is rears of houses where votaries live. Disciple and Preceptor are living in this row of houses. It is maximum numbers of four in a Satra. Hati is constructed surrounding of Satra campus.<sup>5</sup>

### History of the Paal naam in Assam:

The term "paal naam" refers to the methodical acquisition of the name of God up until a specific point in time. This Paalnam was first introduced in Assam in the days of Mahapurush Sankardeva. It is said that Paal Naam is formed around the placing of elephants among the Bhuyans. During the Ahom rule, the responsibility of keeping elephants among the Bhuyans was imposed. Due to their negligence in their duties, Hari Jowai and Madhavadeva were brought to Rajsobha. Both of them were imprisoned for the crime of failure to obey the royal orders. But Hari Jowai was sentenced to death. As all those accounts were published among the Bhuyans, in order to get rid of the wrath of Rajsobha and to seek the safe liberation of Madhavadeva, the devotees chanted Akhandnam Paal Naam on the orders of Sankardeva. While the name was in progress, madhavadeva, knowing that he was innocent and indifferent, released Madhavadeva and gave him a good-bye to Madhavadeva with a bundle of rice and a bundle of salt in his hand. Madhavadeva reached the site at the end of seven days while the name was in operation. Madhav served by donating the food and salt in his hand in his name. Everyone realized that Madhava was freed by the force of the glory of the name and reached the Bhuyans again. The Bhuyans were satisfied with Madhava. So there is a special provision for the donation of anna and salt during Paal Naam. Since then, the system of singing names in the villages and various satras of Assam has become prevalent.

The practice of singing Paal Naam in satra is still prevalent today. Of these, there is a provision of one-day but five-day Paal Naam in the Auniati Satra is very popular. However, apart from the Auniati and Garmur Satras, this Paal Naam of the satras is not a festival of the year.

Paal Naam is a major annual festival of Auniati Satra. The primary origin of this festival in this satra can be traced to Keshav Devgoswami Prabhu, the second satradhikar of the Auniati Satra, who, impressed by the tyranny of the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha, fled with some Vaishnavas in the forest of Sadiya, on the banks of the Kundil river, for self-defense. During that period, other Vaishnavas sang the Paal Naam every day in Auniati Satra in order to bring the stardhikar Prabhu back to the satra. This is how Paal Naam began..Although the name sung on the occasion of a specific purpose ended in the context of its model day, at least five Vaishnavas left a tradition to name it for a brief time. This name is called Patiya Paal Naam because the five sing. Although the order of this name is still preserved today, this name is an additional reference to the origin of Paal Naam of the Auniati Satra.

Paal Naam of Auniati satra was celebrated as a festival in the days of Haridev Satradhikar Prabhu. For the last five days of every month, the Vaishnavas of all four haatis sang the naam on rotation basis. It was customary to sing this naam in day and night on the last day. Later, due to the difficulty of frequent application of expensive tasks, this paal naam festival turned into an annual festival instead of a monthly one. It was Haridev Satradhikar who has put this system in place. But in the meantime, there continued to be an additional reference to the daily context. Since then, this name festival has been held in the same vein during the last five days of the month of Kaati of the year.. Basically, the month of Kaati is considered to be a very holy and virtuous month. It is believed that by doing virtuous deeds in this holy month, its follow-up is doubled in this way.

The Padma Purana says that the four things of God are very dear. The four subjects are Tulsi among the plants, Kartik within the month, Ekadashi within tithi and Dwarka within the field. One of the main reasons why the month of Kaati is dear to the Lord is that the Padma Purana indicates that the vedas are the base of the power of the deities. When the demon Shankhasura brought the deities to their own kingdom by fighting, the deities offered their prayers by awakening the sleeping Vishnu by singing and singing till one end of the night. The day when Vishnu prayed with songs and instruments was the Ekadashi of the month of Kati. Those who worship Vishnu on this tithi with songs and instruments like the gods up to a moment of the night are liberated eternally. Vishnu was pleased with the prayer and killed Shankhasura and sent the munis and retrieved the Vedas from the water. The month of Kati became considered as the holy month due to the presence of vedas in the water in the month of Kati and vishnu himself entered the water.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

The Paal Naam festival is a powerful illustration of the tenacity and richness of Assamese religious and cultural customs. It is a complex socio-cultural phenomena that embodies the core ideas of Srimanta Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavite philosophy and is far more than just a religious ceremony. Paalnam has maintained a whole system of communal identity, spiritual resistance, and cultural preservation through its distinctive practice of congregational prayer that is continuous and rotates. The way Paalnam has changed over time, from its beginnings as a reaction to political difficulties during the Ahom era to its current incarnation as an annual celebration, illustrates how adaptable Assamese religious customs are. Through centuries of societal change, this tradition has been able to endure and flourish because to institutional processes that are highlighted by its roots in the Auniati Satra, especially the practices started by leaders like Haridev Goswami. Paalnam is important

because it goes beyond its specific religious setting. It connects modern Assamese society to its rich historical heritage through spiritual practice, community connection, and a living archive of cultural memory. The festival's persistence, especially its yearly celebration in the auspicious month of Kartika, highlights how important it is to preserving cultural continuity.

The relevance of Paalnam today, its influence on the next generation, and its function in conserving intangible cultural heritage in a world growing more interconnected could all be profitable subjects for future studies. The ritual's capacity to serve as a template for communal spiritual practice provides important insights for religious and anthropological research as well as for comprehending the fluidity of cultural preservation. All things considered, Paalnam is a potent representation of Assamese cultural tenacity—a custom that has withstood social shifts, political upheavals, and outside influences while remaining a dynamic manifestation of spiritual and collective identity.

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