

Sattras of Assam: Balancing Tradition and Modernity for Sustainable Community Development

Chandan Jyoti Bezborah^{1*}, Dimpi Gogoi² and Soumitra Sen³

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of Travel & Tourism Management, The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Hospitality and Hotel Administration, Assam Don Bosco University, Tapesia, India

³Senior Professor, Department of Travel & Tourism Management, The Assam Royal Global University, Guwahati, India

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ABSTRACT

Sattras are traditional monastic centres in Assam, deeply rooted in history and spirituality. They stand as guardians of our heritage, providing a unique perspective on how cultural traditions can coexist with modern ways. This paper explores the diverse roles of *Sattras* in promoting sustainable development in Assam, highlighting how they blend tradition with modern practices.

At the core of *Sattras* lies a rich cultural heritage, shaped over centuries by spiritual leaders like Srimanta Sankardev. These centres have long been hubs for worship, cultural preservation, and community engagement. With a focus on inclusivity and compassion, *Sattras* has been instrumental in fostering unity and ethical values among Assam's diverse communities.

In today's world, *Sattras* are actively involved in addressing pressing issues through their cultural influence. They champion environmental conservation efforts, especially in ecologically sensitive areas where they're often located.

Moreover, *Sattras* play a vital role in community development by offering educational and vocational programs. These initiatives empower residents, enhance livelihoods, and promote social inclusion, thereby improving overall well-being.

This paper also explores how *Sattras* contribute to cultural preservation and sustainable tourism. By showcasing traditional arts, crafts, and performances, they attract tourists and facilitate cultural exchange while generating revenue for community projects. However, it stresses the need for responsible tourism practices that respect the sanctity of *Sattras* and uphold the dignity of local communities.

Keywords: *Sattras, Cultural tourism, Sustainable development*

Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Sattras, traditional monastic centres deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Assam, India, have long served as pillars of spiritual, cultural, and social life in the region. Rooted in the teachings of revered figures like Srimanta Sankardev and Madhavdev, *Sattras* have played a pivotal role in shaping Assamese society for centuries. These socio-religious institutions have not only preserved the rich heritage of Assam but have also fostered a sense of community, compassion, and ethical values among its people.

Historically, *Sattras* emerged during the 15th and 16th centuries as centres of devotion and learning under the guidance of Srimanta Sankardev and his disciples. These institutions were not merely places of worship but also hubs of cultural expression, where arts, music, dance, and literature flourished under the patronage of the Bhakti movement. Over time, *Sattras* evolved into comprehensive socio-religious complexes, encompassing educational institutions, performance spaces, and community welfare facilities.

In contemporary times, as Assam grapples with the challenges of modernization, urbanization, and environmental degradation, the role of *Sattras* in sustainable development has gained renewed significance. Amidst the rapid pace of change, *Sattras* continue to uphold traditional values while embracing innovative approaches to address pressing issues such as environmental conservation, socio-economic inequality, and cultural preservation.

Against this backdrop, this research seeks to explore the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity within the context of *Sattras* in Assam, with a particular focus on their role in promoting sustainable development. By examining the historical evolution, contemporary significance, and multifaceted roles of *Sattras*, this study aims to shed light on their contributions to sustainable development and the challenges they face in navigating the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

Through an in-depth analysis of *Sattras*' environmental conservation efforts, community development initiatives, and socio-cultural impact, this research endeavours to provide valuable insights into how these traditional institutions can serve as catalysts for positive change in Assam. By understanding the effectiveness and challenges of *Sattras* in balancing tradition and modernity, policymakers, scholars, and practitioners can formulate strategies to harness their potential for sustainable development and cultural preservation in the region.

1.2 Literature Review

Sattras, traditional monastic centres in Assam, have a rich historical legacy dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries. Scholars such as Goswami (2001) and Bhattacharyya (2010) have extensively documented the origins and evolution of *Sattras*, tracing their roots to the Bhakti movement spearheaded by Srimanta Sankardev and his disciples. These socio-religious institutions, founded on principles of devotion, inclusivity, and cultural synthesis, played a pivotal role in shaping Assamese society and identity.

In contemporary times, *Sattras* continue to wield significant influence and relevance in Assam. Das (2018) highlights their enduring cultural and spiritual significance, serving as centres for religious worship, cultural preservation, and community engagement. The socio-political landscape of Assam, characterized by ethnic diversity and socioeconomic disparities, underscores the importance of *Sattras* as agents of social cohesion and unity (Gohain, 2015).

Sattras play diverse and multifaceted roles in promoting sustainable development across various dimensions. Environmental conservation efforts by *Sattras* have garnered attention for their effectiveness in preserving biodiversity, promoting eco-friendly practices, and mitigating climate change impacts (Sarmah, 2017). Initiatives such as the "Green *Sattras*" movement, which advocates for sustainable land management and afforestation, exemplify the environmental stewardship ethos of *Sattras* (Goswami, 2020).

Community development initiatives led by *Sattras* have also made significant contributions to socio-economic empowerment and poverty alleviation in rural Assam. Educational programs, vocational training, and healthcare services provided by *Sattras* have been instrumental in improving human development indicators and enhancing livelihoods (Bhattacharyya & Sarmah, 2019). Additionally, the socio-cultural impact of *Sattras* extends beyond religious practices to encompass the promotion of ethical values, social harmony, and inclusivity (Goswami & Dutta, 2018).

While *Sattras* have successfully preserved traditional cultural practices and values, they also face challenges in navigating the complexities of modernity. The rapid pace of globalization, urbanization, and technological advancement presents both opportunities and threats to the traditional way of life upheld by *Sattras* (Sarma, 2019).

Scholars such as Baruah (2016) have highlighted the tensions between tradition and modernity faced by *Sattras*, including issues related to cultural identity, resource management, and governance.

Efforts to balance tradition and modernity have led to innovative approaches and collaborations. Integrating technology, such as digital platforms for disseminating religious teachings and community outreach, reflects *Sattras*' adaptability and resilience in the face of change (Gogoi & Deka, 2020). However, challenges persist, including socio-economic disparities, environmental degradation, and socio-political unrest, which necessitate ongoing dialogue and collaboration between *Sattras*, government agencies, and civil society organisations (Barman & Kalita, 2017).

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To examine the historical evolution and contemporary significance of *Sattras* in Assam
2. To investigate the multifaceted roles of *Sattras* in promoting sustainable development within their communities
3. To assess the effectiveness and challenges faced by *Sattras* in balancing tradition and modernity

1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of the unique role of *Sattras* in promoting sustainable development amidst the dynamic socio-cultural landscape of Assam. *Sattras*, as ancient socio-religious institutions, possess a rich heritage deeply intertwined with the ethos of Assamese society. Understanding their contemporary relevance and contributions to sustainable development is essential for several reasons:

1.4.1 Cultural Preservation: *Sattras* serve as custodians of Assam's cultural heritage, preserving traditional arts, music, dance, and literature. In the face of globalization and rapid modernization, the preservation of these cultural traditions is crucial for maintaining the identity and cohesion of Assamese society.

1.4.2 Environmental Conservation: Assam's unique ecological landscape, including its rich biodiversity and fragile ecosystems, faces numerous threats such as deforestation, habitat loss, and pollution. *Sattras*, often located in rural and ecologically sensitive areas, play a vital role in environmental conservation through initiatives like tree plantation drives, wildlife protection, and the promotion of sustainable farming practices.

1.4.3 Community Development: *Sattras* are not only spiritual centres but also engines of community development, offering educational, healthcare, and livelihood programs to residents. These initiatives empower communities, alleviate poverty, and foster social inclusion, thereby contributing to the overall well-being and resilience of Assam's population.

1.4.4 Balancing Tradition and Modernity: As Assam undergoes rapid economic and social transformations, *Sattras* face the challenge of balancing traditional values with modern practices. Understanding how *Sattras* navigates this tension can provide valuable insights into the broader discourse on tradition, modernity, and sustainable development in a globalized world.

Given the multifaceted roles of *Sattras* and their potential to drive positive change, this study holds significance for policymakers, scholars, development practitioners, and local communities alike. By illuminating the contributions and challenges of *Sattras* in the context of sustainable development, this research aims to inform evidence-based policies, foster interdisciplinary dialogue, and inspire innovative approaches to address the complex socio-environmental issues facing Assam and similar regions worldwide.

2. Historical Evolution and Contemporary Significance of *Sattras*

Sattras, traditional monastic centres in Assam, have a profound historical legacy rooted in the teachings of revered figures and the socio-cultural milieu of the region. This chapter explores the origins, evolution, and enduring significance of *Sattras* in Assamese society, shedding light on their historical evolution and contemporary

relevance.

The origins of *Sattras* can be traced back to the 15th and 16th centuries, during the Bhakti movement led by Srimanta Sankardev and his disciples. Sankardev, a saint, poet, and social reformer, laid the foundation for the Vaishnavite movement in Assam, emphasizing devotion to Lord Krishna and egalitarian principles. Alongside Madhavdev and other disciples, Sankardev established *Sattras* as centres of religious worship, cultural exchange, and socio-economic empowerment. These institutions provided refuge to devotees, promoted spiritual teachings, and nurtured a sense of community among followers.

2.1 Evolution of *Sattras* Over Time

Over the centuries, *Sattras* evolved from humble abodes into comprehensive socio-religious complexes, encompassing temples, educational institutions, performance spaces, and community welfare facilities. The teachings of Sankardev and Madhavdev encapsulated in the Bhakti literature known as Kirtans, Ankiya Naats, and Borgeets, formed the cultural foundation of *Sattras*. The *Sattras* system, characterized by a hierarchical structure and collective ownership, facilitated the dissemination of knowledge, preservation of traditions, and promotion of ethical values within Assamese society.

Despite facing challenges such as political upheavals, invasions, and socio-economic changes, *Sattras* persevered and adapted to evolving circumstances. They maintained their relevance by embracing innovation, fostering inter-community dialogue, and expanding their outreach beyond religious boundaries. Today, *Sattras* continue to serve as bastions of Assamese culture, spirituality, and communal harmony, embodying the timeless wisdom and resilience of the Bhakti tradition.

2.2 Significance of *Sattras* in Assamese Society Today

In contemporary Assam, *Sattras* hold immense significance as repositories of cultural heritage, spiritual guidance, and social cohesion. They serve as focal points for religious pilgrimages, cultural festivals, and community celebrations, attracting devotees and tourists from far and wide. *Sattras'* contributions extend beyond religious domains to encompass education, healthcare, and socio-economic development. Initiatives such as vocational training, agricultural extension services, and environmental conservation projects reflect *Sattras'* commitment to holistic community welfare and sustainable development.

Moreover, *Sattras* play a vital role in fostering inter-community harmony and solidarity, transcending ethnic, linguistic, and religious divides. Through their inclusive ethos and emphasis on universal human values, *Sattras* promote a sense of belonging and unity among diverse segments of Assamese society. In a rapidly changing world characterized by globalization, urbanization, and cultural homogenization, *Sattras* stand as enduring symbols of resilience, cultural pride, and spiritual enlightenment for the people of Assam.

The historical evolution and contemporary significance of *Sattras* underscore their integral role in shaping the cultural landscape and socio-economic fabric of Assam. Understanding their origins, evolution, and contemporary relevance is essential for appreciating their contributions to sustainable development and community well-being in the region.

3. Multifaceted Roles of *Sattras* in Sustainable Community Development

Sattras, deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual heritage of Assam, play diverse and multifaceted roles in promoting sustainable development within their communities. This chapter delves into the various dimensions of *Sattras'* contributions to sustainable development, encompassing environmental conservation efforts, community development initiatives, and their socio-cultural impact.

3.1 Environmental Conservation Efforts:

Sattras have long been at the forefront of environmental conservation efforts in Assam, advocating for the

preservation of forests, wildlife, and natural resources. One of the key areas of focus for *Sattras* is the preservation of forests and wildlife habitats, which are vital for maintaining ecological balance and biodiversity. Through initiatives such as tree plantation drives, habitat restoration projects, and wildlife protection programs, *Sattras* actively contribute to safeguarding the rich natural heritage of Assam.

Additionally, *Sattras* promote eco-friendly practices and sustainable resource management techniques among their followers and local communities. This includes advocating for organic farming methods, promoting renewable energy technologies, and raising awareness about the importance of waste management and recycling. By fostering a culture of environmental stewardship and conservation, *Sattras* play a crucial role in mitigating the adverse impacts of climate change and promoting sustainable livelihoods.

3.2 Community Development Initiatives:

Sattras are not only spiritual centres but also hubs of community development, offering a wide range of educational, healthcare, and livelihood enhancement programs to residents. Education and skill development programs are integral components of *Sattras'* community outreach efforts, aimed at empowering youth with the knowledge and skills necessary for personal and professional growth. These programs often include vocational training in traditional crafts, agricultural techniques, and modern trades, enabling individuals to secure gainful employment and contribute to the local economy.

Furthermore, *Sattras* provide essential healthcare services to underserved communities, including medical camps, mobile clinics, and preventive health awareness campaigns. By addressing healthcare disparities and promoting preventive healthcare practices, *Sattras* contribute to improving overall health outcomes and quality of life in rural areas. Additionally, *Sattras* facilitate livelihood enhancement initiatives such as microfinance schemes, self-help groups, and cooperative ventures, empowering marginalized communities to generate sustainable income and enhance their economic resilience.

3.3 Socio-cultural Impact of *Sattras* on Sustainable Development:

Beyond their tangible contributions to environmental conservation and community development, *Sattras* have a profound socio-cultural impact on sustainable development in Assam. Central to this impact is the promotion of ethical values, social harmony, and cultural preservation. Through religious teachings, ethical discourses, and community engagements, *Sattras* instil values such as compassion, tolerance, and empathy among their followers, fostering a sense of social responsibility and collective well-being.

Moreover, *Sattras* serve as platforms for promoting inter-community dialogue, cultural exchange, and peace-building initiatives, thereby fostering social cohesion and harmony in diverse societies. By embracing diversity and celebrating cultural pluralism, *Sattras* contribute to the creation of inclusive and resilient communities that are better equipped to address the challenges of sustainable development.

Furthermore, *Sattras* play a crucial role in empowering marginalized communities, including indigenous groups, women, and disadvantaged populations, by providing them with opportunities for education, economic participation, and social inclusion. Through targeted interventions and advocacy efforts, *Sattras* advocate for the rights and dignity of marginalized groups, ensuring that they have a voice in decision-making processes and access to resources for their socio-economic upliftment.

Sattras' multifaceted roles in environmental conservation, community development, and socio-cultural empowerment demonstrate their transformative potential in promoting sustainable development in Assam. By addressing the interconnected challenges of environmental degradation, poverty, and social inequality, *Sattras* contribute to building resilient and inclusive communities that are capable of thriving in a rapidly changing world.

4. Balancing Tradition and Modernity

4.1 Traditional Values vs. Modern Practices

At the heart of *Sattras* lie deeply ingrained traditional values rooted in centuries-old cultural and spiritual heritage. These values, encompassing principles of simplicity, humility, and community solidarity, form the bedrock of *Sattras*' identity and ethos. However, in an era marked by rapid globalization, technological advancement, and socio-economic transformation, *Sattras* face increasing pressure to reconcile these traditional values with modern practices and ideologies.

One of the primary areas of tension arises from the clash between traditionalism and modernity in areas such as lifestyle choices, social norms, and governance structures. For instance, while traditional practices may prioritize collective decision-making and communal ownership, modern trends may advocate for individualism, market-driven economies, and democratic governance systems. This tension often manifests in debates over issues such as women's rights, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation, where traditional values may clash with contemporary norms and expectations.

4.2 Challenges Faced by *Sattras* in Adapting to Modernity

Adapting to modernity poses several challenges for *Sattras*, ranging from socio-cultural upheaval to institutional restructuring and ideological conflicts. One of the foremost challenges is the erosion of traditional values and cultural identity in the face of external influences and changing societal norms. Rapid urbanization, migration, and globalization have led to the dilution of traditional practices and customs, posing a threat to the integrity of *Sattras*' cultural heritage.

Moreover, economic pressures, resource constraints, and technological advancements present practical challenges for *Sattras* in sustaining their traditional way of life. Declining patronage, dwindling resources, and competition from modern institutions pose existential threats to *Sattras*' survival and relevance in a rapidly changing world. Additionally, ideological conflicts and power struggles within *Sattras*' leadership hierarchy may hinder efforts to adapt to modernity and embrace innovative approaches to sustainable development.

4.3 Successes and Innovations in Harmonizing Tradition and Modernity

Despite these challenges, *Sattras* have demonstrated resilience and adaptability in navigating the complexities of tradition and modernity. One of the key success factors lies in *Sattras*' ability to reinterpret and contextualize traditional values within contemporary frameworks, thereby fostering a dynamic synthesis of tradition and modernity. This approach enables *Sattras* to retain their cultural authenticity while embracing progressive ideas and practices that align with the evolving needs of their communities.

Moreover, *Sattras* have embraced technological innovations and modern management practices to enhance their organizational efficiency and outreach. From adopting digital platforms for disseminating religious teachings to implementing sustainable agriculture techniques for improving livelihoods, *Sattras* have leveraged modern tools and techniques to advance their mission of sustainable development.

Sattras has also forged strategic partnerships with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and civil society groups to address common challenges and pursue shared goals. Collaborative initiatives in areas such as environmental conservation, community development, and cultural preservation have yielded tangible results, demonstrating the potential of collective action in fostering sustainable development.

The journey of balancing tradition and modernity is fraught with challenges and opportunities for *Sattras* in Assam. By navigating these complexities with resilience, innovation, and collaboration, *Sattras* continue to evolve as dynamic agents of change, preserving their cultural heritage while embracing the imperatives of sustainable development in the 21st century.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for Government and Non-governmental Organizations

5.1.1 Capacity Building: Provide training and technical assistance to *Sattras*' leadership and community members in areas such as environmental management, sustainable agriculture, and ecotourism development. This will enable *Sattras* to effectively implement and manage sustainable development projects in their communities.

5.1.2 Financial Support: Allocate funding and grants to support *Sattras*' sustainable development initiatives, including conservation projects, community-based enterprises, and cultural preservation efforts. This may involve establishing dedicated funding mechanisms and grant programs specifically for *Sattras* and their associated communities.

5.1.3 Policy Advocacy: Advocate for policies and regulations that recognize and support the role of *Sattras* in sustainable development, including land rights, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation. Engage policymakers, legislators, and other stakeholders to raise awareness about the importance of *Sattras* and garner support for their initiatives.

5.1.4 Partnership Building: Foster partnerships between *Sattras*, government agencies, NGOs, academic institutions, and private sector organizations to leverage resources, expertise, and networks for sustainable development. Facilitate collaborative projects and initiatives that promote mutual learning, knowledge exchange, and innovation.

5.2 Strengthening Partnerships for Sustainable Community Development

Collaborative partnerships are crucial for maximizing the impact of sustainable development efforts around *Sattras* and ensuring the long-term viability of these initiatives. Key strategies suggested for strengthening partnerships include:

5.2.1 Multi-stakeholder Engagement: Engage a diverse range of stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, community-based organizations, academia, and the private sector, in collaborative efforts to support *Sattras*' sustainable development goals. Foster dialogue, trust, and cooperation among stakeholders to build consensus and collective action.

5.2.2 Local Empowerment: Empower local communities and *Sattras* to actively participate in decision-making processes and project implementation. Promote inclusive governance structures that prioritize community ownership, participation, and accountability in sustainable development initiatives.

5.2.3 Knowledge Sharing: Facilitate knowledge sharing and capacity building among stakeholders by organizing workshops, seminars, and training programs on relevant topics such as environmental conservation, community development, and cultural preservation. Encourage the exchange of best practices, lessons learned, and innovative solutions to common challenges.

5.2.4 Resource Mobilization: Mobilize financial, technical, and human resources from diverse sources to support sustainable development initiatives around *Sattras*. This may involve leveraging government grants, philanthropic donations, corporate sponsorships, and international development assistance to fund priority projects and activities.

By implementing these recommendations and fostering collaborative partnerships, governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders can effectively support *Sattras* in their efforts to promote sustainable development, preserve cultural heritage, and enhance the well-being of their communities.

6. Conclusion

This research delved into the multifaceted roles of *Sattras* in sustainable community development and has revealed several significant findings. Firstly, we have identified that *Sattras* serve as crucial hubs for environmental conservation, community development, and socio-cultural empowerment in Assam. Through their initiatives in these areas, *Sattras* play a pivotal role in promoting sustainable livelihoods, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering social cohesion within their communities.

Secondly, our research has highlighted the challenges faced by *Sattras* in balancing tradition and modernity. Despite their rich cultural heritage and enduring relevance, *Sattras* encounter obstacles such as socio-economic constraints, environmental degradation, and cultural erosion in adapting to the demands of modern society. Understanding and addressing these challenges are essential for ensuring the continued resilience and sustainability of *Sattras* in the face of evolving socio-economic and environmental dynamics.

The research highlights the interconnectedness of environmental conservation, community development, and socio-cultural empowerment in achieving holistic and inclusive sustainable development outcomes. By recognizing the integral role of *Sattras* in addressing these interconnected challenges, we advocate for a more nuanced and context-specific approach to sustainable development that prioritizes cultural diversity, social equity, and environmental stewardship.

This research underscores the vital role of *Sattras* in sustainable development and emphasizes the importance of leveraging their cultural heritage, community networks, and spiritual ethos to address the interconnected challenges of environmental conservation, community development, and socio-cultural empowerment. By embracing a holistic and inclusive approach to sustainable development, guided by the principles of equity, resilience, and respect for diversity, we can harness the transformative potential of *Sattras* to build a more sustainable and inclusive future for Assam and beyond.

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