

A Study on Traditional Institutions in Promoting Information Literacy with Special Reference to Nagaon District of Assam

Dipankar Borah, Librarian,
North Eastern Council (NEC), Shillong, Meghalaya
Ratna Kanta Bora, Former Student,
Library & Information Science, Gauhati University

Abstract

This study pertains to traditional institutions (such as Namghars, Moina Parijat, Satras etc.) and its role in promoting information literacy among the people of Nagaon district. The contribution of these traditional institutions in the development of the society cannot be undermined. The study revealed that traditional institutions play a vital role in the socio- economic development of a community as it serve as checks to the society by making their operations and performance worthy of being examined.

Keywords- *Traditional Institutions, Information Literacy, Namghar, Satras, Moina Parijat*

Introduction

Traditional institutions refer to the social and political authorities that have their historical roots in maintaining peace and order within societies. These institutions vary widely, particularly in the forms of Namghar, Satras, Moina Parijat in Assam. Their origin can be traced back to the time of Srimanta Sankardeva, under the influence of the 'Neo-Vaishnavite movement'. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, led to the establishment of Namghar and Satras, which have played a crucial role in shaping the socio- cultural fabric of Assamese society. Namghars serve as communal spaces where villagers come together to pray, deliberate on issues, and resolve conflicts, functioning as both religious and socio-political forums. Satras, on the other hand, are monastic institutions that preserve and propagate the teachings and cultural practices of the movement. Traditional institutions like these act as active custodians of cultural heritage, which helps to maintain social cohesion and continuity. They pursue their collective goals through two primary methods: firstly, by utilizing their social influence, derived from the trust and respect they hold within the community (social capital), and secondly, by adhering to their own set of customs,

practices and informal laws, which help in maintaining social balance and order.

Information literacy has become a critical competency in today's technology-driven society, where vast amounts of information are available in multiple formats. This skill set is fundamental to democratic participation, academic success, professional effectiveness, and informed personal decision-making.

Information literacy is the ability to retrieve, analyze, evaluate, exchange, and distribute information effectively across various media platforms, particularly digital and internet-based sources (American Library Association, 2000; Bruce, 2003).

Informed citizens are essential for functioning democracies. Information literacy enables citizens to distinguish credible sources from misinformation and fake information, make well-informed decisions, and participate meaningfully in democratic processes (Elmborg, 2006; Wineburg & McGrew, 2017).

Literature Review: A Study on Traditional Institutions in promoting Information Literacy with special reference to Nagaon District of Assam

Defining Information Literacy

Information literacy is broadly defined as the ability to recognize when information is needed and to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the required information. Doyle (1994) emphasizes that information literacy is a key competency for the information age, enabling individuals to function effectively in an information-rich society. The American Library Association (2000) further codifies these competencies, outlining standards that guide educational and library practices. Eisenberg (2019) underscores the essential nature of these skills for lifelong learning and informed citizenship.

Role of Traditional Institutions

Bruce (2003) presents the 'seven faces of information literacy,' illustrating the diverse ways in which individuals experience and develop these skills within educational and community contexts. Lloyd (2010) expands this perspective by examining how information literacy is cultivated across educational, workplace, and everyday environments, suggesting that traditional institutions adapt their approaches

to meet local needs.

Cultural context: with special reference to Nagaon district of Assam

The cultural heritage of Assam, as detailed by Neog (2004), provides a unique backdrop for understanding the role of traditional institutions in information literacy. Institutions in Nagaon district, such as libraries, schools, and cultural institutions (such as Namghars, Satras etc.), are influenced by local customs, languages, and histories, which shape their information practices and outreach strategies.

Moina Parijat, a notable cultural initiative in Assam, exemplifies how traditional institutions can blend cultural preservation with information literacy efforts, engaging communities through local language publications and programs.

Challenges and evolving practices

Bawden and Robinson (2009) highlight challenges such as information overload and anxiety, which traditional institutions must address through targeted literacy programs. Elmborg (2006) and Pashia (2007) advocate for a critical approach to information literacy, encouraging institutions to empower citizens as consumers, critical evaluators and producers of information.

With the rise of digital information, new frameworks—such as the Association of College and Research Libraries' (2016) Framework for Information Literacy—urge traditional institutions to update their strategies, integrating digital literacy and critical thinking into their programs.

Implications in Nagaon district of Assam

In the context of Nagaon district, traditional institutions are positioned as vital agents for promoting information literacy. Their deep roots in the community, understanding of local needs, and ability to adapt to changing information landscapes make them effective in fostering both basic and advanced information skills. By leveraging cultural heritage, local languages, and community networks, these institutions can address barriers to information access and empower citizens to navigate the complexities of the information society.

Conclusion of the Literature review

The literature underscores the enduring importance of traditional institutions in advancing information literacy, particularly in culturally rich and diverse regions like Nagaon district of Assam. Through a combination of resource provision, community engagement, and culturally relevant programming, these institutions are instrumental

in preparing individuals to participate fully and critically in the information age.

Objectives of the study

The primary aim of this study is to assess the information needs and to evaluate how traditional institutions contribute to enhancing information literacy among the people of Nagaon district, Assam. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the role of traditional institutions in promoting information literacy in Nagaon district of Assam.
2. To assess the impact of these institutions on the development of information literacy.
3. To evaluate the relevance, values, and advantages of traditional institutions.

Research Methodology

The research methodology is used for conducting the study is questionnaire method and interview method. Keeping in mind about the concern topic and scope and objectives of the study, the following methods have been followed:

Questionnaire Method: A questionnaire was distributed, containing questions related to the topic, to various institutions and libraries in order to collect relevant data.

Interview Method: In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were conducted with key personnel from the respective institutions and libraries to gather further insights.

Traditional system of Information Literacy in Assam: A brief overview

Satras and Namghars :

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement, initiated by Srimanta Sankardev, is defined by two uniquely significant institutions: the Satras and the Namghars. These institutions play a significant role in Assamese society and were established by Srimanta Sankardev in Assam during the late 15th century. Their primary purpose was to disseminate the teachings of new philosophical tradition and to foster a harmonious society.

Originally intended for religious education, the Satras and Namghars evolved into important socio-cultural institutions. They have become synonymous with Assamese identity, influencing various aspects of culture and religion. Despite the ongoing urbanization and development in Assam, the core of the state's culture remains deeply rooted in traditional, rural values. Even in urban and semi-urban areas, residents maintain a connection to this traditional society, highlighting the significant impact of the Satras and Namghars across different residential settings.

While the Satras and Namghars share similar objectives and roles within society, they differ in their structural patterns.

Policy/Initiative	Key Contribution to Counseling
Namghars are micro-level socio-religious institutions found in almost every village of Assam. Typically the residents of the particular village are the members of it, making it a close-knit community organization.	Satras are larger socio-religious institutions with a significant impact, both physically and culturally. Membership is more flexible, and there are no strict rules for becoming a member, allowing for a broader and more diverse community.
Most socio-cultural rituals, community gatherings, and religious functions in the village are conducted under the patronage of the Namghar. It serves as a focal point for both spiritual and social activities	Satras play a pivotal role in the religious, cultural, and educational life of the community. They often organize large-scale events, festivals, and are centers for preservation and propagation of Assamese culture and Vaishnavite traditions. Satras are classified based on the celibacy such as Monastic, Grihasthi, Semi-monastic and admixture.
Namghars are generally modest, small structures located within the village.	Satras are expansive compounds that include several facilities such as residence for the chief (Satradhikar) and members of prayer halls (Namghar or Kirtanghar), Visitor's halls, Other community spaces etc. Unlike Namghars, Satras provide residential facilities for both the chief and the members.

Moina Parijat: Brief Overview and Contributions

Moina Parijat is a prominent non-governmental organization in Assam dedicated to the holistic development of children such as physically, mentally, and intellectually. Its mission is to provide a safe and nurturing environment where children can develop skills, become responsible citizens, and contribute to social, moral, and cultural progress. It also fosters brotherhood by connecting children from diverse regions.

Moina Parijat has branches in nearly every village and town across Assam. These local units form District Moina Parijat chapters, which collectively constitute the All Assam Moina Parijat. Some districts have further regional subdivisions for efficient management. The organization is sustained by committed volunteers passionate about child welfare.

The roots of Moina Parijat trace back to 1948 with the 'Moina Mel' children's program initiated by the Saptahik Janambhumi newspaper in Jorhat, led by Troilokyanath Sarmah. With support from educationists like Biman Boruah, Hemanta Bordoloi, and Jagdish Phukan, an open-air educational model was developed. The first Moina Mel was established in Tarajan Sonarigaon, Jorhat, by Hemanta Bordoloi as a pilot, leading to expansion in multiple towns including Chellenghat, Moranhat, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Nagaon, Tezpur, and Shillong. In 1950, Nalini Bala Devi established Sadou Asom Parijat Kanan which later became famous as Moina Parijat. (Rahman, 2011)

On 27 June 1954, Moina Mel merged with Parijat Kanan to form the All Assam Moina Parijat, combining the names "Moina" (from Moina Mel) and "Parijat" (from Parijat Kanan). (Rahman, 2011)

Operating without government funding, Moina Parijat relies entirely on public donations and volunteer support. While it does not maintain dedicated libraries, it preserves relevant books and documents. Through its diverse programs and initiatives, Moina Parijat has made significant contributions to promoting information literacy and foundational knowledge among children in Assam.

Traditional Institutions (TIs) of Nagaon District: An analysis

Data were collected from four Traditional Institutions (TIs) across different parts of Nagaon district to assess their infrastructure, available facilities, services, operational modes, challenges, and contributions to information literacy. Of the four TIs approached, three responded positively.

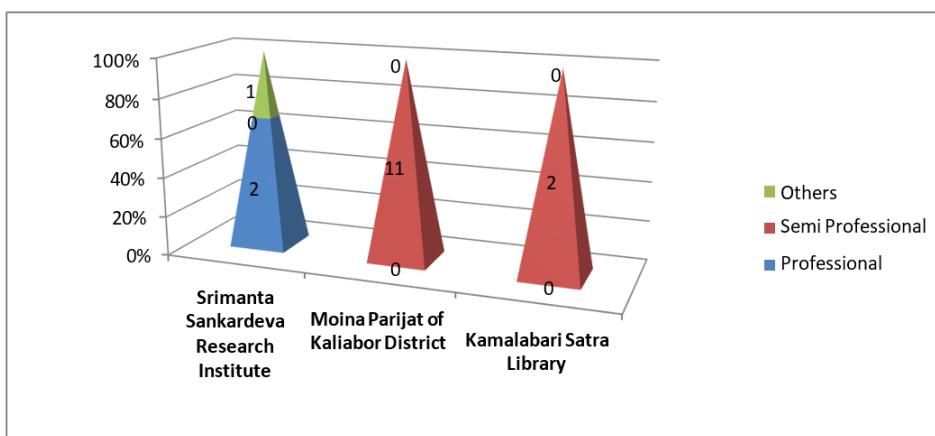
Table - 1
Responded TIs of Nagaon District

Sl. No.	Name of the Institutions/Library	Year of Establishment
1	Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute	1974
2	Moina Parijat of Kaliabor District	1970
3	Kamalabari Satra Library	1975

Table - 2
Staff pattern of the responded TIs of Nagaon District

Sl. No.	Name of the Institutions/ Library	Professional	Semi Professional	Others
1	Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute	2		1
2	Moina Parijat of Kaliabor District	0	11	0
3	Kamalabari Satra Library	0	2	0

Figure - 1
Staff pattern of the responded TIs of Nagaon District



Various activities and Facilities offered by TIs

TIs work on various cultural, social and educational activities and also provide many facilities to their users. These are mostly based on their aim of the organization such as Songs, Dances, Drama, Bhaona, Special festival celebration etc.

Table - 3
Activities and facilities offered by TIs

Sl. No.	Name of the Institutions/ Library	Songs & Dances	Essay, Story Writing and Art Competition	Drama	Bhaona	Festival Celebration	Any other activities to promote information literacy
1	Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
2	Moina Parijat of Kaliabor District	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Kamalabari Satra Library	No	No	No	No	No	No

Table - 4
Resources and documents available in TIs

Sl. No.	Name of the Institutions/ Library	Books	Newspapers	Magazines	Govt. Publication	Manuscript
1	Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute	3500	2	2		599
2	Moina Parijat of Kaliabor District	500	6	19		
3	Kamalabari Satra Library	3000	1	1		

Figure - 2
Resources and documents available in TIs

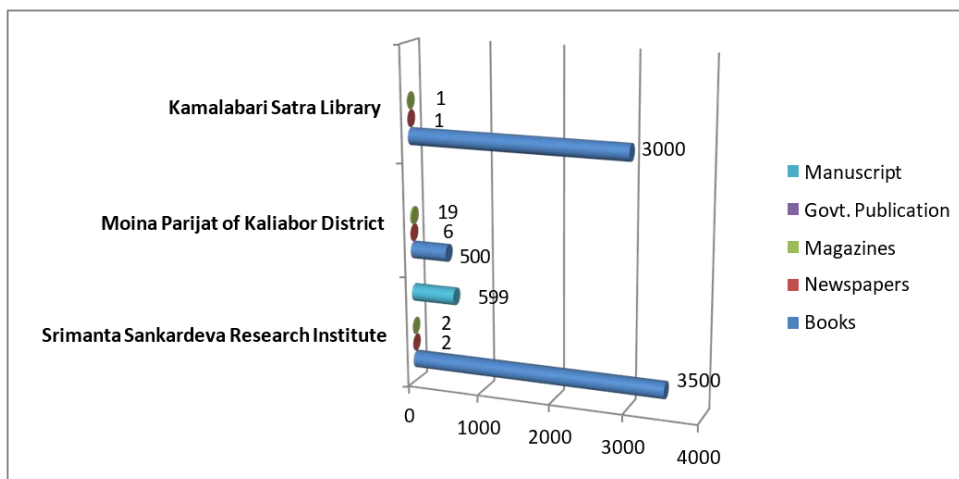


Table - 5
Services offered to special groups by TIs of Nagaon District

Sl. No.	Name of the Institutions / Library	Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute	Moina Parijat of Kaliabor District	Kamalabari Satra Library
1	Handicapped	No	No	No
2	Farmers	No	No	No
3	Housewives	No	No	No
4	Artisans	No	No	No
5	Children of slum dwellers	No	No	No

Table - 6
Promotional activities to promote information literacy by TIs

Sl. No.	Name of the Institutions / Library	Any programme to promote Information literacy	Trained staff member to conduct program on information literacy
1	Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute	No	No
2	Moina Parijat of Kaliabor District	No	No
3	Kamalabari Satra Library	No	No

Findings and Suggestions and Conclusion

Findings:

Data were collected from three traditional institutions (TIs) in different parts of Nagaon district to assess their infrastructure, facilities, services, operational modes, challenges, and role in promoting information literacy. The key findings are :

1.Staffing

- Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute has 2 professional staff and 1 casual worker.
- Moina Parijat of Kaliabor has 11 semi-professional staff, but no professional staff.
- Kamalabari Satra Library has 2 semi-professional staff and no other staff.
- None of the institutions have trained library professionals.

2.Activities

- TIs conduct cultural and social activities (songs, dances, essay/story writing, painting competitions, dramas, festivals) that support non-formal information literacy.
- Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute organizes songs, dances, and dramas.
- Moina Parijat of Kaliabor offers all such activities.
- Kamalabari Satra Library does not conduct these activities.

3.Resources

- Srimanta Sankardeva Research Institute: 3,500 books, 2 newspapers/magazines, 599 manuscripts.
- Moina Parijat of Kaliabor: 500 books, 6 newspapers, 19 magazines.
- Kamalabari Satra Library: 3,000 books, 1 newspaper, 1 magazine.

4.Information Literacy

- No institution participates in formal information literacy programs or has trained staff in this area.

5. Funding

- No extra funds are provided by the government or agencies for information literacy or related activities.
- No financial assistance is received from adult education agencies.

6.Library facilities

- All TIs have their own library, but none have a separate section for neo-literates or a mobile library facility.

Suggestions

- Traditional Institutions (TIs), especially Moina Parijats, serve as foundational educational centers for young minds in Assam. The government should prioritize and financially support these institutions to enhance their reach and impact.
- TIs in Nagaon district, such as Satras and Namghars, have deep historical roots dating back to the 15th century and possess rich traditional knowledge systems. Proper research and promotion are needed to bring their contributions to wider attention.
- TIs play a significant role in promoting information literacy by organizing cultural and social activities that bridge gaps among illiterates, literates, and neo-literates. However, the short duration of literacy campaigns and lack of follow-up programs often lead neo-literates to relapse into illiteracy. Libraries within TIs can function as 'after-care' centers, supporting sustained learning. Therefore, follow-up and adult education programs are essential.
- The government should enact library legislation to establish and promote public libraries and TIs, creating a state-wide library network closely linked to information literacy initiatives, particularly in rural areas.
- Literature should be made available in local languages, and agencies should be encouraged to produce and distribute relevant materials for post-literacy and continuing education. Careful book selection can attract neo-literates and post-literates to libraries.
- Strong motivation is the key to achieving literacy. TIs should observe functional literacy weeks on various topics to inspire adult illiterates and neo-literates.
- Media can play a vital role in raising awareness about literacy. The government, in collaboration with TIs, should utilize posters, local press, radio, television, and social media for literacy promotion.
- Finally, literacy programs should be tailored separately for children (up to 14 years) and adults (15 years and above).

Conclusion

A literate society is fundamental to national progress, especially for a developing country like ours, where advancement in every sphere relies on informed and enlightened citizens. Literacy and libraries are inherently interconnected. One cannot envision a truly literate society without accessible libraries. However, most rural populations still lack access to library facilities. In this context, traditional institutions can play a vital role in bridging the gap between literates and neo-literates.

Despite their potential, the involvement of traditional institutions in literacy and adult education campaigns has been largely overlooked by the government and related agencies. To extend the benefits of education to the wider population, it is essential to promote and integrate traditional institutions alongside formal literacy initiatives.

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