

Ethos of Satra Institution and Its Impact on Assamese Society: An Evaluation

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Abstract

Even in the present time satra institutions are of immense importance for socio-cultural practices and spiritual enlightenment in the Assamese society. Vaishnava saint Srimanta Sankardeva is said to have established his first satra at Bardowa in the district of Nagaon, Assam, the place where he was born. Later a number of satras grew up at places where Sankardeva went and stayed during his travel from Bardowa (Upper Assam) to Barpeta (Lower Assam). In the present paper an attempt is made to understand the role of satras and namghars in shaping religious and cultural history of Assam and how these institutions put it's far reaching impacts of ethos in the process of making the Assamese society.

Keywords: Assam, Neo-Vaishnavism, Social Assimilation, Cultural Enlightenment, Reformation, Integrity.

Introduction

In the second half of the fifteenth century, the erstwhile religious history of Assam embraced a new shape with the emergence of the neo-Vaishnavism propounded by the great Vaishnava saint, reformer and visionary Srimanta Sankaradeva. Sankardeva had been instrumental in bringing various races, tribes and religious groups into one common fold for why we today enjoy in Assam a unique demographic structure with variety. He thus upholds a principle of unity in diversity for the first time. Two major institutional aspects of the Neo-Vaishnavism, Satra and Namghar are the evidences of such democratic ideology of the saint. Initially satras were formed to preach religious doctrines, and later these institutions seemingly brought the radical changes to the socio-cultural life of Assam. Namghar, an inevitable part of the satra, has served the community promoting mass education, adult education, cottage industries, banking system, judiciary, theatre and musical pursuits. It has also spread the awareness on integrity and harmony among people, oneness between man and man and between man and other creatures and ecological balance.

Aim of the Study

With the passes of time the neo-Vaishnavite movement brought a revolutionary phase in the process of socio-cultural evolution in Assam. Although imported from outside, the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam was not an imitation of what was there in rest of India at that point of time. With its own socio-political and economic background, this movement created an ideology and a structure of its own to distinguish it from other Vaishnavite movements of the country. This movement apparently was egalitarian in character. The most significant character of this movement in Assam was its Satra system that played a major role in every aspects of Assamese socio-cultural economic and political life in the past as well as present. This discourse will obviously entail scope of further study on the pertinent issues related to the making of the unique Assamese society.

Review of the Literature

S N Sarma in his book, *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* mentions that the word Satra, with a sacred connotation, is derived from the Sanskrit word "Sattrā" which means sacrificial place (103). The word Satra finds expression in "Bhagavata" and "Mahabharata". In the Bhagavata purana the word "Satra" was mainly used to mean an assembly of sages to perform sacrificial rites. But the original meaning of the term has ultimately changed in the neo-Vaishnavite period. In the recent years some research pursuits carried out on satra institutions of Assam have brought this subject into a bigger forum leading it to an erudite discourse. The study conducted by U N Goswami entitled *Origin,*



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Development and Contribution of Satra in Assam, (2020) is one of the studies that evaluates the origins and development of satras and reveals the fact how this Neo-Vaishnavite monastery had immensely contributed to the formation of the greater Assamese society making even the most isolated classes inevitable to the mainstream. These discourses now are in vogue in the research domain in terms of unveiling facts about the genesis of the making of the greater Assamese society. The present discourse has also been designed apparently to attract novel thoughts for further studies. Adding to this surcharge the present study will also intend to shed light on certain points whether there is any scope to incorporate curricular aspects in the satra institution in the line of present education system to make it more lively, vibrant and viable to the academic circle in the state.

Sects and structure

Though the features of reform and protest movement are seemingly marked in neo-Vaishnavite movement, it is in reality, a social movement based on religious ideology. Satras constituted moral laws and controlled the activities of society. The neo-Vaishnavite movement is split into four *sanghati* (*sanghatas* or sub-sects). Satras were divided into four categories on the basis of these *sanghatas*. After his death three leaders formed their own denominations: Bhabanipuria Gopal Ata (Kaal *sanghati*), Purushuttom Thakur Ata, a grandson of Sankardeva (Purusa *sanghati*) and Mathuradas Burhagopal Ata (Nika *Sanghati*). They differ mostly in the emphasis of the *chari vastus* (four fundamental principles). The Brahma *Sanghati* emphasized on deva (image of the chief incarnation), The Purusa *Sanghati* emphasized on naam (devotion through chanting of devotional songs), the Nika *Sanghati* emphasized on sat-sanga (relationship with wise one) and Kal *Sanghati* emphasized on guru (teacher or leader).

The structure of a Satra features a *Namghar*, a *Manikut*, a *Batsora* or *Karapat* and two or four rows of hatis. *Namghar* or *Kirtanghar* is a prayer hall. In each Hindu Assamese village of Assam there is a *Namghar* which is not merely the place of religious activities but is regarded as important institutions where various affairs even village politics are discussed. It works as a theatre site and a venue of village panchayats. *Manikut* is the actual shrine where the sacred scriptures or idol of the deity is kept. Inside the Satra campus there are four rows or two rows of residential huts centering round the *Namghar* or *Manikut*. These four rows of huts are called *sari-hati* where the bhaktas or devotees of various categories reside.

Each Satra holds the three main institutional parties-(i) *Satradhikar* and *Deka Satradhikar* (ii) *Bhakat* and (iii) *Sisyas*. *Satradhikar* is a distinguished personality who performs the duties of a head of the Satra. The management of Satra is run under his guidance. He is the religious and spiritual guide. In the absence of the *Satradhikar*, the *Deka Satradhikar* performs his duties. The very name *Bhakata* or *Bhakat* means the devotees. There are two types of *Bhakata* in a Satra- one is *Grihasthi* and other is

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Kevaliya. The *Kevalia* means alone. There are some devotees in the Satras who are called *Sisyas*. These devotees live both in and outside the Satras.

Customs and Manners

As per the practice of celibacy four types of Satras are found in different parts of Assam. The first type of Satras is purely monastic in nature where the *satradhikar* and the clerical devotees lead life of a celibate. Celibacy has been in vogue in such Satras. In these Satras the inmates reside permanently inside the Satra premises. Women are not allowed to stay at night inside the Satra premises where as they can participate in religious functions at day time. In the second type, the *satradhikar* and his devotees lead family life with their wife and children. In the third type, the *satradhikar* remains as celibate and lives with the family. In the fourth type, the *satradhikar* is married and his devotees remain as celibates and non-celibates. There are of course separate provisions for residing married and celibate devotees.

Satras have important function in the society as they offer *sarana* which is also called *śaraṇa-lowā* or *śaraṇa-howā* and *bhajona* among the locality and binds all the disciples. The second part of ordination called *bhajona* contained the esoteric and philosophical instruction, which may not give at the time of *śaraṇa*. From the day of receiving *śaraṇa*; disciples have to practice the process of meditation named *guru-sevā*, *īśvara-sevā* or *gosai-sevā*.

Assamese society is immensely influenced by Satra system. The Satra culture has great impacts on the life style of the people, their food habits, dress codes, verbal communications and moral behavior. The Vaishnava Gurus and devotees normally prefer to be vegetarians though taking fish and meat by them are not prohibited. They were not in the habit of taking non-vegetarian meals simply because of the convention (Sarma, 143-144). Even both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva were non-vegetarians (Sarma, 143). The *tāmbūla* (areca-nut) together with betel leaf, lime and tobacco was liberally used. This is in vogue even today in the Assamese culture.

Though the garments were generally cotton but silk clothes were also used occasionally. Earlier the reformers emphasized much on the simplicity of garments-waist coat (*cauga*), long flowing garments (*capkon*), and wooden footwear (*paduka*). Regarding the dress a celibate devotee used pieces of white cloths, dhoti, a *cādar* and *gāmocha*. (Sarma, 145). *Satradhikars* wear the turbans when they go out of the Satra-campus but never used the colour dress. In the Satras, the devotees generally use the *Kath*, *pāṭi* and *dharā* (carpet) made of grass, bamboo-shits etc. The devotees used the *paduka* and sandals made of coir (*phānti*) and *jāpi* (conical hat). The celibates residing in the Satras keep long hair, and had clean shaven, paste a circular mark or two vertical lines of sandal on the forehead.

Relationship and Manner

The *Satradhikar* as the head of the religious community enjoyed respects and reverence. As the spiritual guide and guardian the *Satradhikāra* was addressed as *Prabhu-Jagannāth*, *Prabhu-īśwara*

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(ruler of the world.) or *ātā-iśwara* as per practice prevalent in each Satra. The villagers addressed the Satradhikāra as *gosāi-iśwara* though they are not acquainted to Vaishnava religious creed. The Satradhikāra was esteemed as *ātā* (*ātama*- soul). Every devotee irrespective of his age is greeted as *ātai*. Disciples incorporated to the same Satra are linked up by the same religious pledge. A sort of sacramental brotherhood (*sakhi*) is established when the devotees of two Satras are initiated by the same satradhikar. They greeted each other as *hari-bhakat*. No marriage relation could be arranged among their sons and daughters. The children of one sacramental brother usually address the latter as *tāwai* and his wife as *āmai*. At the death of sacramental brother the fellow devotee observed one day fasting. Satriya-bhakat residing in Satra used very polite and highly polished words. Some of the illustrations are- *teōlok* (St.Assamese) *terāsava* (Satriya form), *eōlok-erāsava*, *bhāt cāul-sijowā* (cooking rice), *jalukiyā* (black-pepper)- *bhojan-ṭhelā*, *śauc* (call of nature), *bāhir-phurā*. (Sarma,148). The devotees emphasized much on the habit of neat and clean and even not chew the *pān* and *tāmbula* without taking their morning bath. This sort of mannerism initiated by Satra system had far reaching effects on social activities.

Offence and Punishment

Adultery, theft, assault and immorality were regarded as offences and guilty persons were excommunicated from the order. As mentioned in *Kathā-guru-carita*, Madhavadeva expelled from his Satra one Haricarana on the mere suspicion of adultery. (Sarma, 149). Indulgence of lying, libel, backbiting, slandering and abusing etc. were pardoned after having reprimanded them and having realized a certain amount of fine from the offenders (Ibid.). But honest confession of any guilt even in serious nature was highly appreciated. Addiction to opium eating, smoking and drinking was also prohibited. (Ibid). Even to-day the monastic Satras try to maintain traditional rules and codes against moral turpitudes and religious delinquency. The Satradhikāra with his councils decides such cases who declared the judgments according to the nature of the cases. If alleged persons proved his innocence then he is absolved from alleged guilt. In some monastic Satras notably in Majuli sometimes devotees are kept in confinement for several days. (Sarma,151).

Marriage and Obsequial Rites

If the celibate desired to lead the householder's life and marriage he was allowed for that. The practice of inter-caste marriage was prohibited among the vaishnavas and for such marriage devotees are socially boycotted. (Sarma,151). Generally the marriage ceremony among the high caste and sub-castes held according to the *Sāstric* rites conducted by Brahmin priests, while the marriage ceremony among the socially backward sub-castes and Hinduised non-Aryan tribes held in accordance with the traditional or tribal customs supplemented by *Vaiṣṇava nāma-kīrtana* observance. (Ibid). After the death of one *Vaiṣṇava* devotee, his body is cremated not buried.

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Though incidentally his body could not be cremated but after few months the bones of the buried person was formally cremated. However, this practice was confined not among the *Vaiṣṇvas* but also among the Hindu communities.

Amusement and Entertainment

The Satra and the *Namghar* are the center of all cultural activities. Dance, music and dramatic performances like *bhaona* are frequently held on all festive occasions in the Satra campus. Boat-race is held in *Barpeta Satra* and some Satras in *Majuli*. Even today this sportive event has been able to attract large crowd. The birth anniversary of Krishna is celebrated on the right lunar day of the dark fortnight in the month of *Bhādra*. The *Vaiṣṇava* of Assam never observed it in the month of *Srāvana*. Holding an annual prayer in each of the families inviting the elderly members of the village is a part and parcel of their culture. Even the *Bihu*, a festival is accompanied by *nāma* called *huchari-kīrtana* is celebrated very joyfully.

Position of Women

Women are administer in *śaraṇa* after marriage and even allowed to carry devotional chantings in the *Nāmghar* but not simultaneously with the man disciples. Although women saints are met in other *Vaiṣṇava* sects but it is only in the *Śaṅkaradeva's* faith that women have been found as heads of Satras. (Barua, 110). *Śaṅkaradeva's* granddaughter-in-law *Kanaklata* became not only the head of the Satra, but she herself appointed twelve *Satradhikar* to set up and organize more Satras. Women can also take part independently in the community prayer. Like the men, initiated women can perform various duties in the Satras. In *Satriya* tradition married and initiated women are called *Gopīnīs* or mother. Satra institution initiated such a liberal attitude towards women which is rare outside Assam.

Social and Cultural Contribution

The Satra institution changed the spiritual and moral outlook of the Assamese people. It also gave birth of an idea of classless society based on the principles of universal social brotherhood, simplicity and liberalism in the religious practices. The Satras for the first time started the process of reconstruction of greater Assamese society. It also introduced the sense of democracy in the Assamese society. It endeavored for elevation and betterment of the socially backward classes and bordering tribes of Assam. From the very beginning of his missionary activities, *Śaṅkaradeva* created awareness against existing caste system and untouchability of the society, instituted equality of all men irrespective of caste or creed in the eyes of God. His neo-Vaishnavite movement toned down the caste and class discrimination eliminating social disparity and founded the base of a classless society. According to *B.K. Barua*, the neo-Vaishnavism became a powerful catalyst, a cementing force of the different social groups. The Satras of the *Kala Samhati* notably the *Dehing*, *Budbari*, *Ceca*, *Boreghar* and *Kantipur* deserved special apperception for their proselytizing works amongst the backward and tribal people

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(Sarma, P157). As the untouchability had no place in this fold, besides the tribes even the Muslim also accepted this faith. Satra institutions, with the physical transformation and spread of Vaishnavite religious ideology among the indigenous tribes of Assam, constitute an intriguing and significant part of social history.

The Satra institution helps to impart unity to Assamese village life (Barua,72). It transmits integrity, unity and solidarity among the diverse caste and communities Assam through which equality in men is restored and untouchability is eliminated. All the devotees can enjoy equal share and status as man. It brings peace, tranquility and harmony in the society and functions as the promoter of ethics and conducts of life. Satra and Namghar have been two prominent mass media in Assam since Medieval period through which Śankaradeva and his followers sowed the seed of democracy, removed untouchability and inequalities, introduced village panchayat, and banking system five centuries ago. Mahatma Gandhi remarked, "Assam is beyond my dream, my service are not required here. In Assam Vaishnavism, Śankaradeva successfully fought against the elaborate and costly rituals which were replaced by simple and easy observance of religious practices. The Vaishnavas are highly polished in their behavior and polite in their manners."

The Satra institution emerged during the mid part of Ahom rule and transformed political Assam into a cultural Assam. The Satra institution, induced by neo-Vaishnavite precepts, Assam becomes a part of cultural India, though she had been far away from political India. The Namghar which was set up as central socio-religious institution of the villages played a prominent role in their cultural activities. Namghar served not only as the place for prayer and devotion but also as the centers of community service. According to some British scholars the Satra are the spiritual colleges. Emerging as a major religious and social institution, their numbers grew to more than one thousand by middle of the 18th century and are still a countable force of social change and acculturation in the plains of Assam. Hence the Namghar can be termed as the Museum of Assamese culture.

Education

The Satras worked both as the hub of religious learning and as residential school. This institution helped the dissemination of education, learning and culture in entire state. Despite medieval constraints Satras moved forward to enforce an academic environment originating successful teachers, philosophers, scholars and poets. This institution took upon the noble responsibility of imparting education among masses through tols. The important Satras managed to run these tols by maintaining an efficient crew of scholars. Evidently many of the Vaishnavite reformers like Madhavdeva, Bhattadeva imparted education to their pupils. This move gradually brought about a change to the village education. Many of the leading Satras are still taking initiatives of enlightening people in rural and semi-urban areas. Apart from this Satra worked as a library. The present and past books covering a range of

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topics right from religion, philosophy, literature, music, dance, painting and medicine were preserved and replaced in time by new copies.

Further it would be worthwhile to ruminate over on the issue of incorporating curricular aspects in the Satra institution in the line of present education system to make it more lively, vibrant and viable to the academic circle of Assam. Considering the present trend of education there is scope to argue that the Satra institution would no longer remain effective to the stakeholders if it would not introduce new educational set up to meet the need of modern minds. This initiative may attract more people to get into the Satra system and will create in them an urge to exploit benefits from it.

Literature

In literature, the contribution of Satra institution is no less remarkable. The early Assamese religious literature is practically a product of the Vaishnavite circle (Sarma, p161). Sankaradeva and his colleagues translated Sanskrit scriptures into Assamese and this task was carried out till the modern times under the patronage and guidance of the different Satras. Among the translation works by Vainshnava circle Sankaradeva's *Dasama* was the most popular. In the later phase the followers of Sankaradeva took forward this tradition translating Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Badha-kavyas, Harana- kavyas into Assamese verses. The episodes and stories of these antiquarian texts left an indelible mark on the minds of people. The contributions of Ananta Kandali, Rama Saraswati, Gopala Dwija, Aniruddha Kayastha, Bhagawata Misra and many others deserve a special mention in this regard. All of these writers somehow connected with Satras. Bhattadeva, the father of Assamese prose, translated the entire Bhagavata and Gita into Assamese prose in the last decade of sixteenth century. Bhattadeva was the head of the Patbausi Satra. Besides, Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva wrote equal number of one-act plays which are known as Ankiya-nata. Sankaradeva's *Rukmini-harana*, *Parijat-harana*, *Rama-bijaya*, *Rasa-krida* and Madhavadeva's *Chor-dhora*, *Pimpara-guhowa*, *Arjuna-bhanjana*, *Bhumi-letowa* etc. have been able to pull the audience till the present time. The Vaishnavite movement gave birth to a new branch of literature in the form of carita-puthis or biographical books. (Sarma,165). These are known as hagiography which is considered to be the most effective sources of information of the Assamese Neo-Vaishnavism.

Music and Dance

The art of music and dance was cultivated in all the leading Satras with utmost passion and veneration. The devotional songs composed by Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and other Vaishnava poets attuned to classical ragas. These devotional songs of lofty ideals and poetic art are known as Bargitas, ie. noble songs. These songs are performed with scrupulous care without deviation of ragas. At present 240 devotional songs composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are accepted as Bargita. (Sarma, p168). Some of these songs are still being practiced and performed in the Satras and

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outside. Satriya Nritya was evolved in Satra during the Vaishnava movement. It has now become a major Indian classical dance.

Conclusion

Satra is the most prominent institution inherited by the people of Assam from the 16th century neo-Vaishnavite movement. The importance of the Satra institution is not confined within the religious activities; it has rather contributed much to the cultural evolution of Assam. It added rich religious literature and introduced the dramatic performance and the art of manuscript painting. It also revived and popularized the art of classical music and encouraged handicrafts. The Satra institution with the guidelines of neo-Vaishnavism spread awareness of integrity and harmony among people, value of all beings at spiritual level, equality towards socially backward people eliminating discriminations on caste and sex, ethics of non-violence and obedience, spirit of fellow-feeling and oneness between man and man and man and nature. The Satra with its institutional counterpart Namghar put its impact of ethos in the process of formation of the Assamese society and became the uniting force to the Assamese cultural fabrics. Thus Satras and Namghars played immense role in

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stabilizing the Assamese society in a time of political disintegration and religious degeneration and in shaping religious and cultural history of Assamese people from the 16th century.

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