

Origin, Development and Contribution of the Satra in Assam

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Abstract:

Satra means the Neo Vaishnavite monastery in Assam. Srimanta Sankardeva was a Vaishnavite scholar. In 15th Century he initiated the movement called Neo-Vaishnavite movement. It is also a religious movement it is called 'Ek Sarana Naam Dharma'.

Before the Sankardeva there were no cultural unity Assam the Vaishnava Satras had attracted the isolated classes of society and under the direct patronage of Satras they had been able to form of unity in one platform. So Satra is an important Institution for Assamese people. The objective of the paper is to analyse the Satras in Assam which is called Sattriya Culture.

Keyword : Satra, Sankardeva, Culture, Structure, Type, Contribution.

Objectives:

The objectives of this paper are to study the cultural structure and development within the Satras and the impact of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and Satra Institute of the Assamese Society and also studying about the system of Satra in Assam.

Scope : Satra is an institute of civilization of Assamese society.

The scope of the study is continued to the main article.

Methodology:

The research paper based on records of both primary and secondary sources. The data were basically collected from the sources like Book, Journals, Souvenirs and Magazines, oral and investigation, discussion have also been used together information.

Introduction:

The Satras were an institute of the neo-vaishnavite movement by Srimanta Sankardeva. 'Satra' word origin from 'Satapath Brahman' and other Veda's. It was a system of Meditation. But in Neo-Vaishnavite movement period's Satra is a fully Devotional Institute. The first Satra was set up by Srimanta Sankardeva at Bordowa in about 1494 AD. After that Madhabdeva, Damodardeva, Harideva, Gopaldeva expend this Institute. Madhabdeva and Damodardeva gave a definite shape to the structural and organizational aspects of this institution. After that more about thousand Satras were established is different part of Assam. This Satra words basically mean by two words 'Sat' and 'tra'. 'Sat' means 'truth' and 'tra' relief. So it is the holy place where honest and religious people assemble very traditionally to discuss Baishanava related religious topic. Satra like Buddhist residence 'Monasteries' where the Monk or Saint live and search the essence of religion the believed. This institute always gave an Ideal and very peaceful atmosphere in the society. But Satra is not only a platform of religion purpose. It is also a Multi-Dimensional Institute. Satra were organized by the great reformer for the cultivation and expansion of the ideals of the Neo-

Vaishnavism. Satras worked variety side as centers of religious learning, residential school, cultural promoting and others.

Origin and Development of the Satra:

The origin of the Satras is the term from 'Hrick Beda' and 'Satapath Brahman'. In Assam the Satra Institution is associated and merged in the Socio-cultural structure of the society. It is started from Neo-Vaishnavite movement. At that time means 15th century it was a religious sitting, where the Monks are discussion Krishna and Ramleela. But in course of time it emerged developed institution with a certain structure in definite location. At first Satra developed at Bordowa and Barpeta. After that it is developed mainly Majuli and other side of Assam. "The Satras are generally situated in a spacious and peaceful environment full of natural beauty and away from the Rubbub of life. During the time of Sankardeva-Madhabdeva, it was established on the bank of the rivers. The entire Satra precinct is a large area barricaded with strong walls and equipped with batchara, manikut or bhajghar, doul and hatis."¹

Structure of Satra:

The structural pattern of a Satra is marked by the existence of a Namghar, a manikut, a karapat and two to four rows of hatis. The centre of all religious activities of a Satra is the namghar.²

"At beginning time, Satra has not a specific form like today. In early stage, Sankardeva and his disciples built a devag (ha, where religious discussion took place leaded by him). After the discussion, Sankardeva distributed prasada to his disciples like naimiea forest where fruits were distributed to the stages. According to Charitputhi, in the time of Madhabdeva and Damodardeva, Satra has taken the present shape. There four components are regarded as essential in Satra Institution."³

- (i) **Namghar** : Namghar, it is also called Kirtanghar. It is the large prayer hall. The main activities of the Satra are performed in Namghar. The size of a namghar no any permanent rules it is depend upon the number of disciples it has to accommodate. It becomes the venue for congregational chanting of prayers or nam-prasang, singing of Borgeets or classical devotional songs composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhabdeva and enactment of Bhaonas on various occasions. Namghars were introduced in Assam by the Vaishnavite Saint Sankardeva for Assamese people where they can culture and practice naam (devotional songs) and Bhakti of God (devotion). He established the first Namghar at Bordowa in Nagaon district. In maintaining discipline order and morality of the villagers, the namghar have been playing a prominent part during the last four hundred and odd years.⁴

According to Charitputhi at the early stage Namghar construction of Barpeta Satra's wall were setup with bamboo and woods. And another Barpeta Kirtanghar also made by the same materials. But Barpeta Satra's Kirtanghar or Naamghar setup was the same size of Vrindavani Vastra. Which size was 220 feet length and 60 feet width, Naamghar words basically mean by the two words

‘Naam’ and ‘ghar’. Naam means prayer of God Lord Krishna and Ghar means Hall.

- (ii) **Manikut** : Manikut also known as ‘Bhajghar’. It is an actually a house of the jewel. Manikut is the actual shrine where the Guru Asana (Sacred throne) or the idol of the deity or the sacred scripture is kept. Besides, all the valuables and jewels of the Satra and precious things dedicated to the deity are preserved in the Manikut. Unlike the Naamghar, the manikut is smaller in structure and is not open to all.⁵ Manikut is also called Debagriha. Because ‘Deba’ means Lord. Another word Bhajghar. The word Bhaj means bent like the snapped branch of a tree or like familiar. ‘Bang’ the curved and bent pole for carrying loads on the shoulder. The fact that the ‘Bhajghar’ is still in common use amongst the Assamese people, specially with reference to the house in which the god of the vaisnava Satras is housed, is perhaps ample proof in support of the argument. A ‘Bhaj-ghar’ is freshly thatched with the common ...(a kind of thatch) grass.”⁶
- (iii) **Batchara** : Batchara is also called Karapat. Batchara is the entrance of a Satra is usually marked by a small gate. The word Batchara means two words. ‘Bat’ means path or road ‘Chara’ means small house like gate. The special Bhakat or anyguests are received at that place.
- (iv) **Hati** : Hati means rows or set of the residence area for the monks or bhakats. “Centering round the manikut and the namghar exist four rows (sometimes two) of residential huts intended for clerical devotees. These four rows of huts are known as Cari-hati. Word hati is derived from Sanskrit hatta, meaning a market or a fair. To each devotee is allotted a hut consisting one or more rooms according to his status and need.”⁷ The individual huts (Bhakat’s own space, baha), having a common verandha joining the length from one end to the other are allotted to the devotees according to their need and status in the Satriya hierarchy. The different Satra store-rooms e.g. the dhanbharal and chaul bharal are generally situated close to the hatis. (Malakar, Dhruvajyoti – Research Paper)
- The Bhakats are living in the Satras under the rules and regulation of Satras, which is supervised by Satradhikar.

Types and Division of Satras :

Starting of the Satras in Assam only one type of Satra. After that four types of Satra establishments are found. First type of Satra, which is purely monastic in nature. Second type of Satra, which fully all member or householder follow grihasthi. Third type of Satras, Satradhikar and Deka Satradhikar remain as celibates, but they have relation with family. The fourth type of Satras is combined life. They are living with two styles. Where Adhikar and Deka Adhikar are married but devotees consist of both celibates and non-celibates. Actually this a pattern of satriya lifestyle. These all type preserve the satriya culture is own style.⁷

After the death of Sankardeva’s Satra were developed by four division or section. At first it is divided into two sect. Mahapurushiya and Damodariya. But it is enlarged to four

sect or division like – Brahma Sanghati, Nika Sanghati, Purusa Sanghati and Kala Sanghati. Sanghati means association or organization.

- (i) **Brahma Sanghati** : This Sanghati created by Damodardeva. Damodardeva observed some Vedic rites and rituals. Brahma Sanghati represents mainly Vedic related culture with Sankari Philosophy. Harideva also with him. Actually Brahma Sanghati originally constituted by Damodardeva was later on joined by Harideva, the followers of Yadumoni and some other Satras with Brahman abbots. The Auniati Dakhinpat, Garamur and Kuruwabahi Satras became the richest and most influential Satras of Brahma Sanghati.⁸ Brahma Sanghati mainly depend on the ‘Deva’.
- (ii) **Purusa Sanghati** : Purusa Sanghati founded by Purusottam Thakur. Purusottam Thakur proclaimed that Sankardeva is the only Guru of the sect and the other proselytizers or religious heads were more representatives or agents of Sankardeva. He placed Madhabdeva as second Guru and termed the other religious heads as Acaryas.⁹ This Sanghati believed that ‘Naam’ is the supreme power of God. It is narrated in the biographical literature of this sub sect that Madhabdeva declared on more than one occasions that Purusottama being the direct descendant of Sankardeva, would be the real successor to the headship of the order founded by his grandfather, he simply acted as an agent during the interim period. That Madhabdeva actually nominated Purusottama Thakur as his successor, as claimed by literature of this sub-sect is doubtful in view of the fact that earlier biographers like Daityari, Bhusana and Ramacharan have nowhere mentioned this; rather they have categorically told that Madhabdeva did not nominate anybody to succeed him. Nevertheless, Purusottama is regarded by the followers of Purusa Samhati as the real successor of Sankardeva.¹⁰
- (iii) **Nika Sanghati** : ‘Nika’ the word means clean. It is also known as Nistha Sanghati. After the death of Madhabdeva this Sanghati is started. Badala Padma Ata, Mathura Das Burha Ata and Keshabsaran Ata considered the trio of Nika Sanghati. This Sanghati’s rules and regulation is put stress on strict discipline in various sides like dress, manners, food etc. They always believed the ‘Bhakat’ or ‘Monk’. “The sub sect had certain religious characteristics which also deserve notice. This sub sect lays special emphasis on serving holy association (Sat-Sanga). The second noticeable feature of this section is that its followers consider Madhaba as the Guru of the sect, while Sankardeva is regarded as the Guru of their Guru and as such their relation with Madhabdeva is immediate and that with Sankardeva is indirect.”¹¹ Barpeta, Kamalabari are the Nika Sanghati’s Satra.
- (iv) **Kala Sanghati** : ‘Kala’. This word derived from ‘Kaljhar’. The devotees of this gave supreme importance to the ‘Guru’ according to Kala Sanghati, Guru is like God. They prayed to Guru as God in the human form. Kala Sanghati’s Devotees are very strong spiritually, socially and economically. They believed the Gurubad. Gopal Ata is the founder of Kala Sanghati. He was a so much devoted to his Guru Madhabdeva that he was eveready to perform any kind of job for

him. His was the twelve devotees. After death of the Gopaldeva, Sri Ram Ata take charge the Kalajhar Satra as a Satradhikar. This Sanghati gave preference to tribal people. Most importance Satras of this Sanghati were Ahatguri Satra, Mayamara Satra, Dihing Satra, Gajala Satra etc. This Sanghati has been well known for bringing into its fold the socially backward caste and community groups like the Maram, Motak, Kachari, Kaibartya and others. This Sanghatis were fight with Ahom monarchs. So this Sanghati deserve special consideration for their historical importance.

Contribution of the Satra :

Contribution of the Satra to Assamese social evolution like Bhaona and other culture activities of the devotees and villagers and also Satra is an institute of Assamese civilization. Because Satra became an integral part of Assamese social life and discipline, a seat of law and justice, education and art and culture. Satra promoted not only culture, this institute also promoting Assamese language and literature. After the death of Sankardeva, more Satradhikar wrote many religious books on various topics and social religious issues. Sankardeva and Madhabdeva as a milestone of the Assamese literature.

Contributions of the Satra in the field of Assamese culture is so high. Satra is like a centre of social activity, elevation of backward classes, centre of education, moral function, centre of social consciousness creation of music, dance and drama etc. From the starting to still moment Satra contributing a lot to our society in every aspect like in literature, culture and others. This institute established equality among Hindus, Muslims, Christians etc. The process of the formation of Greater Assamese Society started during the Sankardeva's time, it is continuing by the Satra. Satra always try to gave education value through the toll institution. There are some scholars who impart education, there are more branches like Vedas. They are also gives knowledge on music, dance, sculpture, are and craft etc. Satra acts as moral governor and also maintained the moral and ethical code. Any indiscipline matter solved there. The villagers assemble here to solve moral and social delinquency with the help of some important people. Satriya create the feeling of unification, mutual understanding and spirit of co-operation which takes the Assamese people in the bond of friendship, brotherhood etc. Satras served as a place of different cultural activities like music, dance, poetry, drama like Bhaona, other sculptures. Basically culture, music, satriya dance and bhaona alive by the Satra. Borgeet, Bhatima, dance and acting are the most important folds of Satras. Satriya dance is a most important item for Satriya culture. So it is recognized by the government of India. Another painting culture and mask making culture also famous culture of the Satra. That type of various contribution make by the Satra to the Assamese society.

Conclusion :

The Satra Institutions influence on the religious, social, culture, education and economic life of the Assamese people. Satradhikar, Deka Satradhikar and others devotees are idol person for the Assamese general society. Because the institution became the centre stage of all activities is the villages and the interior areas. The above discussion shows the Satras were the head centre of spreading the Sankari culture and Satra Institution provided a new

dimension to the Assamese Society through the multifarious activities which is always represent to Assamese Society.

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