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Origin and Development of the Satras in Assam: A Study from Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

The Neo –Vaishnavism Movement, which was initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva is the most significant socio-cultural and religious phenomenon during the medieval period. The Neo-Vaishnavism movement brought about an intellectual and cultural renaissance in the Assam valley. However, the most notable contribution of the Neo-Vaishnavism movement is perhaps the Satra institution which came to emergence at the hands of the great saints, Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The Satra institution is still functioning as a living institution in the Assam Valley. The Satra institution has been an integral part of the Assamese society because it brought a change in socio-cultural and religious life of the Assamese people. Therefore, researcher is an attempt to analyze the origin and development of the Satra institution in Assam. The Paper also aims at analyzing the relationship between The Satra society and culture.

Key words: Satra, Neo-Vaishnavism, Renaissance, Intellectual, Phenomenon, Society, Culture.

1. Introduction

The medieval Assamese society has witnessed with various socio-religious and cultural aspects. It may be noted that the neo-Vaishnavite movement is considered as one of the most significant aspect relating to the religious change during the medieval period. The neo-Vaishnavite movement of Assam initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva is remarkable for its valuable contribution to the socio-cultural and religious formation of the Assamese society. Srimanta Sankaradeva's Eka-Sarana- Nam –Dharma (Bhakti cult) is based on the philosophy of brotherhood and equality. It has contributed a lot to create a vibrant society. The main motto of the neo-Vaishnavite movement is to create an ideology of egalitarian society based on fraternity, humanism, peace, equality and democracy. Moreover, the neo –Vaishnavite movement brought a positive change in the Assamese society by initiating a socio-religious renaissance in Assam. According to S.N Sharma, "the movement may, therefore, be called a part of the All-India Vaishnavism of Assam is the Satra institution through which the faith was propagated and established."¹ It may be noted that the satra institution started a new change in the socio-religious and cultural life of the Assamese Society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationship in Assam. However, the Satra institution has initiated a faith to promote welfare of all living being and emphasized the message of universal brotherhood and equality among the common masses. Therefore, the paper is an attempt to highlight the origin and development of the Satra institutions in the Assam Valley since the 15th century onwards.

2. Objective of the Paper

The objective of the paper is as follows:

1. To understand the origin and development of the Satras.
2. To analyze the administration of the Satra institution.
3. To highlight the relationship between Satra and society.
4. To understand the role of the Satra institution as a cultural centre.

3. Methodology of the Paper

The Present paper is based on historical and analytical method. The data have been collected from the secondary sources. Secondary sources were collected from different books written by different scholars, articles published in different journals, internet etc. All of data or sources have been critically analyzed.

4. Research Question

The following research questions are posed through the research paper:

1. Is it true that the Satra institution helped to evaluation of the Assamese Society?
2. What were the factors behind the establishment of the Satra institution?

5. Origin of the Satra

The Satras based on the neo-Vaishnavism is a socio-religious and cultural institution which developed in the Assam valley since the sixteenth century onwards. The most important institution inherited by the Assamese people is the Satra institution which was established by Srimanta Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Damodardeva during the sixteenth century. But the physical structure of the institution as we find it today with a systematized form and maintenance, did not develop along with the emergence of the religious at the hands of the great saint.² Scholars say that the concept of a Satra has been borrowed from the concept of the hermitage of the Risi saanak in the Naimisha forest where the hermits used to assemble to listen to the recitation of Bhagavata for a thousand years at a stretch performed by monk suta.³ So, it is found that the name, "Satra" originated in the Bhagavata purana in Sanskrit word, "Satra" which used in the context of an assembly of devotees. It is to be noted that the term "Satra" come to be first used in the Satapatha Brahmana in the context of a sacrifice. But in the Assam valley, the term, "Satra" is used in the different context which came to be established for propagating the neo-Vaishnavism ideology among the masses. It is found that during the Sankaradeva's days, the devotees was assembling in the open ground under trees where the singled-minded vaishnava recite savanna- kirtana (songs of God). Therefore, M. Neog writes, "that in Sankaradeva's days the daily sittings of the monks and such lay disciples, as used to attend them, were held in the open or under the shade of trees. Such meetings, independent of any construction whatsoever, probably formed the nucleus of a sankrite satra with the kitan – ghar, and the residences 'of the superior and the monks only came later to be associated inseparably with the notion of a Satra."⁴ Then, S.N.Sarma says, "The etymological meaning of the word which an association or a sitting (sad+tra) or an instrument which helps to liberate the noble (sat+tra) must have supplied additional weight to form the above notion about Satra. The word Satra very naturally became Satra in Assamese."⁵ From such fact, it is found that the Satra has been emerging as a full-fledged socio-religious institution since the seventeenth century onwards when the neo-Vaishnavite movement expanded into the entire part of the Assam valley. Thus, it developed into a well-organized socio-religious institution in the Assam valley. However, Sankaradeva brought about a change in the religious outlook of the common masses through his teachings. Therefore, Sankaradeva established the first Satra at Bardowa where he constructed a prayer hall and held, besides theological discussion. It may be noted that he gradually established many Satras in different part of Assam. After death of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva played a role in propagating the neo-Vaishnava movement in the entire part of Assam. He reconstructed the Barpeta Satra in a democratic set up allotting functions to the devotees and celibates.⁶ However, now-a-days, the number of Satras in the Assam valley is more than five hundred with many householders which affiliated to one or the other Satra.

As we know that Srimanta Sankaradeva died in 1568 leaving two important apostles to succeed him-Madhavadeva (1498-1596), and Damodardeva (1488-1598) in the helm of his religious affairs.⁷ The two great personalities led finally to division of the faith. Moreover, after death of Madhavadeva, the four sub-sects or samhatis of the Mahapurushiya cult came into exist. Damodardeva and Harideva seceded a separate sub-sect called Brahman samhata, where Brahmanical elements predominated.⁸ Satras affiliated to this section are more numerous and prosperous being recipients of thousands of acres revenue free –grants.⁹ The four leading Satras of this samhata are- Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur or Kuruabari. These four Satras are popularly called Bamunia Satras and Chari Satras.¹⁰ In upper Assam, the royalist status of four big Satras (Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur, Kuruabari) became almost institutionalized.¹¹

There are twelve Satras which were established under the authority of Sankaradeva's grandson Purushottam Thakur. The Satras of Mahapurushiya cult called as Bar-Baregharia Satra. Then, another twelve Satras were also established by another grandson of Sankaradeva, Caturbhuj Thakur which came to be known as Saru –Baregharia Satras. These twenty –four Satras all together formed the purusha-samhati.¹² On the other hand, the twelve Satras founded by Gopal Deva in the eastern Assam came to be known as the kala samhata. According to S. L. Boruah "the term derived its origin from Kaljar, the head –quarters of Gopal Deva of the six Satras presided by sudra pontiffs, those of Dihing and Mayamara were more important. The kala samhata gave the Guru, a supreme position who was considered as God in human form. They were more egalitarian in their outlook and more liberal in matters of caste.¹³ The satras belonging to this order flourished especially in the far eastern part of upper Assam which in the fringe region of the Ahom state inhabited by an overwhelming number of tribal people like the Morans, the Chutiyas, the Kacharis, the Borahis etc.¹⁴ Then, Mathuradas Ata and Padma Ata came to establish the Nika samhata. The Nika samhata emphasized the importance of association (bhakta-samgha), rule and regulation prescribed by Madhavadeva. Thus, the Satra institution was divided into the four sub-sect or samhatis.

6. Administration of the Satra Institution

The Satras are found in two different forms: 1. Monastic, with its celibate inmates (kewalia /udasin Bhakat) and the celibate pontiff (udasi Adhikara), or celibate pontiff with house holding inmates (grihi/grihasthi /vishayee Bhakat) & 2. Householding (grihi or grihasthi Satra) with householding inmates and house holding pontiff (grihasthi/vishayee Adhikara).¹⁵ This well organized institution came to be known as the Satra having monastic, semi-monastic and non-monastic type with residential accommodation for celibate devotees.¹⁶ The number of pure monastic Satras are limited in number and they are mostly confined to the island of Majuli.¹⁷ The big and well-known of the monastic Satras are Auniati Satra, Dakhinpat Satra, Garamur Satra and Kamalabari Satra which situated in Majuli (Jorhat District). These Satras are more independent nature in the sense of administration of the Satras. The monastic Satras have their own physical identities with well-known structural establishment of the common prayer –hall (kirtanghar). Thus the entire system forms a distinct society in with its own identity.¹⁸ However, the administration of ecclesiastical order of a Satra is run by a Satradhikar (head of the Satra). The following officials are in charge of the satras administration :

6.1. Adhikar

He is the head of a Satra .He was usually a life-long celibate.¹⁹But recently this tradition has been changing. It may be noted that Harideva goswami, the satradhikar of Garamur Satra attained marriage life and tried to break up the tradition of celibacy .The Satradhikar is generally religious head as well as spiritual guide. A Satradhikar must be learned and should have expertise in grammar, puranas and epics, dharma sastras and smritis, music, dance and dharma.²⁰

6.2. Deka –Adhikar (deputy head of Satra)

Normally ,every Satradhikar has one junior called Deka or Deka Adhikar who is the heir to the religious gaddy and who help the Satradhikar in his functioning .²¹The deka or the junior Satradhikar is trained for the headship mentally, physically and culturally during the his apprenticeship , and when the Satradhikar dies, he is installed ceremoniously to the religious throne by performing the coronation ceremony as per vedic rites.²²Both the senior and the junior Adhikaras have their independent establishments .In the Auniati Satra they have three separate and Independent establishment with a number of attendants attached to each other.²³However ,the junior Adhikara or Deka Satradhikar play a vital role in maintaining the administration of the Satras.

6.3. Bhakats (Devotees)

The inmates called Bhakat are unmarried –kewalia or udasin and live in small-house consisting of one or two rooms called “baha” cloistered in a row of such houses called hati.²⁴They are as a matter of rule celibate persons with supposedly perfect celibate character ;but at liberty to leave celibacy if at any time they find its restraints uncomfortable.²⁵According to S.L. Boruah,” the Bhakats were the devotees,who held ecclesiastical office under the Satra or led intensely devotional life within the Satra campus remaining celibates throughout life. In purely monastic Satras celibacy was strictly observed .celibate devotees were known as Kevalia Bhakats.”²⁶ The word “kevaliya is originated from Sanskrit word Kavala (lone). It may be noted that the Bhakats are playing a significant role in maintaining of various daily activities of the Satras.

6.4. Sisyas or Disciples

The laity was called Sisyas who lived in scattered villages, leading the life of householder.²⁷Customarily, every Assamese youth belonging to the fold of Vaishnavism must have his initiation before he gets marriage life.Assamese youth was take part in religious activities after taking of “*sarana* “ under a guru.

6.5. Other Officials

There are many other officials like the Bhagawati who recited the Bhagawata-Gita ,the Pathak ,who read the religious texts ,the Deori ,who distributed the sacred offering (mah-prasad),the Bharali, the Gayan, the Bayan, The Madhi ,The Rajmadhi .They are contributed lots by maintaining different activities of the Satras .

7. Relationship between Satra and Society

The influence of Satra institution was widespread and multi –dimensional in the contemporary society. The religious –cum-social reform agenda as envisaged in the Neo-Vaishnavism movement led by Sankaradeva, of which the Satra institution is a legacy ,involved the ideal of caste equality in the religious plane and opposed untouchability.²⁸Generally ,the society of Assam as a land of various ethnic groups and castes had been a fertile ground for the Satra institution to propagating of the Neo-vaishnavism ideology. As we know that the Satras (monasteries) was headed by a guru (Satradhikar) .It is found that anyone could enter into the fold of neo-Vaishnavism by taking *sarana* under a guru .Thus ,a large number of tribal people entered into the fold of the Neo-Vaishnavism .The tribal neophytes were known as the saranies and still are addressed as such as a community who had over the years been assimilated into the Assamese Society.²⁹The Satras of the Kala samhati ,played a significant role in upliftment of the tribal society.It was Aniruddadev ,the first abbot of the Mayamora Satra ,who carried the message of neo-vaishnavism philosophy to the indigenous and tribal society during the first quarter of the 17th century.It may be noted that the Mayamora Satra vigorously rejected the caste superiority of Brahmins .This non-conformist attitude of the Mayamora Satra attracted the tribal masses into the fold of neo-Vaishnavism. They began to establish many Satras in the tribal areas and contributed a lot to the process of assimilation of various tribes into the neo-Vaishnavism The Mahantas or the Adhikars of the Kala samhati, particularly the Mayamara or Moamaria Satra were liberal towards the tribal men. The Moamaria Satra played a role in converting the tribes into the Bhakti cult. Guha mentions that “despite denial by its present authorities ,the Mayamora Satra , apparently had held very liberal ,views in the past with regard to commensality and connubium,”³⁰ However , during the colonial period, the Satras continued works for propagating neo-Vaishnavism philosophy among the common masses. Some satradhikhars or head of the satras like Pitamber Deva Goswami of Garmur Satra and Gahan Chandra Goswami of Nikamul Satra worked for improving the socio-economic status of the tribal society. It is found that Pitambar Deva Goswami dedicated himself to improving the condition of the Missings and the Kaibartas. He himself lived in the tribal district of karbi Anglong for two years in order to work among the Karbis. He set up a number of schools in the district and maintained them with his own resources in order to spread modern education among the Karbis.³¹

8. Satra as a Cultural Centre

However, Satras are centres for cultivation of various performing arts, notably music and dance.³²The traditional songs like *Bargeet* ,*Bhatima* are still sung in the Satras. The *Bargeet* are composed in a language called “*brajawali*”. The *Bargeet* occupy the most sacred

place among the devotional songs of the Satra.³³ It may be noted that the “*bhauna*”, “*rash-lila*” are popularly performed in the Satras like the Auniati, Garamur Satra. Bhaona is a theatrical performance of a Vaishnava Ankiya Nat, a one act play, initiated by Sankaradeva (1449-1568).³⁴ It is a kind of dance-drama chiefly aimed at propagating vaishnava tenets and performed in village Namghars and Satras premises.³⁵ Moreover, Dramas are generally performed at the common prayer hall in the Satras. It is found that various forms of dance which are performed in the Satra institution are the satradhara nach, rasa nritya, oja-pali, cali nach, jhumura, gosai prabesar nach. However, various musical instruments also used with dance and music. The important ones are the nagara, khol, mridanga, jaidol, khutital, bhortal, mandira etc. Thus, Satras are monasteries which represent the organizational set-up developed to propagate the religious faith dissemination of all kinds of art and refinement.³⁶ Moreover, the Satra institution opened a new horizon to the Assamese Culture.

9. Conclusion

From above discussion, it is found that the Satras bring socio-cultural and religious change among the tribal and backward castes largely in accordance with the pace of their social development. The Satra contributed immensely towards the formation of the great Assamese society. Many Satradhikars like Pitambar Deva Goswami of Garamur Satra, Gahan Chandra Goswami of Nikamul Satra worked for development of the Assamese society. The paper reveals that the Satradhikar, Deka-Satradhikar, and other officials played a role in the Administration of the Satras. The paper also reveals that the Satra becomes not only the religious institution, but also it is the centre of the representation of the Assamese socio-cultural life. However, over the years, the existence of the Satra Island, Majuli is at stake due to over flood and erosion hazards. So, for the preservation of the age-old Satriya culture, both people and Government need to take necessary steps in this regard.

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