

NEO-VAISHNAVISM IN ASSAM AND SATRA INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Neo-Vaishnavism developed by Sankardeva (1449-1568), the great social and religious reformer of 15th-16th century Assam. It was basically a religious movement, preaching the monotheistic faith in lord Krishna. The Satras are a kind of medieval Vaishnava religious institution created with the explicit purpose of spreading Neo-Vaishnavism. This institution, however, did not grow to their matured structural form during the life time of the saint who died in the year 1568 after a long span of life of about one hundred and twenty years. It is recorded that Sankardeva started to proselytize in congregational gatherings of his devotees under the shade of trees in line with the Satra as described in the Bhagavata Purana, building prayer halls (namghar) and performing bhaonas, religious songs and playing musical instruments, and reciting the Bhagavata. Sankardeva did this first at his native village at Bardowa within the present district of Nagaon and then at DhuwahatBelaguri within the Majuli island in the first half of the 16th century.

Keywords: Vaishnavism, Neo-Vaishnavism, Sankardeva, Satra

Introduction

The Bhakti movement in medieval period created a new trend of social and political setup. The teachings of Vaishnavite leaders were open to all irrespective of cast, cruel, rich, poor, literate and illiterate. Prime importance was given on faith and devotion. Despite the differences in modes of worship and practice of rituals, all the Vaishnava sects agreed to use Bhakti as the heart of worship. Historian B. K. Boruah summerised the characteristics of New-Vaishnava movement in this way:- “It was a progressive and democratic movement which laid emphasis on the unity of the Godhead, stood against excessive ritualism, preached a faith or constant devotion, fought against caste prejudices and stressed on the equality of man, several saints of great endowments appeared in various provinces to carry the gospels of the new faith to the masses by rendering the Sanskrit Puranas in to regional language.”

The basic future of New-Vaishnavism is that it is based on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti, which is almost free from the whims of the casteism. Local languages were used as a medium of instruction by the Vaishnava leaders in their respective areas, which had great force behind the developing of regional literature and learning.

The emergence of lord as a supreme God and developing of Krishna triad creates the New-Vaishnavism in India. It is difficult to find out the actual time of its beginning; yet the BindhyaBasini Rock inscription during the period 300 to 400 AD., which refers to the life story of Krishna, is the earliest recorded evidence of the existence of Vaishnavism. The words Bhakti and the Bhakti movement began in South India for the first-

time during 7th century to 9th century A.D. From 9th century down to the end of 15th century an unbroken line of Vaishnavism with the office of the spiritual leadership existed in India. The great reformers of this period included Ramanuja (1016-1137), Nimbarka (1101-1162), Madhavacharya (1199-1278), Ballavacharya (15th century), Ramananda (1400-1470), Kabir (1400-1518), Nanak (1469-1538), Chaityannadeva (1485-1533) and Sankardeva (1449-1568). The Vaishnava renaissance of India supplied necessary ideas and inspiration to Sankardev, the initiator of Bhakti movement in Assam. The great saint Sankardeva spent twelve years outside the Assam, visiting several places and studying religious trends of different parts of India. According to Kathagurucharit, the 18th century biographical works of Assam, Sankardeva covered all the important holy places of India from Badarikashram to RameswerSetubandha. During this time of pilgrimage Sankardeva must have been impressed by the nature and working of the Vaishnavite movement led by Ramanuja, Madhabacharya, Nimbarka and Ramananda in different parts of the country. On the whole, experiences and impressions of the long pilgrimage helped a great deal in widening his religious outlook and inspired him to undertake the task of re-orienting the religious setup in Assam.

Immediately after his return from his pilgrimage Sankardeva set himself seriously to the task of propagating the new faith among the people at Bordowa. But very soon Sankardeva received a set back from the clashes between the Bhuyan-chiefs and the Kocharis which compelled him to leave Nagaon and settled down at Dhuahat-Belguri which was under the rule of the Ahoms and engaged himself in the task of propagation through the process of congregational chanting of prayers, songs, dramatic performances, and religious discussion. Attracted by his novel method of propagating and the simplicity of the cult, disciples began to swell in number in the new place at DhuahatBelguri, Sankardeva met his most precious disciple Madhavadeva about the year 1522 A.D. But a clash with Ahom king compelled him to go to Western Assam where the Koch king Naranarayan (1540-1585 A.D.) had ruled. The Koch king Naranarayan who was known to be an enlightened monarch and had the reputation of sheltering and encouraging scholars, poets and saints, was considered a better resort by Sankardeva and other Bhuyans. In the Koch Kingdom Sankardeva with his relatives and followers settled in different places like Kapalabari, Chapara and finally established himself permanently at Patbaushi, near Barpeta. At Patbaushi, a prayer hall was soon built and regular religious discussions and recitation of the Bhagawata, dramatic performances and congregational chantings were regularly held. At Patbaushi three Brahman scholars, viz. Harideva, Damodardeva and Ananta Kandali came to join the movement.

In this way Sankardeva established a new cult of Bhakti. In order to attract the people to new religion, Sankardeva first composed the verses of the Kirtan Ghosa. Together with Nam-Ghosa composed by Madhabdeva the Kirtan-Ghosa is the main religious text of the Vaishnavas. The four principles in the condensed form are Guru, Deva, Bhakata and Nama. Since his teachings were mainly based on the Bhagawata Gita and the Bhagawata purana, his creed was called Bhagawata Dharma or Ek Saran Nama Dharma. Popularly it was called Mahapurushiya Dharma as Sankardeva was recognized as Mahapurusa or God incarnate. Sankardeva taught equality of all human beings and accepted disciples from amongst the tribesmen and the Muslim whom he placed on equal footing. Sankardeva still could not propagate his new cult in Eastern Assam, due to the ill-treatment of the Ahom rulers and prevention of the orthodox Hindu Brahmins there. But towards the middle of the 17th century the religious outlook of the Ahoms rulers gradually changed and they began to welcome Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism. Thus, the faith came to be gradually prorogated in the Ahom

kingdom also by the disciples of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and Damodardeva.

After the passing away of Sankardeva Vaishnavism got divided in to different sub-sects called Sanhatis or Samghatis. i.e., Brahma, Purusa, Kala and Nika Sanhatis. The initial division of Satra into Damodaria and Mahapurushiya groups was the outcome of the caste-based conflict over the issue of leadership as most of the Brahmin apostles had cast their support in favour of Damodardeva as the successor of Sankardeva. The basis of the subsequent division of Mahapurushiya group into three Sanhaties namely – Purusa, Kala and Nika in general is different from the preceding one, i.e., Damodaria which came to be more popularly known as Brahma Sanhati in later times, in which caste-based elements are found to be prominent. For example – Purusuttam Thakur, the founder of Purusa Sanhati, had acknowledged the importance of Brahmanical rituals to some extent in the satria way of life. On the other hand, Padma Ata, the founder of Nika Sanhati, did not pay importance to Brahmanical rituals. And Gopaldeva, the founder of Kala Sanhati did not pay heed to the legitimate incorporation of Brahmanical elements in their way of life. In this way after the death of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva Vaishnavism got divided in to four sub-sects and leaders of these sub-sects had deputed their disciples to spread their own message of Vaishnavism in different places of Assam.

Satra Institutions

Meaning:

As a religious organization a Satra resembles Buddhist monastery or Vaishnavite Math in India. The word Satra is derived from the Sanskrit word Sattrā, (Sat + Tra) meaning one's salvation from the mundane life to the holy sphere or providing salvation to the noble souls. Satra served as the instrument of spreading principles of the faith among the masses and helped to sustain and stabilize Vaishnavism in Assamese society. It is recorded that Sankardeva started the Satra as a kind of institution in its embryonic form first at his native village at Bardowa within present Nagaon district of Assam, but it was not considered as full-fledged Satra as its present counterpart. On the other hand, Damodardeva, the ardent follower of Sankardeva, gave a new shape to the Satra institution by developing its structures like Devagriha, Bhakator Hati, Bhoral Ghar, Korapat, and Atithi Griga, which are considered now as the structural features of an ideal Satra institution. During the period 1560-1590, Damodardeva for the first time established such ideal type of Satra at Patbausi. The division of four sanhaties with their own principles resulted in the establishment of Satras both in Eastern and Western Assam by their disciples. In this way there was an expansion of the Satras during the 16th and 17th centuries. It is found in the District Gazetteer of Assam, 1905 that during this year there were two hundred and eighty Satras in the state.

Classification of Satras:

Satras of Assam are of two types: 'Udasin' or 'Kevalia' and 'Grihi' or 'Grihasthi'. A Satra with celebrate devotees (called udashinbhakat) living in cloisters of houses within a large campus with the married, or celebrate pontiff (called Adhikar) as the head is known as Udasin Satra; and a Satra with house holding inmates (called grihi or grihasthibhakat) with the married Adhikar at the top, is a Grihasthi Satra. Grihasthi Satra looks more like a village than a secluded religious centre.

Organizational Structure:

It is the organizational structure of Satra that makes it so strong and sustaining. Generally, the Satra is quadrangular in shape. Each Satra has four structures – a Namghar, a Manikut, a Bat chora and Hatis.

The structure of Satra in general centres round a Namghar, i.e., prayer house. The main activities of

the Satra are performed here. The Namghar is used as venue for multiple activities such as – community prayer services, school of music and dance, dramatic performances, religious and secular discussions etc. A category of functionaries is associated with the management of Namghar and they are found to discharge their allotted duties as per tradition. The existence of Namghar is not confined to the Satra alone; it is a common feature of Assamese social life. To represent Satra in the village, initiative was taken through the system of Namghar. The village Namghar is not only the community prayer hall, it acts as a local community within which its members ordinarily live their lives. In every village of Vaishnava fold there is at least one and usually several Namghars whose members form a religious congregation. The Namghar both in Satra and in village includes a separate building called Manikut. Manikut is the sanctum- sanctorum where the holy script and the valuables of the Satra are preserved. ‘Manikut’ means the house of jewels. It is the place where the idol of the deity or the sacred scripture on the ‘Singhasana’ (lion-seat) or both are kept on the four sides of Namghar and Manikut there are usually four rows of huts known as Hati, where the Bhaktas (devotee) of various categories reside. The residential quarters in the Hatis are ‘Baha’. The system of ‘Chari Hati’ however, is not the general feature of all Satras. In the monastic Satras like Auniati, Dakshinpat and Kamalabari etc. only celibate devotees are allowed to reside in the ‘Hatis’. The Satras where celibacy is not strictly enforced, proper separation in respect of dwelling is strictly followed.

On the other hand, ‘Batchora’ or ‘Karapat’, a small open house, is the entrance to the Satra.

Management of the Satra:

The management of Satra runs centering round three categories of functionaries. They are- 1. Guru or Adhikar, 2. Bhaktas or devotees and 3. Sisya (disciples). The first two categories generally reside within the Satra campus and the third one live in the scattered villages and towns leading an ordinary life of house-holder. The head of the Satra is the Adhikar or Satradhikar. In fact, Adhikar signifies an office. He is the trustee of the properties of the Satra. In some Satras the Adhikar is celibate, in some others, he is not. He must belong to either Kayastha or Brahmin community. Being the head of a Satra, the Adhikar has traditionally held the highest social status in Assamese society. The Adhikar is the religious head and spiritual guide of the group under his care. It is a custom to have two Adhikars in a Satra, one junior called ‘Deka Adhikar’, and the senior- the Adhikar or Satradhikar, the actual head of the Satra. In power and prestige ‘Deka Adhikar’ is next to the Adhikar. In the absence of Adhikar, he discharges the duties and functions of the Adhikar. After the demise of the Adhikar, the Deka Adhikar usually becomes the Adhikar through the ‘Nirmalilowa’ (coronation) ceremony.

The second category i.e., the Bhaktas consist of residential devotees. They live within the Satra campus. The devotees, called Bhakat live in small houses consisting of one or two rooms called ‘Baha’. Cloistered in a row, such houses are called ‘Hati’. Devotees are brought to the Satra when quite young, knowing nothing about the worldly life, from the lap of the parents, and are brought up in a way to adapt to the celibate life- style both mentally and physically, and trained throughout their youth to a life of devotion and culture.

The third category i.e., Sisya, consists of those persons who lead house-hold life especially in the villages. They live outside the Satra. Every Assamese Vaishnava house-hold invariably affiliated to one or other Satras through religious and economic means. The first and most important religious means of interaction between Satra and Sisya is the rite of initiation (Sarana). No uninitiated (a-sarana) person is usually allowed to take active part in any socio-religious functions within and outside the family. Conventionally, every man

is required to get initiated before marriage. In case of women this situation exists after marriage. The payment of annual dues by the Sisya just starts after initiation. Every house holder-disciples are required to contribute food stuff to the Satra according to his capacity whenever he visits the Satra. The Satra-Sisya relationship is hereditary.

Cultural Activities:

Being based on Neo-Vaishnava ideals, these monasteries (Satras) and numerous villages are the centers of cultivation of colourful Assamese classical dance and music (Satria Nritya Aru Geet) and theatrical performances (Bhaona). The 'Tithis' (death anniversaries) of the two gurus, namely Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhabdeva as also the Aataas and Aatoi's (spiritual guides in the vaishnava tradition of Assam who succeeded the two Gurus), Rasotsav (Lord Krishna's Rashleela), Falgotsav (Holi), 'Palnam' (prayer offered to lord Krishna by chanting of his glories from Assamese Vaishnavite scriptures for one or more days at a stretch) make for the with ideals of non-violence and social harmony preached by Sankardeva, and the Satra institutions as instruments of upholding them.

It is interesting that the Satras have been centers of literary pursuits in both Sanskrit and Assamese since their inception. They still possess a number of illustrated relics of Middle Ages which attract the visitors and scholars alike from all over the world. The most well-known of them all are the Hasti Vidyarnava of the 17th century and the Chitra Bhagawata of the 16th century preserved in the Auniati Satra of Majuli. It is to be noted that it was from the Auniati Satra of Majuli that its late Adhikar Duttadeva Goswami (1838-1904) published the first newspaper in Assamese the Assam Bilashini ever published by an Assamese (the first Assamese Newspaper was the Arunodoi published by the American Baptist Missionaries, from Sivasagar in 1846). The significant point in this regard is that publication of a newspaper from a place like Majuli and that too in a time like the 2nd half of the 19th century (1876) is just unimaginable. The Assam Bilashini forms a land mark in the literary history of modern Assam.

Besides, many other forms of art and crafts are practiced by the inmates of the Satras who attract the interest of visitors. These include painting, mat making, ton making, boat making and more importantly, mask making for which the Chamoguri Satra of Majuli in the island is more well-known. The current Satradhikar Sri Koshakanta Deva Goswami, a recipient of the Sangeet Natak Academy award in 2003, is an authority on mask making.

Conclusion

The fact that the Satras are still alive and kicking even at this fast-paced age of globalization testifies to their massive influence on the common masses. Their religious, ethical and cultural teachings have contributed substantially to the formation of the composite Assamese nation binding the diverse ethnic castes and communities of Assam in to one knot of communal peace and harmony. In these troubled times of today, the importance and relevance of these institutions are acutely felt as they help the common masses build the stepping stones to a vibrant and stronger society based on a disciplined, moral and above all a humanitarian way of life.

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5. M.Neog, *Sankardeva and his times*, Guwahati, 1966 P. 110.
6. U. C. Lekharu, *Katha Guru charit*, PP. 100-101.
7. Ibid, PP.101-148
8. Ramananda, *Guru Charita*, P. 183
9. The term Sanhati a synonym of the term Sangha, which means an association. The term is also used as Sanghati, a Sanskrit word Sangattana, which means unification. *Katha Guru Charit* uses the term as Ghati in the sense of groups of Assam Vaishnavism. See *Katha Guru Charit*, p.p. 521-618.
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