

Role and challenges of Sattriya culture in the social life of Assam

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Abstract:

Satra institutions have played a very important role in the social life of Assam. From running fluently to develop, the Satra institutions have contributed a lot to Assamese society. The powerful and rich culture of Satra is making the Assamese culture rich and diverse. But there is a lot of change in contemporary Assamese society now. In the process of spreading this culture, Satra institutions are also facing many problems and challenges. In this research paper, an attempt was made to examine the role of the Satra Institution in the social life of Assam and the problem of Sattriya culture in the present context. Interviews with related people of Sattriya culture have been used to study this topic and trying to find a solution to the problem.

Introduction:

The Satra is a notable social and cultural institution of Assam. In the fifteenth century, Sankardeva set up the *Namghar* (prayer house) in Bardowa to preach Vaishnavism, since that time the earliest form of satra institution was created. Later Damodardev established the Satra in full form.(Sharma, 2008) Satras are generally situated on quadrangles surrounded by palisades or walls. Each principal satra is marked by the existence of a *namaghar*, a *manikut* (a place of Naamghar where deity or sacred books were kept), a *batchara* (entrance of Satra) and two or four rows of *hatis* (Houses of Devotee).[Sarma, 1966, p. 100] However, Sankardev did not use the words Satra. The word *Than* was used to denote the Satra. The word Satra is mentioned in the Veda. But this word was used to refer to the Jaygya ritual. Bhattadev, a disciple of Damodardev, mentions about the Satra in a book called *Sharan Malika*: This is the oldest definition about the Satra.-

yatracharanti Sadh dharmana kevala bhagavat priya

nabadha bhagadvhakti pratyahng Jatra bidyate

tat satrang uttamang kshetrang Vaisnava surabanditma

tatrastha Vaisnava sarbe harinam purayanag (Sarmah,1975, 367)

Meaning-That is, where the beloved of God follows the religion, where the Bhagavata devotee resides, it is the best area where Vaishnavism and devotion to the deity are performed, the areas where Vaisnavites always remain devotees. It is called the Satra.

The arrangement of the Satras in the hands of Sankardeva did not achieve perfection. But in the days of Sankardeva, all the devotees started the tradition of sitting in the Namghar under his leadership to perform Naam Kirtan and settle under a small society (Gohain, 2014,100). After giving full form to the satra by Damodaradeva, Sankardeva saw that level and became happy. According to the order given by Sankardeva to classify satra in the order of knowledge, Madhavdeva also established satra and made the surroundings like Damodardeva at the request of devotees. After the death of Sankardeva, the Vaisnava religion was divided into four sects and the Vaisnava religion expanded. Many Satras were established. All the Satras started propagating religion, according to their own sect. At present, there are more than 1000 Satras in Assam. In a report, it was said-

There are various opinions as to the number of Satras, big and small, existing in Assam. While according to the Report of the North-East Policy Institute, there are 914 Satras in Assam, the Secretary-General of the Assam Satra Maha Sabha, who claim their number to be about 1200. In any case, the number either way is huge by any standard and it only re-affirms the fact that the Satras of Assam still remain a crucial part of the Assamese society and the most cherished Institute singing the songs of the Assamese heart. (Baruah et al., 2017)

Auniati, Dakshinpat, Garamur, Kuruabahi, Kamalabari, Patbaushi, Kamalabari, Bhogpur, Elengi, Chamguri, Bengana Ati, Narua, Barpeta are the most prominent satras of Assam. The main purpose of the Satra is to propagate Vaisnavism, but the Satra has also played an important role in keeping Assam united. Satra has an important role in the social organization of the Assamese society. Satra developed the mental and physical form of the Assamese people through religion. Assamese drama, dance and lyric music were developed by the Satra. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Satra laid the intellectual foundation of the Assamese people. A Bhuyan writes-

The Satra, literally meaning “holy areas” each headed by a *Guru* (teacher) designated as the *Satradhikar*. At Tembuwani (Bordowa), the birthplace of Srimanta Sankardeva, the saint set up his first *Kirtanghar* (prayer hall), with houses for the devotees within the compound and on the four sides of the *Kirtanghar*. The *Kirtanghar* was the nerve centre of the entire place. It was a long and open hall, where the devotees sat together to sing the glory of God. There was no idol in the altar, but only a book, generally the *Bhagavata*, symbolizing God. (Bhuyan, 2008).

Satra also contributed to rural society by giving a useful agricultural method. Satra institution can be called the backbone of Assam. The Satra institutions have contributed to the intellectual, political, social, cultural and economic sectors of Assam. Assam's ethnic life has been formed under the leadership of Satra. The culture of Assam was strengthened by the Satriya culture and at the same time helped to preserve its specialty. Under the leadership of Satra, Assamese society was going in the right direction smoothly, but at the present time, Satra is facing many challenges. That is why there was a change in society. In this background, this paper is an attempt to discuss the role and problem of the Satras in Assamese social life.

The social contribution of Satra institutions:

Satras have helped to organize society in a systematic manner. Satras have spread neo-Vaisnavism by establishing branches in various main places of Assam. Authorities and other

Vaisnavites have initiated people from various places in Assam and are trying to advance the society through rituals of Vaisnavism. In sponsorship of Satras, educational institutions have been established in villages and towns of Assam. Some Satras like Auaniati, Dakhinpat, Kamalabari, Bhogpur, etc. have tried to take the historic old Indian education system forward by establishing Sanskrit teaching schools. From pre-independence till today, religious discussions have been held in Assam and various other places on the initiative of Satras. The Satras have attempted to upgrade society by promoting education and other plans among the backward Howa tribal people living in inaccessible areas of Assam. In the days of Shankardev, a large number of tribal people adopted Vaishnavism. Later, people like Ahom, Deori, Maran, Chutia, Sonowal, etc. took extensive initiation into the religion of Sanakdev (Gogoi, 2004,27). Even today, more and more Assamese people take initiation on religion from Satras. S N. Sarma says about the contributions of Satra-

All the important Satras used to maintain and are still maintaining a regular band of scholars whose duty it was to impart education, especially in respect of ancient lores and scriptures. The Vaisnavite lores were, no doubt studied, but other branches of study such as *Vyakarana*, *Nyaya*, and *Kavyas* were not neglected. Many of the early Vaisnavite reformers took upon themselves the task of educating the pupils (Sarma, 1966, p. 160)

During the pre-independence period, Pitambar Devgoswami, the Sattaradikar of Garamur Satra, showed the idea of social reform. Adopting a modern approach, he was launching various socio-cultural programs such as the abolition of opium, abolition of untouchability, allowing all classes to enter. Even in the present times, in the advice of Satras, the religious problem of any village of Assam is easily solved.

Political contribution:

In the Ahom regime, from time to time, Satras faced political mayhem. The Ahom rulers also showed reverence for the Vaisnava saints. The Ahom rulers donated a lot of money to the Satra. All the royalty had special status. While the new king was to be ascended to the throne, it was the practice of the Satra to grant infirmities.

In later years also, Satras were honored with a similar attitude by the British rulers. Meanwhile, Mahatma Gandhi established the influence of the freedom movement in the mind of the entire Indians and also had its influence in Satra. The name of Pitambar Devgoswami is particularly notable in this case. Other rulers of this time did not oppose the British. But the people of Majuli under the leadership of Pitambar Devgoswami participated in the movement. Krishnachanda Devgoswami, the *Deka Adhikar* (Deputy Adhikar) of Garamur Satra went into imprisonment with an active part in the movement. Later Pitambar Devgoswami also agitated and went to jail. Pitambdev Goswami played an important role in the burial of foreign goods, movement of indigenous goods and self-sufficiency. Nowadays, Satras are playing a strong role in the public interest of the people of Assam in various political problems.

Cultural Contribution:

Satras in Assam are often celebrated at various festivals such as Naam-kirtan, Barsabah, Bhaona, Janmastami, Ras-palnaam, mahapursar-tithi, Phalgutshav, Pachati, Bihu, etc. on regular occasions. In addition to the daily recitals, various cultural activities such as Gayan-

Bayan, Maati-akhada, singing Bargeet, and so on are being performed in the satras. Cultural programs have also taken place in various places in India and also in foreign countries. This culture continues throughout Assam under the influence of Satra.

In the artistic direction of Assamese social life, the role of Satra is more than in any other institution. When a new satradhikar takes the garland in a Satra, there are traditions of composing a play and performing the same. (Devgoswami, 2014, 150) The drama and dance of the satra are seen to be found equal respect in foreign countries also. No one can deny the contribution of satra in the spreading of Bargeet. In Masks construction, Chamuguri and Bihimpur Satras have reached a special level. The popularity of the mask is seen throughout Assam. The Majuli's mask has also been exported to other countries. The universe of the mask associated with the Satra institutions is the world of imagination. Masks in the Satra are included in the ceremonies and festivals, which have a social and religious significance, and also are used in the plays of dance and drama. Masks in the satras have been designed in innumerable varieties from a good number of materials available in the environment. (Gogoi, 2016)

The Satras of Assam have opened a number of training schools in various places for Sattriya dance, songs, and instruments. In India, training of Sattriya dance and dramas have also been arranged in Delhi, Mumbai, etc.. Various workshops, discussion meetings, Bhaona competitions, etc. are arranged through Satra institutions all over Assam itself. Satras have contributed to the spread of the Sattriya culture by participating on the agenda of the Indian Sangeet Natak Akademi. The role of the Satras of Assam in this area is particularly important. Apart from the Assamese language, Ankiya plays have been translated into various tribal languages of Assam and its performances are also being organized. Nowadays, Ankiya drama is translated into foreign languages like English, French. In this way, an effort is being made to bring popular among all the people. Auniati, Kamalabari satra has helped to increase the reaction and the popularity of the Ankiya drama by arranging Bhaona ceremonies and competitions. Many Vaishnavas of Satra have won the Sangeet Natak Akademi and other awards and are inspiring people to practice the Satriya culture.

A rich stream of Sattriya literature has flowed in Assam since the time of Sankardeva. Poetry, songs, drama and other literature are being composed chronologically in the Satras. Adhikars of all the Satras has composed the play. Apart from the drama, other Satriya literature like religious books, Charit Puthi, etc. has enriched Assamese literature. S. N. Sarma says-

The art of book-illustration by means of miniatures was largely cultivated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the Christian era. All the illustrated manuscripts have not yet been published, and therefore, no serious attempt has been made to study the technique of Assamese religious paintings of the medieval period. (Sarma, 1966, p. 176)

Pitambar Devgoswami, the Adhikar of Auniati Satra, has received his doctorate for *Sattriya UtshabarTatpraya Bichar*. The Adhikar of Natun Kamalabari Satra, Narayan Chandra Goswami has written many books on Satriya culture. Dibrugarh University has given him a D.Lit. Degree. Hemchandra Goswami of Chamuguri Satra has been given a doctorate for the mask craft. Vaishnava Bhavananda Barbayan of Uttar Kamalabari Satra has done his doctorate by doing research in Sattriya dance. Even today, many Vaishnavites of different

Satras are getting admission in research work in various universities. Therefore, Sattriya literature has brought a special influence in Assamese literature.

Financial contribution

Sankardeva also preached Vaishnava religion and also taught self-sufficiency to the people of Assam. In Satra, the education of small self-reliance goes to the educated classes and education of religion is also given. Satra has given the economic development of Assam. Through cottage industry or new craft, such as the Bamboo Bet, in the direction of economic development through facade crafts, it also provides beauty. The unit, in particular, is unique.

The art and craft of the Satra institution are seen to help in the economic development of Assam. Ancient-valuable materials stored in Satras are the center of attraction for present-day tourists. In each main Satra, a museum is set up and it is arranged to go for a little money. The material used in Bhaona (performance of Ankiya play) is locally produced in Satras and is helpful in the economic development of Assam. Satras provides financial assistance to many schools, and colleges by providing financial grants. In the natural calamities like flood, earthquake the Satra helps the pediatric public. They take an active role in the economic development of Assam

Sattriya culture has an important role in Assamese social life. But in the changing times, the Sattriya culture is facing various challenges. These are the problems of lack of Vaisnava devotee, the arrival of various mediums of modern entertainment, economic debility, the arrival of multicolour culture, natural disaster, effects of modernity, caste system, etc.

It is found that the number of devotees has been decreased in different satras in Majuli, particularly in historical Satras like Auaniati, Dakhinpat, Kamalabari, Bhogpur, etc. The increase in family planning awareness has led to a decrease in the number of children in Assam's family. Therefore, the amount of bringing the child to Satra is reduced.

It can be said that earlier there were enough people in the Satra to perform a Bhaona. But in the present time, The number of people in satra has reduced day by day in organizing sattriya culture. Problems have increased in the spreading of Sattriya culture. Vaishnavites living in Satra have started going to different places in search of livelihood. Many people of satras died due to old age. But the new member has not brought. Hence the problem of propagation of the Satriya culture is seen due to lack of manpower. To overcome these problems it is necessary to increase the number of Vaisnavas in the satras.

Nowadays, various modern entertainment media have become quite accessible. Television, Cinema, Internet, Mobile as well as various other social media platforms such as Face book, Twitter have gained popularity. Being a part of daily life, this media have taken a stroll towards Satra's culture.

Instead of traditional culture, the public is getting attracted to modern entertainment. The modern has brought a new source of popular interest. In comparison to modern grandeur, the Sattriya culture is refined, so the new generation is embracing the modern culture and medium and has lost attraction to the Sattriya culture. (T. Rajkhowa, personal communication, July 12, 2017) The positive direction of modern media should discuss the concern about behaviour in the culture of Satras. To keep the current Sattriya culture alive, the tradition should not break and preserve it with the assimilation of modernism. Initiatives

should be taken on how to progress with the help of experts of Satra culture. People's awareness of heritage will increase the popularity of Sattriya culture.

Problems created by the advent of external cultures in Vaishnavism:

Globalization and cheap popularity have given a serious warning to Vaishnavite culture. For some years, various foreign cultures unknowns in the Vaishnava culture of Assam have emerged unevenly in the sky of Assam. Balbom, Sharat Puja, Nadi Puja (river worship), etc., which run in other parts of the country have been celebrated with grandeur in Assam and spread in all directions. The traditional society of Assam has shown great influence by adopting such a culture. The combination of this culture, which was not seen before in Sankardeva's religion, one day will destroy the Sattriya culture. Therefore, it would be appropriate to oppose its entry in due time. The possibility of solving this problem is seen in the alertness of the people. Therefore, there is a need to create public awareness about the penetration of external culture.

Economic backwardness:

The thin economic situation has also increased the problem of the spread of Sattriya culture. In particular, the lack of self-sufficiency and small earnings has troubled the satras. The increase in the prices of material day by day has created problems in the smooth journey of life for those employed in the strict Sattriya culture. The Vaishnava of Satra has been on a continuous journey for livelihood. The days are being spent in the struggle for life, so there is a problem with serving the culture. In this direction, the government and NGO have to help the Satras. Some solutions to this problem can be found in making the people of Satras self-reliant.

Natural Calamities:

Natural disasters have also given rise to problems in the Satras of Assam. These natural calamities like floods, soil erosions, earthquakes. Floods and erosion cause a real problem during the time of monsoon. Due to soil erosion, several cisterns have been relocated to Majuli. Satra is losing valuable property due to flooding and erosion. In this misuse of life, protecting culture is a complex task. The government should make them ruling by giving them permanent protection from this problem. Otherwise, the entire Assamese becomes lean.

Effects of modernity

The present Assamese society-life is constantly moving in both positive and negative directions of modernity. Under the negative influence of modernism, many people of Satras have adopted modern lifestyles rather than traditional life. The emphasis on modern Objectivist culture has increased the attitude and carelessness towards ancient heritage. It is available everywhere that people are very indifferent to the old tradition nowadays. At this time, only the appropriate combination of tradition with modernity can give realization to Satra institution.

Although there are no caste discrimination in Satra, there is patronage in Satra. Atulchand Hazarika mentions in *Manchalekha* that the character of Krishna was given to a boy of a Brahmin-gentleman in Bhaona. All the people showed respect for this character (Hazarika, 1967, 14). So some people are still considered ignorant in society. Although the Satras in Assam are teaching religion to the tribal people also, But some people are not allowed to

participate in some religious functions of the Satras. Some defects of tribal people are also seen in this area. But in future, if modern society is to be established, it is necessary to give an equal share to all people in all the functions of the society. Even if the Satras have special education and special system, all the people of the society should be given equal status and provide them with proper religious education. The impact of modernization of society in general and on the Satras, in particular, is one of the factors leading to such a decrease in bhakat (Divotee) population. People who seek to become bhakat are declining day by day (Sarma, 2013)

Land eviction problem:

The Satras have been facing problems due to eviction in the ground. In most cases, the land is illegally acquired by Bangladeshi and other local people. The land of Satras is decreasing day by day and due to this situation of Satras are getting weaker. The government will have to free this land from interference and give it to the Satras again. By protecting Satras and helping them in spreading the Sattriya culture will create a sophisticated society in Assam. In a report, it was said-

While no methodical Land Survey has been conducted to determine the exact extent of encroachment on the Satra and temple lands, various estimates have been made by different authorities including the Assam Satra Mahasabha of the lands under their respective ownerships. According to a rough estimate, more than 8000 Bighas of lands belonging to different Satras of Assam (besides that of the Madhupur and other Satras in West Bengal) are under encroachment of the Bangladeshi Muslim encroachers. (Baruah et al., 2017)

The problems of soil erosion have reduced the shape of many satras. Specially The Satras in Majuli are facing the biggest threat from soil erosion. It is notable that there are 22 Satras in Majuli now. In an interview, The satradhika of Auniati Satra said "If the problem is not addressed early, they would cease to exist". (Majumdar, 2017). Auniati Satra and Dakshinpat Satra are perched just one or two km away from the river Brahmaputra. Large-scale soil erosion at Majuli is threatening to swallow the Satras also.

Conclusion:

It was seen from this discussion that since ancient times, Satras have been making a valuable contribution to the social life of Assam. Sattriya culture has a serious impact on the social, economic, economic, cultural and cultural direction of Assam. Sattriya culture not only created the culture of the Assamese caste, but also gave it an advanced form. At present, some serious problems have arisen, which have been weak in the promotion of Sattriya culture and are making the Assamese society weak. As time passes, Assamese society is moving towards modernity. The ruling problems must be solved at the right time and give a powerful form to this culture. In this work, all the people will have to show their hands and help in creating unity and a united Assam.

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