



# Satra as a mean to Sanskritisation to Assamese Society

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## Abstract:

*Satras* plays a vital role in the life of Assamese society as well as in the formation of Assamese society. The Neo –Vaishnavism Movement, which was initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva is the most significant socio-cultural and religious phenomenon during the medieval period. The Satra institution which is the most notable contribution of the Neo-Vaishnava movement is perhaps came to emergence at the hands of the great saints, Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. For that *Satra* institution plays a very important role in Assamese society. Therefore, it is tried to analyze the origin and development of the *Satra* institution in Assam. The paper also aims to highlight the relationship between *Satra* and society. This paper also made an attempt to understand the role of *Satra* in the process of Sanskritisation in Assam.

**Key Words:** Satra, Sanskritization, Society, Neo-Vaishnavism, Assam.

## 1. Introduction:

Neo-vaishnavism is the reformist movement in Assam in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century against social disorder by Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciples. It is basically a socio-cultural revolution which is a trial to create social unity and eradicate social evil. Despite of multitude of gods and goddesses Srimanta Sankaradeva's Neo-vaishnavism emphasised on 'ek saran naam dharma' which is congregational prayer of one supreme god Krishna with simple devotion or *Bhakti*. In accordance to this Sankaradeva established *Satras* in various parts of Assam. Neo-vaishnavism in Assam was based on a wide network of *satras*(monasteries), headed by a *guru*. By taking *sarana*(religious shelter) under *guru* through a very simple procedure anyone could enter into the fold of Neo-

vaishnavism.(Sarma, C.K. 2011: 116) *Satras* are simply such religious institutions for practicing *nama-kirtana* with great devotion to Lord Krishna. More than religious institution, *Satras* are the social and cultural institutions. Sankaradeva generally wanted to reform the society and establish a

universal brotherhood among the people of Assam and *satras* are the tools for it by bringing various castes and tribes under the fold of a common society.

## 2. Research Question:

The following research questions are posed through the research paper:

1. How did *satras* develop in the society of Assam?
2. What type of relations do *Satras* hold with Assamese Society?
3. How do *Satras* help in the process of Sanskritization?

## 3. Aims and Objectives

1. To analyze the origin and development of *Satras*,
2. To understand the relationship between *Satra* and Society,
3. To understand the role of *Satras* in the process of Sanskritization

## 4. Methodology:

This study is analytical. Datas are collected from secondary sources. Sources of data collections are various books on *Satras*, research work and journals on *Satras* and Neo-vaishnavism, different souvenirs etc.

## 5. Origin and Development:



*Satras* are the heart of Assamese society led by great saint Sankardeva and his disciples like Mdhhabdeva, Damodordeva etc. The *Satras* are the socio-cultural and religious institutions of Assam. As M. Neog writes “that in Sankardeva’s days the daily sittings of the monks and such lay disciples, as used to attend them, were held open or under the shade of trees. Such meetings, independent of any construction whatsoever, probably formed the nucleus of Sankarite *sattra* with the kirtan-ghar, and the residences of the Superior and the monks only came later to be associated inseparably with the notion of a *sattra*.” The *satras* of present time society are the sanskritized form. The emergence of *Stras* as a full-fledged institution we have to wait more precisely, until the period of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when Neo-vaishnavite movement expanded to all over Assam.(Nath,D 2011:37) it is found that the name “*Satra*” originated in the Bhagavata purana in Sanskrit word, ”*Sattra*” which used in the context of an assembly of devotees. *Satras* are the well organized socio-religious institutions in Assam practicing the devotion of one deity by performing songs, dramas, arts etc. In order to cultivate Bhakti Movement, Sankardeva first established *Bardowa Satra* which is the first *Satra*. After that there were many *Satras* in Assam and nearby places gradually established by Sankardeva and his followers Madhabdeva, Damoardeva, Purushottam Thakur(Sankardeva’s grandson), Gopal Deva etc. All the *mahapurishiya satras* fall under four *samhatas* (sects) according to their believes and ideology – *Brahma samhati*, *Purusha samhati*, *Kala samhati* and *nika samhati*.

- **Brahma Samhati:** The *Brahma Samhati* was developed by Damodardeva and Harideva. The followers of this *samhati* practise the Brahmanical codes, while basically they pursue the *Bhakti* cult.. Most of the Dharmmacaryas of these *Satras* belong to the *Brahmin* caste group. From the *Chari Bastu* (4things) i.e *Guru*, *Deva*, *Nama* and *Bhakata* they give first place to *Deva*. They worships *Salagram*, as the symbol of *Vishnu* image or *Narayana* image. In the later periods, some of the *Satras* of this *Samhati* practiced worshipping of other gods and goddesses also. Out of twelve principal of Madhavdeva, Vamsigopaldeva and Jadumonideva were the prominent for the establishment of *Satras* of *Brahma Samhati*. The *Chari Satras* (4

*satras*) namely *Auniati*, *Daksinpat*, *Kuruwabahi*, and *Garmur* belong to *Brahma Samhati*.

- **Kal Samhati:** Gopal Ata of Bhabanipur is considered to be the founder of this *samhati*. It was set up at Bhawanipur. Later, this *Satra* was shifted to Kaljar by his followers on the bank of the Porola, where he died. The followers of '*Kal Samhati*' claim Gopal Ata as the sole successor to Madhavdeva. This *samhati* strictly believed in the central *Vaisnava* order of Sankardeva and stressed absolute faith on *guru* . Following the path of his *guru* Sankardeva and Madhabdeva, Gopal Ata appointed six Brahman and six non-Brahman disciples to the position of '*Mahanta*' or '*Adhikara*' .
- **Nika Samhati:** This *Samhati* was established by Padma Ata, Mathura Das Burha Ata and Kesava Ata. The followers of this sect put their emphasis on religious code of conduct, unattached devotion and total dedication to '*Ek Saran Nama Dharma*', that is why this *samhati* is called *Nika* or *Nistha Samhati*. In this *samhati*, *bhaktas* are given such position in *Satras* as authority . The main characteristic of the *Satras* of this *Samhati* is their great importance on celibacy and ritual purity. Some principal *Satras* of this sect are Barpeta, Kamalabari and Madhupur *Satra*. The Barpeta *Satra* was established by Madhavdeva himself, who later handed over its charge to Mathura Das Burha Ata after he left for Kochbehar from Barpeta. These *Satras* are more democratic. During the period of Mathura Das Burha Ata, the democratic system of management of *Satra* was introduced. The *Sundaridiya Satra* was also set up by Madhavdeva, which he later handed over to his nephew Ramcharan Thakur. The followers of the "Nika Samhati" stress their emphasis on the maintainance of strict discipline for preserving the purity of both body and mind. That is why they follow strict codes for eating habits, religious and social practices, and other aspects of daily life.



- **Purush Samhati:** This *samhati* derives its name from Purussottam Thakur, the elder grandson of Sankardeva. There are several views about the origin of this *samhati*. There was a claim put forward by Narayan Das Thakur, Purussottam Thakur, Caturabhuj Thakur and their disciples that they were maintaining the originality of Sankardeva's faith. According to them, as because this *Samhati* had its birth from the family linkage of Sankardeva who is regarded as the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism, that is why it is called *Purush Samhati*. The followers of this *Samhati* lays special emphasis on Nama which is one of the four fundamental elements in the practice of devotion. With '*Nama Kirtana*' certain Brahmanical rituals and '*Vishnu puja*' are also performed in these *Satras* like *satras* under *Brahma Samhati*.

The superior authority of *Satras* are known as *Satradhikar* in localite language. He is the spiritual and religious guide of all. The initiation ceremony, *sarana* and *bhajana* is performed under his supervision. All the administration of a *satra* is run by *Satradhikar*. Under a *Satradhikar*, there are deputy and various officials like *Deka – Adhikar*(Deputy Authority), *Bhakat*(Devotees staying inside the *Satra* premises), *Sisya*(lay disciples). Some of the other important functionaries of a *Satra* are the *Bhagawati*( the reciter and expounder of the *Bhagawata*), also known as *Namlogowa* in some *Satras* of Upper Assam, *Deori* or *Biloniya* (the distributor of sacred offering known as *mah-prasad*), *Bharali* (the store-keeper). The musicians trained to organize devotional music and plays are known as *gayan* (the singers), and *bayan* (players of instruments like drums and cymbals).

*Satras* have been playing an important role as religious-cultural organization in the Society of Assam till date. Over the centuries more than hundreds *satras* have established. Such socio-political and other changes occurs in society have affected the *Satras* also. There have also been differences among the *Satras* as evident from the emergence of the four *samhatas* or sects. But the differences are peripheral. The constitution of Sankardeva's democratic faith of *bhakti* remains the same from his time to present. No matter to what denomination of sects a *Satra* belongs, its ultimate allegiance

is always to Sankardeva and Madhavadeva, the great devotees of God who have homogenized Assamese society by revolution of spiritualization and devotion.

#### 6. Relationship between *Satra* and Society:

Neo-Vaishnavism led by Sankardeva with the ideological background of *bhakti* was a revolution for socio-cultural transformation in mediaval period of Assam. *Satras* are playing an important role in all aspects of Assamese life-social, cultural, economic and political-in the past as well as present.(Nath,D 2011:4) Assam is the homeland of various diverse ethnic groups. Groups from Mongoloid stocks are regarded as the first inhabitants in the Land of Assam. Moreover there are Aryans origin and other Sanskritized groups in Assam. *Satra* as a social institution of Assam brings all the groups into common fall.

Neo-vaishnavism facilitated a large number of people and groups to come under Hinduism without any difficulties unlike Brahmanical Hinduism. The tribal neophytes were known as *saranias* and still are addressed as such a community who had over the years been assimilated into the Assamese society. (Sarma,C.K 2011:116) It offers the tribal communities the space to become Sanskritized and to come under four dimensions of Indian caste system by taking *Sarana* under *Guru*. The *Satras* fall under *Kala Samhati* basically facilitate the tribal groups to inherent *Bhakti Dharma*. These *Satras* are the most radical in character belonging to the eastern part of upper Assam inhabited by large number of tribal people. Aniruddhadev established there *Mayamora satra* in early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Many tribal people thus attracted by Neo-vaishnavism cult and came under the fold of it. Later on some *Satradhikars* like Pitamber Deva Goswami of Garmur *Satra* and Gahan Chandra Goswami of *Nikamul Satra* worked for upliftment the socio-economic status of the tribal society.

*Satras* also works as a institution where cultural practices are taken place. Sankardeva and Madhabdeva introduced *Borgeet*(devotional song), *Bhaona*(drama), *Satriya nritya* (a type of classical dances) to enter to the masses. These arts are practiced in *Satras* with great devotion. The arts and



literatures are basically the aspects of spreading *Bhakti* movement into the core of the masses and it results positively. Most people entered into the fold of neo-vaishnavism attracted by its those songs and performing arts. *Satras* in some places also works as the places where such judgements and discussions are taken place. People assembles in *satras* for meetings and discussions and *satradhikars* here plays a significant role by offering suggestions to the common masses. Thus *satras* become the place of assembling people of different groups into one stage and holding the unity and solidarity of greater Assamese society.

The role of a *Satra* in the propagation of religious and moral education and organizing religious-cultural activities is limited upto the physical boundaries of a *Satra*, it goes far beyond into the nearby villages. Villagers can come to *Satras* to attend religious functions and also to listen to religious and moral deliberations organized in *Satras*. Not just the *bhakats* or the functionaries, others also can take part in the activities of a *Satra* under the over-all guidance of the *Satradhikar*. The *Satradhikar* made periodical visits to the villages where followers or *sisyas* of the *Satra* live.

*Satra* also worked like a political institution. *Satras* provides a common Platform for the villagers to assemble and discuss on a collective basis their common issues and problems and also to resolve their local disputes in accordance with their local judicial procedures and methods. In this sense the *Namghars* initiated the system of *Panchayati Raj* and programmes of community development methods by which people who live in local communities become involved in helping to improve their own Economic and Social conditions and thereby become effective groups in the programmes of national development (Bhuyan, 2007). *Satras* were the effective institutions of people's involvement in decision making and community building. People are dependent on *Satras* for resolving any problems in society. Decision that takes place in *Satras* are regarded as superior and it is never breaks down.

#### 7.Role of *Satras* on the process of Sanskritization:

*Satras* had played an important role for upward mobility of the indigenous people of tribal origin in Assam. As stated by M.N Srinivas “ Sanskritization is a process by which a low

caste or a tribe or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, twice-born caste.”(Srinivas. 1971). It is already stated that Sankardeva deliberately tried to bring all the people in terms of caste and religion into one fold i.e Vaishnavism. *Satra* worked as the place of religious learning and moral education. *Bhakti* Movement of Sankardeva was first started by Sankardeva when he was living among the *Sudras* (lower caste people) of Assam. Rather than Brahmanical religion Sankardeva associated for Neo-Vaishnavism which stands for equality in Society.

According to Sankardeva only *Brahmins* should not limit the power to study the spiritual and holy books among themselves. Spiritual education is for every people. In Neo-Vaishnavite religion, a *sudra* can be the *Guru* of a *Brahmin*. Among the disciples of Sankardeva, Chandasai and Jayhari was from Muslim Religion, Jayananda was a Bhutanise person and Sriramdeva was from *Kaivarta* Caste(a lower caste in Hindu Caste system). *Satra* was more like Democratic in nature. Women could also become the disciple of Sankardeva following Vaishnavism and could perform the religious work as well. Even a woman can be a *Satradhikar*(authority of a *Satra*) also. Sankardeva's grand-daughter-in-law Kanaklata Aai became the head of the *Satra*. She also appointed twelve *Satradhikar* to set up and organize more *Satras*. Women can perform various duties in the *Satras*. Even all the *Satriya* rites including initiation are open to women. In *Satriya* tradition married and initiated women are called *Gopinis* or mother.( Sharma M, 2017)

Madhavadeva who is considered Sankardeva's great disciple of Sankardeva made efforts to reach to the people of diverse ethnic groups living in Assam. He assigned some disciples, both *Brahmins* and *non-Brahmins*, with the task of spreading the Neo-Vaishnavite faith based on equality and brotherhood throughout the length and breadth of Assam. His message was propagated among almost all sections of the Assamese people by his disciples. Thus they strived to remove the evils of caste distinctions by embracing people from all tribes and ethnic groups into the fold of the faith enunciated by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva about Neo-vaishnavism. People belonging to various tribes and communities like the *Misings*, the *Sonowals*, the *Barahis*, the *Marans*, the *Deuris* moved to the new faith. *Satras* like *Gajala*, *Ceca*, *Budbari*,





*Dihing* etc at that time managed to have large number of *Mising*, *Sonowals* and *Deuris* as their laity.

*Satras* integrate a multi-ethnic society into one sphere and eradicate any discriminations into it. While giving *saranas* *satras* never tries to find the root of any person whether he is from upper or lower caste. Every individual irrespective of caste, tribe, class, religion may come under *Bhakti Dharma*. It tried to provide scope for the people of lower caste to have all the conditions for the upliftment by devotion of one God. Sankardeva tried to reform the culture of Assamese society as every people in terms of caste, class, religion, gender come under common culture. By doing so, Sankardeva tried to break the castism and untouchability of his present society. His liberal ideas about Society helped people to come closer to the fold of Sanskritization.

### 8. Conclusion:

*Bhakti* movement of Sankardeva was not a religious movement, it was a movement of devotion. *Satra* cultivated a high degree of enlightenment of Society by its Philosophy. It has a very good influence on the socio-cultural and communal life of people in Assam. *Satras* are basically religious forum, but it works a socio-cultural and political space for people. The main motive of *satras* are the evolution and social progress of Assamese society by creating equality among all the people of Assam. Neo-vaishnavism in Assam created its own structure by its ideology which is different from *Bhakti* Movement of other parts. It practiced communal prayer by people irrespective of caste, class, religion and gender in a common stage. Thus it laid a platform for people to sanskritise themselves. All the ideology and simplicity of Neo-vaishnavism laid by Sankardeva and his disciples attracted many people. As a result of it, a huge number of people from marginalised group converted to Neo-vaishnavism and were succeeded to occur a good status in the society of Assam.

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