

## ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF SATRAS IN ASSAM

<sup>1</sup>Alakananda Saikia

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Assamese, Gauhati University, Assam India

Email. alakananda07@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT:

Satras are the indispensable part of cultural and religious lives of the people in Assam. Besides that, some Satras have also played dominant role in the political history of the State. It is a product of Neo-Vaishnavite movement propagated by Saint Sankardev, the revered 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century-polymath from the region. Through Satras, Sankardev tried to unite the society with the values and ideals of Vaishnavism. Thus, Satras became a major public institution.

**Keyword :** Satra, Sankardev, Neo-Vaishnavite

### INTRODUCTION:

Satras are the indispensable part of cultural and religious lives of the people in Assam. Besides that, some Satras have also played dominant role in the political history of the State. It is a product of Neo-Vaishnavite movement propagated by Saint Sankardev, the revered 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century-polymath from the region.

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement got momentum in Assam towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The movement was already in circulation in some other parts of India. This spiritual movement was led by three exponents in Assam—Sankardev, Madhavdev and Damodardev. The Satras were established to spread the ideology of the movement. Through Satras, Sankardev tried to unite the society with the values and ideals of Vaishnavism. Thus, Satras became a major public institution.

Till the emergence of Neo-Vaishnavite, Shaiva and Shakta sects were predominant in Assam. Though Vaishnavism was present, Shaiva and Shakta played more dominant roles. Practices like animal sacrifices, Brahmachari Tantrik Puja were predominant. Therefore, to establish a new and simplified form of religious practices, Sankardev started Ekasarana Naam Dharma. The main emphasis of Sankardev's religion was on Bhakti and worship of one god—Lord Krishna. He wanted to build a bridge among various communities, religions and different classes of people through his religious principles.

The ideology of Sankardev's religion was derived from the Geeta and Bhagavata Purana. Sankardev's concept of one god is based on the Geeta. His extensive travel across the country for 12 years to visit various pilgrims and places of worship also shaped the core of Ekasarana Naam

Dharma. The Satras and Namghars were the major components of his movement of Neo-Vaishnavism.

The Satras are the centres of religious practices and cultural activities including songs, dances and dramas to spread the ideas and ideals of Eksarana Naam Dharma. Thus, it has become an indispensable part of Assamese religious and cultural lives.

### **ORIGIN:**

The word 'Satra' in Assamese derived from the Sanskrit word 'Sattra'. It means sacrificial session. In Vedic literature, the Yajnas which lasted for many days were called 'Santra Yajnas'. (Sarma)

It is said that Bhagavata was recited and explained during the Sattras or Yajnas in Naimisaranya. The discussion of Bhagavata was centred on Yajna Sattras. The Vaishnavite followers used the term "Satra Yajna" as a place of worship and a centre for conglomeration of the followers. Later, the word 'Yajna' was lost and Satra was widely used.

After deciphering the stone writings of Ambari, Dr. Pratap Chandra Choudhury opined that the word 'Satra' was first used in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The word was used in "Brittasur Badh Kavya" by Ananta Kandali. He stated that his father Ratna Pathak established Satra at Hajo for deliberation on Bhagavata. But, Satras didn't evolve much during his times. Though there was no mention of Satras in the writings of Sankardev and Madhavdev, Baikunthanath Bhagavat, a contemporary of Ananta Kandali defined it in his book "Saran Sangrah". According to his definition, besides religious practices, a Satra was also a place of residence of the devotees. Dwij Bhushan, Ramcharan also wrote about the "Satra-Griha" of Sankardev in their works. But, the formal aspects of Satras didn't see much development during the times of Sankardev. The full-fledged Satras were established by Damodardev.

### **DEVELOPMENT:**

After his pilgrimage across India, Sankardev started his Bhakti Movement from Bordowa in Assam. Sankardev established Satras as well as 'Monikut' and 'Kirtanghar'. He continued the movement at Bordowa till 1516 AD i.e. 67 years of his age.

In the meantime, Sankardev's conflict with Kacharis and Bhuyans started. He moved to Gangmou in Darrang district to escape this unpleasant situation. He established a Satra there and stayed for around 5 years. After facing harassment from the Koch and Bhutias, he left for Dhuaht Belguri in Majuli. Sankardev established Satra there. He lived in Majuli for 14 years and 6 months. It was the time, when he took various schemes to spread his religious ideals.

The number of followers attracted to the simplicity and medium of Sankardev's religion increased in Dhuaht Belguri. It was in Dhuaht Belguri, where the rendezvous between Sankardev and Madhavdev took place.

Madhavdev was a Shakta. A prolonged debate made Madhavdev believe in Sankardev's religious ideology. It was a turning point in the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam.

But it was during his times in Dhuaht Belguri, when saint Sankardev's son-in-law Hari was hacked to death by some people in the power. A sad Sankardev didn't wish to live there. So, with his family and relatives, he left for lower Assam. After living here and there, the saint started to live permanently in Patbaushi. Sankardev had lived there for 18 years and 6 months before he left for Cooch Behar.

In Patbaushi, Sankardev established "Chari-Hati" and Satra. He was actively engaged in various religious activities including Bhagavat Path, Nam, Prasanga, religious discussion etc. Sankardev's cultural and literary activities got a new momentum in Patbaushi. He breathed his last at Cooch Behar Bheladoba in 1569 AD.

Following his path, Madhavdev, Damodardev and other followers of Sankardev set up Satras across the state.

Barpeta is enriched with the contribution of both Sankardev and his disciple Madhavdev. Following his mentor, Madhavdev also established Satras in Barpeta and its nearby areas. There were only a few Satras centred around Patbaushi Satra during the times of Sankardeva. These Satras included Sunpora, Komarkuchi, Aadidham (Established by Damodardev), Ganakkuchi, Paneri etc. But during the period of Madhavdev, the Vaishnavite Gurus and their disciples set up several Satras in Sundaridiya, Ganakkuchi, Baradi, Konoriya, Bhabanipur, kaljar, Jonia etc. These Satras were the branches of Barpeta Satra. Ganakkuchi was the second Satra estavlished by Madhavdev. He lived in Sundaridiya for 14 years. It is said before he had left for Cooch Behar, Madhavdev nominated Ramcharan Thakur as the Satriya of Sundaridiya Satra.

Damodardev also contributed significantly towards the development of Satras. Most of the Satras established by Sankardev were given a full-fledged shape by Damodardev. It also made Sankardev happy. These Satras were complete with Namghar, Monikut, Charihati. The boundary of the Satras was defined. There was a designated place outside the Satras for the married disciples. At the entrance, there was a gate.

In Patbaushi, Damodardev decorated the Satras in a way which attracted a large number of followers. He also introduced Guru Korpratha (Tax to the mentor). Impressed with his model, Sankardev instructed Madhavdev to establish Satras in different places.

Thus Madhavdev expanded the model of Damodardev. While Damodardev established a Satra at Byaspara near Patbaushi, Haridev started another Satra at Maneri. The coordination among Sankardev, Madhavdev, Damodardev and Haridev gave an impetus to the Bhakti movement as well as Satriya culture (Culture pertaining to Satras) in Assam.

The Bhakti Movement started by Sankardev was further bolstered by his disciples. Madhavdev and Damodardev were most prominent among them. They bestowed upon 12 of their followers each with the responsibility to spread the Ekasarana Naam Dharma in ancient states of Kamrup, Behar and Assam.

Madhavdev demarcated the areas covering these three states—

- (a) From Sonkosh river to Ranganadi for Mathura Das Burha Aata.
- (b) Upper part of Bornodi River (Assam) for Badala Padma Aata.

(c) From Sonkosh to Kortowa, Ganga for Sankardev. Therefore, this area was looked after by Madhavdev himself.

After the demise of Sankardev, Damodardev started to work separately following discontent with Madhavdev.

Sankardev, Madhavdev and Damodardev received patronage of Koch kings towards the later part of their lives to continue the Vaishnavite movement. Sankardev was compelled to leave Upper Assam following torture from the Ahom kings. But later, he received support from Ahom kings Jaydhvaj Singha and Chakradhwaj Singha. Both of them became followers of Sankardev's religion and patronised in establishing Auniaati, Dakshinpaat, Kuruabahi and Gormur Satra.

Auniaati Satra is located in Kamalabari Mouza of present-day Majuli. Jaydhvaj Singha brought Niranjan Pathak with the statue of Govinda Thakur and established the Satra. The Satra's economic condition became sound as it received support from the king.

The 12 disciples of Madhavdev who were entrusted with the responsibility to spread the religion in Assam were—Mathura Das Burha Aata (Barpeta), Bhawanipuria Gopal Aata, Badula Padma Aata (Kamalabari), Bangshigopal Dev (Mahmora, Gharmura, Potoyori, Kamalaboriya), Ramcharan Thakur (Sundaridiya), Haridev (Laiati), Lesakoniya Govinda (Khotora), Barbishnu Aata (Malsa, Somoria), Lakshmikanta (Dhoporguri), Bhatou Kusiya Kesab Charan (Borjoha) and Gopal alias Porhia Aatoi of Poriapar (Heremdo).

Gopaldev set up Satras in Kahikuchi, Kolabari and Deberpar. Bangshigopal also worked for proliferation of the movement and established Satras in Upper Assam. The Sarit Puthi of Ramananda states that Bangshigopal set up a Satra at Kuruabahi which could house 500 Udashin Bhakats (Devotees indifferent to worldly pleasure).

Gopaldev faced the wrath of royals at Deberpar. He fled and set up another Satra at Sourani. Haricharan, Niranjandev, Bonomalidev and Jay Hari Dev also made remarkable contribution in the development of Satras in Assam.

Niranjandev, Bonomalidev and Jay Hari Dev established Auniaati, Dakshinpat and Gormur Satras respectively.

Likewise, Porhia Madhav, Gomar Govind, Barbishnu Aata, Padma Aata, Bor Jadumani, Aniruddha, Gojolia Jadumani made significant contribution towards development of Satra culture.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The total number of Satras in present times is unclear. With the changing times, the Satras also perceived various changes. The roles of Satras in the personal and social lives also underwent transformations. But, Satras are still a relevant force in the society. One of the main objectives of Sankardev's Neo-Vaishnavite movement was to ensure the unity of people from different backgrounds, classes and races. He believed in the existence of one god and denounced Yajnas and other forms of religious practices in Saktas and Saivas.

## origin and development of satras in assam

His principles included various aspects of the society. The Satras had innumerable contribution towards literature. Most of the vaishnavite literary works were produced from Satras.

The Namghars and Satras are two important structures of Assamese socio-cultural and religious lives.

Despite the rapid globalization, no one can deny the influences of Satras in the Assamese society.

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