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Satra, Sanskritisation and Assamese Society: Understanding Social Assimilation

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Abstract

Assam vaishnavism has been constantly playing a significant role in the process of assimilating diverse elements-indigenous and non-indigenous into Assamese culture. Under the auspicious of Satra Institution, which is the greatest contribution of Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam the process of assimilating the non-Hindus to the Hindu fold started with new spirit. Satras plays a vital role in the life of Assamese society as well as in the formation of Assamese society. In this paper an attempt is made to understand the role of Satra in legitimizing and popularizing the process of Sanskritisation in Assam, which was started long years back in the Brahmaputra Valley.

Key words- Vaishnavism, Sanskritisation, Assimilation

Introduction: *Satra* is a socio-religious and cultural organisation which developed in medieval Assam. Neo-Vishnavism in Assam was propounded by Srimanta Sankardeva, the great social and religious reformer of Assam, in the 15th and 16th century. The term Neo-Vaishnavism applied to the

Assam version of vaishnavism of Sankardeva to differentiate this phase of vaishnavism from its early phase. *Satra* institution is the unique contribution of Neo-Vaishnavism to the people of Assam. The *Satras* of Assam are the most distinguished and influential socio-cultural institution of the state.

Socially the *Satras* form a popular institution and have earned the status of being a national institution of Assam. *Satras* are the places for religious practices, cultivation of art and literature and craft and painting, music and dance. However, mere religious, socio-cultural or even aspects of their art and literature on their own, do not identify the *Satras*. There are more than thousand *Satras* in the whole the Brahmaputra Valley, the largest and the most well-known, however, being located in the Majuli island.

Objective of the Study: The study has been conducted keeping in view of the following objectives-

- 1) To describe the role of *satras* in the process of sanskritisation in Assam
- 2) To analyze the nature of assimilation of indigenous non-Aryan tribes to the Aryan fold in Assam.

Methodology: The study relies on secondary data. The secondary data have been collected from research works on *satras* and from other published books and articles.

Findings and Discussion: Prior to the beginning of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, Assam was the land of various extra Aryan tribes. The tribal people or non-Hindu people of Assam followed primitive religious practices. In ancient Assam the great Mother Goddess like

Kamaikhya and *kechaikhati* were popularly worshiped. For example, the Sonowal Kacharis were the worshiper of *Kechaikhati Gossani* before coming to the fold of vaishnavism. And it was the *Satra* institution, under whose influence a large section of tribal populace like the Morans, the Sonowal Kacharis, the Chutias, the Deoris, the Thengal-Kacharis etc. as well as overwhelming number of people belonging to the marginal and despised caste came under its ambit.

According to M. N. Srinivas, Sanskritisation is the process by which a low born Hindu caste, or tribal or other groups changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, twice born caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community.

The process of Sanskritisation, which was started long years back in Ahom and the tribal society in the Brahmaputra valley become faster after the initiative taken by the *Satras*. By giving 'saran' to the tribal people positioned them in the Hindu caste hierarchy. They had given the opportunity to uphold their position in Hindu caste hierarchy by adopting the customs and manners of higher caste.

The process of 'Saran' is important to the both *Satra* and society. This is through this ceremony, 'Saran'; one can come to the fold of *Satra* or can become a disciple of *Satra*. *Saran* means shelter. By taking *sarana* under a *guru* through a very simple procedure anyone could enter into the fold of neo-vaishnavism. It thus facilitated the entry of a large number of tribal people into the fold of Hinduism. The tribal neophytes were known as the *saranias* and still are addressed as such as a community who had over the years been assimilated into the Assamese society.

One notable contribution of *Satra* is its works towards the upliftment and betterment of the backward classes and bordering communities of Assam. Sankardeva from the very beginning of his missionary life led a crusade to restore the inter-community balance and understanding to its pristine glory. He strove for a complementary equality of all men across caste, character or status in the eyes of God and exhibited deep sympathy for the downtrodden class.

When Arunachal was within the map of Assam, Shri Rmudev Gossain, *Satradhikar* of Bareghar *Satra*, a dynamic personality, initiated Lotha Khon Bao and renamed him as Narotom. Therefore, the kings of Loptang and Namchang were initiated to Vaishnava sect along with

thousands of Noctes. The Garamur *Satra* of North Lakhimpur took similar steps among the Abors. All of these communities were from the hills, which now come under present Arunachal Pradesh.

Division of *Satras* into *Brahma Sanghati*, *Kala Sanghati*, *Purusha Sanghatin* and *Nika Sanghati* in the later part of the Vaishnava movement in accordance to the personal interest remained as an obstruction in achieving its actual objectives. The expansion of Vaishnavism into the tribal territories and the villages of the so-called non-Hindu or semi-Hindu population was historical true during the earlier part of the Vaishnavite Movement; but when *Satra* institution factionalized into different divisions, than old Brahmanical conservatism with the practice of casteism and untouchability sprang up and entered the *satra* fold. It was only to a limited extent that the ideological stand of the saint still held ground, make a man like Mathuradas Burha Ata, a member of the depressed class was allowed to head a *satra*. The tradition of sankritising the tribal and other backward and non-Hindu or semi-Hindu communities, however, continued in the *kala sanhati* branch, particularly in its *Moamara* or *Mayamara* sect proponed by Anirudhadeva (1553-1626), who was the son of a *bhuyan* and a

nephew of Sankardeva¹. The Morans are a plain tribe inhabiting the eastern part of the Ahom Kingdom and they are the largest constituent of the Mayamora satra. Before coming to the fold of Mayamora satra, the Morans were the follower of Saktism. After undergoing a process of Atomization and later on sanskritisation, they turned to wet-rice cultivation uplift from shifting cultivation and left the customs and practices of *Saktism*.

Along with the traditional religious ceremonies it is found some of the Pati Bitalia and Totla Rabhas have established the 'Namghar' as social and Vaishnavite religious institution. There they celebrate the *Tithi of janmastami, Douljatra, Ambubasi, Budha-Purnima, Akshay-Tritiya*, the birth and death ceremony of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, Damodardeva, Harideva and so on. Such ceremonies are performed by reciting verse from the religious book of the *Bhagavata Gita, Namghosha* etc. Along with them, Assamese Nam-Kirtana (congregational singing and reciting), is also performed.

The missionary work of bringing many backward tribes of Assam into the fold of Vaishnavism was started by early reformers and their successors. Ahom, Chutiya, Kochs, Miri, Kachari, and Naga-all these tribes were brought into the fold of Vaishnavism. In Eastern Assam it

has been the name of a Hindu sub-caste in which are received the converts to Hinduism from the rank of Kacharis, Lalung, Mikir and other tribes. In former times the Koches and Meca (a branch of the Kachari) freely intermarried, but the conversion of the former to Hinduism has caused the practice to be discontinued. The people of these tribes who took to Vaishnavism have gradually adopted Hindu conducts of life. They have also given up many of their unclean habits, discarded animism and become more and more refined in their dealings. They have mostly discarded their own tongue in favour of Assamese. It should not, however, be supposed that the influence was a one sided one. Customs and beliefs of the tribes have influenced or at least colored Vaishnavism of Assam to a certain extent. That the Vaishnavism of Assam was adopted to suit the different types of people and also received in its fold certain things from the tribes can never be doubted.

Nature of Assimilation: The assimilation of indigenous elements or non-Aryan traditions to the Aryan fold can't explain in simple narrative of assimilation. In the process of upward mobility, most of the indigenous communities retained some of their beliefs and practices and refused to fully conform to the casteist codes and regulations on

commensality. The Sonowal Kacharies accepted dual religious system. They are 'Kirata dharma' and 'New-vaishnavism' or '*Eaka Saran Namdharma*'. But there is vast difference between the systems of the two religions in terms of beliefs and practices. Though they have faith in *Namdharma*, which is against the worship of any other god or goddess with or without sacrifice, yet they can't abolish their traditional religious system. So they still continue to hold sacrificial worship to their traditional deities. Ahoms, Morans, Mataks, Chutias, etc. came to fold of Hinduism, yet they retained some of their distinct identities and this helped in asserting in the modern period as ethnic communities as against caste identities.

Conclusion: Neo-vaishnavism brings socio-cultural changes among tribal and depressed castes largely in accordance with the pace of their social development. Neo-vaishnavism contributed immensely towards the formation of a broader de-tribalised homogeneous society in the Brahmaputra valley. The Satra Institution, which is the greatest contribution of neo-vaishnavism to the people of Assam, plays a vital role in this regard. The Neo-

Vaishnavite movement and the Satra institution played the role of an agent in social change in Assam and the backward communities of Assam got the opportunity to uplift themselves in the development process with the influence of Neo- Vaishnavism. Neo-Vaishnavism thus became a powerful catalyst, in the word of B. K. Barua, 'a cementing force'- in the process of acculturation of the different social groups. And Satra as the main institution of the Neo- Vaishnavism took the initiative of upliftment of various tribal and indigenous community of Brahmaputra valley. But the ideal with which Sankardeva and early reformers carried Neo-Vaishnavism and created Satra institution, soon lost its former spirit allowing much conservative, personal and caste elements to enter into the satra system. And with the advent of colonialism, the satras become more orthodox in its outlook. Except, some *Satradhikars* like Pitambar Deva Goswami of Garmur satra and Gahan Chandra Goswami of Nikamul satra who worked sincerely towards ameliorating the status of the tribal people, almost all other satras had some adverse socio-economic impact on the marginalized communities.

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