

Role of *Satras* in the Spread of Art and Culture with Special Reference to Barpeta *Satra*

¹Mridusmita Goswami

Abstract: The most notable characteristic of the neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam is the *Satra* institution through which the faith was propagated and established. It may be monastic as well as semi-monastic in form. The importance of this institution lies in the fact that it is intimately connected with the Assamese society and it has become a part and parcel of Assamese life. The history of Vaisnavism in Assam cannot be treated without reference to the *Satra* institution. For the Vaisnavite movement in Assam the *Satra* institution plays an important role in the spread of Assamese culture and acts as an aid in making the Assamese society united. The *Satra* has been working as a center of various art forms, such as Literature, Drama, Song and Dance, Craft and Painting etc.

The objective that has been formulated for the study was to know about the role of *Satra* institution in Assam. The study also tried to study the role of Barpeta *Satra* in the spread of art and culture. The study was based on both primary and secondary sources of informations.

Keywords: Satra, Vaisnavite, Role, Art, Culture.

Introduction

Hinduism is the major religion in Assam. There are two sects of Hinduism such as *Sakta* and *Vaisnava* are found among the Hindu people of Assam (Gait 2010, 58). A majority Assamese Hindu follow *Vaisnavism* is the cult of worshiping *Vishnu* (lord Krishna) as the supreme deity in any one of his several forms. Later on *Vaisnavism* was known as neo-*Vaisnavism*, which had been propagated in the 15th and 16th century onwards, stress was laid on *Bhakti* (devotion) and on the singing of prayer songs than on other priestly rituals”

¹ Research Scholar, Department of anthropology, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, Pin- 734013, West Bengal, Email: mridusmita.goswami50@gmail.com

(Barpujari ed 1990, 327). The *Bhakti* movement or the *Ekasharaniya-Nam-Dharma* (religion to supreme devotion to one God) initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva towards the end of 15th century reflects the religious, social and cultural history of the population of Assam (Nath 1988, 306). The history of *Vaisnavism* in Assam cannot be treated without reference to the *Satra* institution. In fact, the origin and development of the institution is intimately connected with the growth and development of the neo-*Vaisnavite* movement in Assam (Sarma, 1999: Intr). The first *Satra* of Assam was set up at Bardowa in 1468 A.D. by Srimanta Sankaradeva (Nath 2012, 08). The cultural renaissance brought about by Srimanta Sankaradeva laid the very foundation of Assamese socio-cultural life. The *Satra* institution founded by Sankaradeva, Madhvadeva, Damodaradeva, Harideva and other *Vaisnava* saints during the 15th and 16th has enriched human lives morally, socially educationally and contributed a great deal in the realm of art and literature. The wholesome contribution by the *Vaisnava* scholar spread across a whole range of subjects like language, literature, music, songs, education, industries reforms etc. touched every aspects of life that is relevant till today. All these subjects have wide ranging application in everyday life. Hence the *Satra* institution wielded widespread influence upon the evolution of the Assamese society since the medieval period.

What is Satra

The meaning of the word *Satra* as found in the *Yajurveda* and *Satpath Brahman* is *Yajna* (sacrifice) where sacrifice is performed for a few days to a number of years. In Sanskrit, apart from *Yajna* (sacrifice) another meaning of *Satra* is alms house (Roychoudhury 2012, 3). The Assamese word *Satra* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sattra*. Sankaradeva admitted the necessity of *Satra* for propagation of his religion based on *Bhagavat- Purana*. According to Bhattadeva another *Vaisnava* writer “the place which is adored by the Gods and the *Vaisnavas* and where the devotees recite the name of *Hari* (lord), (Neog, 1965 reprint 2008, 309).

Satras are generally situated on quadrangles surrounded by palisades or walls. Each principal *Satra* is marked by the existence of a *Kirtanghar* or *Namghar* (place of worship), a *Manikuta* (shrine), a *Batcora* (gate way), and two or four rows of *Hatis* (cluster of settlements), (Sarma 1999, 139). At Barpeta *Satra* all four rows of *Hatis* are not found. Instead there are two such rows are found within the *Satra* campus known as the *Kewalia Hati* which is locally known as *Keular Baha* (residence of celibate devotees). Residential houses at Barpeta are arranged along both sides of a road. Each area consisting of such rows of houses separated by narrow alleys is called a *Hati* (Neog, 1965 reprint 2008: 324). Each *Satra* consists of three parties viz- i) *Adhikara* and *Deka Adhikara* (abbot and deputy), ii) *Bhakata* (devotee), and iii) *Sisya* (commoners) (Sarma 1999, 141). In monastic

Satras the first two parties reside within the four walls of the *Satra* campus and the last, the *Sisya* lives in *Hatis* leading householders life (Nath, 2001: 9). But in semi-monastic *Satras* like Barpeta *Satra* only *Bhakatas* reside in the *Satra* campus (Nath 2001, 10).

There are many cultural contributions found in the *Satras*, which were the centers of excellence. They helped a great deal in evolution of Assamese socio- cultural idiom. The language, the literature, the music, the songs, the dance, the plays etc. gave a distinct identity to the cultural spectrum. Most of the *Satras* of Assam are doing lots of works in the spread of this *Satra* centric Assamese culture. Barpeta *Satra* is also playing a vital role in this regard.

Barpeta *Satra* is the earliest and most influential *Satra* of *Mahapurushiya* sect (Sarma 1999, 177) as well as the chief monasteries of Assam (Neog 1965 reprint 2008, 137) which was established by Madhavadeva the chief disciple and apostle of Sankaradeva with proper help to Mathuradas Burha Ata (one of the chief followers of Madhavadeva and the first *Satradhikar* of Barpeta *Satra*) in 1504 *Sakaabda* (Pathak 1959 reprint 2006, 12). The people of Barpeta live in different *Hatis*, are closely related with the *Satra* and the *Satra* plays some important role among the people. So it is intended to study some roles of Barpeta *Satra* in the spread of art and culture.

Review of Literature

Many studies have been made by different scholars on *Satra* institution. Most of the studies mainly focus on neo- *Vaisnavite* movement and the *Satra* institution in Assam and Barpeta also. Thus this topic is one of the most important topics in the literature of social science.

“The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and *Satra* Institution of Assam” (1999) by S.N. Sarma is an attempt at systematic study of *Satra* institution. “Cultural Heritage of Assam” (2004) by Maheswar Neog is the collection of a few important studies in Assamese culture by Dr. M. Neog which deals with various aspects of the society, culture and religion of Assam. Another important book is “Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankaradeva and His Times, (reprint 2008) by Maheswar Neog. This work gives a detailed account of Sankaradeva with his background and a resume and appraisal of his work. In this compact volume is presented almost all that we need to know about the Hindu culture of Assam as it expressed itself through *Vaisnavism* and the *Eka-Saraniya* faith which may be described as Assam’s expression of the mediaeval pan Indian *Bhakti* movement. In this work Dr. Neog did not miss anything that is apropos to the study of Sankaradeva. He has treated all aspects of the subject in his twelve chapters. “*Satra* Society and Culture, Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garmur *Satra*” (2012) by Dambarudhar Nath mainly deals with the *Bhakti* movement and the *Satra* institution, its

origin and evolution, historical retrospective of Garmur *Satra* and state, Pitambardeva Goswami and social reforms, cultural activities, administration and economy of Assam. The significance of this work lies in that it is a rational and analytical work and based on modern historical methodology. “*Barpeta Satrar Itihas*” (1959 reprint 2006) By Gokul Pathak dealt with the varied religious-cultural activities of the people in relation to the *Satra*.

Area of the Study

Barpeta *Satra* is one of the chief monasteries of Assam, which was established by Madhavadeva the chief apostle of Sankaradeva in the later part of the sixteenth century (1570-1590) (Pathak, 1959 rprnt 2006: 12). Barpeta *Satra* is situated at a distance of about 100 km. to the north-west of Guwahati city. Barpeta is the head quarter town of the district of the same name.

Objectives

The objective that has been formulated for the study is to know about the role of *Satra* institution in the spread of art and culture. The study also tries to know the role of Barpeta *Satra* in the spread of art and culture.

Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of information. For the collection of primary data, I have applied field study method on a self-prepared questionnaire, personal interview and observation as well as participant observation method to collect information on the studied problem. Secondary data consisted of relevant books and articles etc.

Role of Barpeta Satra in the spread of Art and culture

Barpeta *Satra* is the earliest and most influential *Satra* of *Mahapurushiya* sect (Sarma 1999, 177) as well as the chief monasteries of Assam (Neog 1965 reprint 2008, 137) which was established by Madhavadeva the chief disciple and apostle of Sankaradeva with proper help to Mathuradas Burha Ata (one of the chief followers of Madhavadeva and the first *Satradhikar* of Barpeta *Satra*) in 1504 *Sakaabda* (Pathak 1959 reprint 2006, 12). Barpeta *Satra* is situated at a place which is also well known center of communication and business. The *Satra* is well planned. The *Kirtanghar* of the *Satra* is also known for its magnificent construction and design. Originally a *Satra* based community; Barpeta emerged as dwelling place of non-peasant community in course of time. Due to the geographical condition of the place, the people of Barpeta have taken to petty business instead of agriculture (Goswami 1990 in B. Choudhury and A. Srivastava 1990, 74). As

the *Satra* institution itself is taken up for study, its ramification on the social organization and cultural life of the township is also covered to a very considerable extent.

At Barpeta *Satra*, Mathuradas Burha Ata regularized and systematized the daily prayer service into fourteen times a day. He delegated different functions in connection with the religious to different trained persons. The system introduced by Burha Ata has continued till date (Nath 2001, 21). Most of the performing art forms of India including Assam are evolved out of religious institutions. The *Satra* has been working as a center of various art forms, such as Literature, Drama, Song and Dance, Craft and Painting etc. At Barpeta *Satra* also such programmes are held. The social context of these art forms cannot be ignored as the performing arts certainly emerged out of men and society.

Literature

There was the efflorescence of a great literature in the wake of the Sankaradeva movement of Assam. Sankara and Madhava themselves composed a good number of songs, dramas, verse narratives and other types of literature, wherein they expounded and elaborated the teachings of the faith they sought to propagate (Nath 1988, 308). “A host of poets, writers and scholars like- Ananta Kandali, Rama Saraswati, Vaikunthanatha Kaviratna, Sridhara Kandali, Gopaladeva, Ramacarana Tahkura, Daityari Thakura, Gopalacarana Dvija flocked under the banner of *Bhakti* and formed into a vigorous literary movement” (Neog 2004, 134). It was the age of one ideal, that of *Bhakti* of one God, Vishnu-Krishna; of one leadership, that of Sankaradeva; of one book the *Bhagavata Purana* (Neog 1965 reprint 2008, 107). The *Vaisnava* writer’s adherence to the sanction of scriptural authority amounted to a limitation upon their creative ability and a curb upon their poetic genius. Non- the-less, the literacy output of Sankara and Madhava alone is considerable, and is characterized by a rare power of reading the spirit of the original fights of creative imagination. Their literary works acted as the chief machinery of propaganda of the faith and afforded both enlighten and pleasure of the people (Neog 2004, 134-135). Sankaradeva translated in simple verse of the whole of the first, second, eleventh and twelfth books and portion of the third, sixth, eighth and tenth books of the *Bhagavata* into the spoken dialect of local people (Baruah 2009, 260).

In Sankaradeva’s early works, *Harischandra Upakhyana* and *Rukmini Harana* (Neog ed. 1987, 173), Sankaradeva exhibit the same narrative zeal as was evident in the preceding period of Assamese poetry. Each of the 25 sections of the *Kirtana Ghosha*, the most popular and important of Sankaradeva’s works, contains several *Kirtana* songs with refrains, goes to relate a story or expound a subject. *Gunamala*, a tiny work of six *Kirtanas* of jingling verses, is a remarkable feat of mental speed and brevity of expression (Neog ed 1987, 173).

Sankaradeva composed 34 songs, later known as *Bargeeta*, Madhavadeva complementing them with 157 (Neog ed. 1980, 173) of his composition. Sankaradeva's songs sing of the futility of human efforts and urge upon listeners the need for *Bhakti*, some of them are prayer songs, pure and simple and didactic verses. Madhava's songs breathe an open air atmosphere and excel in the description of Krishna's child life and the bringing out of the eternal mother in Yoshoda (Neog 2004, 135-136). Both of them wrote a number of songs called *Bhatima* (panegyrics) in praise of the worshipful Lord. The dramas of both are a type by themselves and do not follow any model like Sanskrit, Prakrit or otherwise (Neog, 2004: 136). The dramas are in an artificial literary dialect, used in the *Bargeeta* and *Bhatima* also, later called as *Brajawali Bhasa* or *Brajabuli Bhasa* (Kakati 1971, 70) and this has a queer mixture of Assamese, Maithili, Hindi and other elements.

Drama

The *Bhaonas* and the dramatic shows with mythological themes that are enacted in the *Satra* compound depict stories showing the success of goodness over the evil. "The *Bhaona* or neo-*Vaisnava* form of dramas owes its origin to the unique genera of plays evolved by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, which they themselves had called *Nata*, *Yatra* or *Anka*, and which later on came to be designated as *Ankiya Nata*" (Barpujari 1994, 419). This art form became increasingly popular with the progress of time. Dramas written by Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and other *Vaisnava* saints were enacted in various *Satras*. The dramas are a type by themselves and there are no act or scene divisions within a play. The *Sutradhara's* role originally taken from the classical Sanskrit drama is the central character, conducting the whole action with songs, dances and narratives and explanatory commentary in prose. Dramas are normally performed at the common prayer hall in the *Satras*. Madhvadeva himself staged drama in open houses called *Rangghar* or *Rangiyalghar* (Neog 1965 reprint 2008, 267). Being religious in character, there is always the role of Krishna or Rama in the Assamese *Vaisnava* dramas. Composition and staging of drama began seriously when Sankaradeva along with apostles came to Barpeta. Sankaradeva composed 4 dramas namely Rukminiharana, Kaliyadamana, Keligopala and Parijatharana (Roychoudhury 2012, 159) Following his example his disciples like Madhavadeva, Mathuradas Burha Ata also composed dramas at Barpeta *Satra*. At Barpeta there is a Rangiyalghar in the *Satra* compound where *Bhaonas* are being performed regularly.

Music and Dance

In Assam Neo-*Vaisnavism* brought in its train a wide culture of music. The *Vaisnava* music in Assam is rich and remarkable for its tone and variety. Among the different forms

of this music, Sankaradeva himself composed a number of devotional songs (Nath ed. 2011, 58). Songs composed by Sankaradeva and Madhvadeva are still sung at Barpeta Satra. The *Bargeetas* are composed in *Brajawali Bhasha* although a good number of them are composed by his disciple Madhavadeva deviate from it (Neog 1965 reprint 2008, 278). The next class of songs is the *Ankar Geet*. These are the songs of dramas (Nath ed. 2011, 59). Another important song which is sung in the *Satras* is *Nama-Kirtana* which is easy for all classes of singers as it is sung in chorus with a leader called *Naam Lagowa*. Being easy this form of music is popular both in the *Satras* and in the villages. *Naama-Kirtana* is accompanied by use of musical instruments like- *Khol*, *Mridanga*, *Nagara* and Cymbal called *Bar Tal*. In the other art forms such as *Ojapali* and *Ghosha-Kirtana*, the names of God are sung in chorus. *Ghosha-Kirtana* is a dance form. There is one *Oja* (main performer) and 18 *Palis* (accomplices). Each of these artists use *Taal* (small cymbal) in their hands. The *Oja* sits at the middle while his *Palis* sit behind him in semi circular position. *Ghosha-Kirtana* may also be performed in standing position with *Mudra* (movement) of hands. *Ghosha-Kirtana* and *Ojapali* are performed in different festivals of Barpeta Satra. *Ojapali*, *Bhaona* etc are important and powerful propaganda of media to direct the attention of the people towards a particular programme. The *Satra* dances mainly center round the *Anka* dramas of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. The *Sutrdhara* (master of the show), the hero that is Rama and Krishna and the women roles, that are the *Vrindavana Gopis*, provide the class types of the dance performance (Neog 2004, 140). Of the various other forms of dances, important ones include- *Gossai prabeshar nach* or *Krishna Bhangi*, *Gopi Prabeshar nach* or *Gopi Bhangi*, *Cali nach*, *Jhumura* or *Nritya Bhangi*, *Ras Nritya*, varieties of dance forma associated with *Bhaonas* etc (Nath ed. 2011, 60). At Barpeta Satra One more dance type is found that is *Bhor Tal Nritya* (group dance with cymbal).

Dances involve the use of various kinds of musical instruments like *Khol*, *Tal*, *Mridanga* etc. *Tals* are of three varieties- big or *Bar Tal*, *Bhor Tal* (cymbal originally imported from Bhutan by Sankaradeva), middle sized- *Pati Tal* and small sized- *Khuti Tal* (Nath ed. 2011, 61). *Khol*, *Mridanga* and *Tals* are used in the performance of various kinds of dance, drama and devotional songs. A very large wooden and skinned drum called *Daba* (kettle drum) is found in every *Satra* and village *Namghar*. It is used in congregational prayer and in the evening as a symbol of announcing the time for prayer. At Barpeta Satra also *Daba* is beaten in the morning and evening also (Raychoudhury ed. 2010, 43). *Nagara* is another type of musical instrument.

Craft and Painting

One of the many forms in which the *Vaisnava* Renaissance of India manifested itself is the art of painting. Like other states in Assam also *Vaisnavism* brought in the practice of illuminating the holy books with small illustrative paintings. Sankaradeva is also believed to have been a painter (Gogoi 1990, 86). On one occasion he is said to have painted on *Tulapat* (ginned cotton paper) scenes of seven 'Vaikunthas'. On another he painted with vermilion and yellow arsenic the picture of an elephant and pasted it on a wooden book-case to be presented to his royal patron, Naranarayana (Neog 2004, 141). He had scenes of Krishna's life in Vrindavana woven with the help of the weavers of Tantikuchi (present Barpeta) into a sheet of cloth of 180 feet long with a caption for each miniature (Gogoi 1990, 117). He prepared this cloth for king Naranarayana (Khan Choudhry 1936 reprint 2008, 101). "The illustrations in a copy of Sankaradeva's rendering of the first half of 10th *Skandha* of the *Bhagavata purana*, found in the Bali *Satra* of the Bardowa group, have been reproduced in print in a recent publication, *Citra Bhagavata*. The original copy bore the date 1461 *Saka*/1539 A.D. which seems to be too early; the work may suitably date from the late 17th century" (Neog 2004, 141). It is evident that these paintings were done in some *Satras*, most probably into Bali *Satra*, where the original manuscript was preserved (Neog 1949, 50). In some *Satras* are to be seen mural paintings and wood carvings of some beauty and with folk-art elements in them. Barpeta *Satra Kirtanghars*, which has now been demolished, was decorated with many finely engraved and painted wooden panels, depicting scenes from religious texts (Pathak 1959 reprint 2006, 135). Barpeta *Satra* also shows the art of ivory carving. Paintings also are provided on wooden posts and post plates, book rests, raised trays used for the purpose of making offerings (*Sarai*), and pleasure boat (Sarma 1995, 277).

Conclusion

The neo-*Vaisnavite* religion initiated by Sankaradeva has contributed immensely to the formation and development of the Assamese society and its culture. The complex philosophical ideas of the religious scriptures which the common un-lettered people cannot understand have been made simple and comprehensible through his writings. As a corollary to his religious mission of spreading *Vaisnavism*, he developed mass communication media like- drama, dance, song and painting which were gladly accepted by the people. As a result common people were attracted to his religion. In this way he built up the *Vaisnavite* religion on a solid foundation. The *Vaisnavite* movement gives a new lease of life to Assamese society and its culture. These types of art forms are practiced in most of the *Satras* of Assam. Barpeta *Satra* with the performances of these art forms contributes immensely in enriching the social cohesion and social integration.

References

- Barua, K.L. 2009. *Early History of Kamrupa*. Guwahati: Bani Mandir.
- Gait, E. 2010. *A History of Assam*. Guwahati: Bani Mandir.
- Gogoi, L. 1990. *Asomar Sanskriti*. Guwahati: Bina Library.
- Goswami, A. 1990. *Barpeta Saharar Artha-Samajik Rupantar: Ekti Samikhya*.
- Kakati, B.K. 1971. *Assamese its formation and development*. Guwahati.
- Khan, A.A. 2008. *Koch Bihar Itihas*. Kolkata: Modern Book Agency Private Limited.
- Nath, D. 2011. *The Satra Institution- Forms, Life and Culture: Understanding Medieval Vaisnava Traditions of Assam in Religion and Society in North East India*, ed. D. Nath 37-83. Guwahati: DVS Publishers.
- Nath, D. 1988. *Asomar Buranji*. Guwahati: Student's Stores.
- Nath, U. 2001. *Barpetar Sanskritik Buranji*. Guwahati: Bina Library.
- Neog, M. 2004. *Cultural Heritage of Assam*. Guwahati: Omsons publication.
- 1965, reprint 2008. *Early History of The Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankaradeva and His Times*. Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall.
- Neog, Dimbeswar. 1949. *Mahapurushiaism- A Universal Religion*. Jorhat.
- Nath, D. 2012. *Satra Society and Culture Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garmur Satra*, Guwahati: DVS publishers.
- Pathak, G. 1959, reprint 2006. *Barpeta Satrar Itihas*. Barpeta: Amar Desh prakashan
- Raychoudhury, B. (2012), *Barletta Satraar Itibritta*. Guwahati: Rekha Prakashan.
- Sarma, S.N. 1999. *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and Satra Institution in Assam*. Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall.
- Sarma, S.N. 1994. Vaisnavism. In *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, ed. H.K. Barpujari 3: 229-239. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
- Sarma, M.M. 1990. Religion. In *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, ed. H.K. Barpujari 1: 302-345. Guwahati: Publication Board Assam.
- Sarma, N. 1995. *Asomiya Loka Sanskritir Abhash*. Guwahati: Baniprakash.
- Sribastab, A. (ed) 1990. *Madhab Choudhury Mahabidyalay Xonali Jayanti Smritigrantha 1990*, 74-81. Guwahati: Bani Prakash.