

Monasticism in Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam: Transition in Life and Ideology

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Abstract: *Development of religion in society is a result of the historical process of the evolution of society. Historical study of religion testifies the fact that religion from its inception gets diluted in different ways to create different dimensions, different methods of worship and practices. Transition in religious belief is essentially a subject for a historian to study to draw a clear and holistic picture of society and religion in society as well. Monasticism in Neo-Vaishnavism, a reform sect of Assam is also witnessed changes in terms of life and ideology in due course of time. This transition was a result of the impact of facilities brought by modern age where celibate disciples prefer to adopt material and worldly pursuits.*

Key words: *Neo-Vaishnavism, Satra Institution, Monasticism, Transition, Life and Ideology.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Monasticism is a religious way of life in which the devotee renounces worldly pursuits to devote himself completely to the spiritual work. Monastic way of life is familiar to many Christian Churches especially in the Catholic and orthodox traditions and also to Buddhism, while exists in Hinduism and Jainism also. But monasticism in Hinduism is not popularly accepted way of attaining absolute religious goal as like that of the Buddhism. In Vaishnavism also, monasticism is not encouraged and practiced in its fundamental codes. Monasticism in Vaishnavism, according to some scholars like Romila Thapar, Peter Hervey, started in the 11th to 12th centuries A.D. when the Bairagi Movement first adopted it. In Neo-Vaishnavism, the most influential reform sect of medieval Assam, monastic way of religious life became a customary practice among a section of its followers. Monasticism developed in Neo-Vaishnavism after the development of its institutional outfit-the *Satra* institution. Monasticism is followed only in a few *Satras* of Assam for which these *Satras* are known as monastic *Satra*. Monasticism in Assam Vaishnavism got institutionalized from when Madhavdeva, the immediate follower of Sankardeva, the founder of the reform sect adopted it. The long standing ideas and customs of monastic *Satras* gradually lost its popularity and growth of its follower showed a decreasing trend. This paper is an attempt to analyze the tradition of monasticism and how and why monasticism in the *Satras* of Assam lost its popularity.

2. SATRA INSTITUTION:

Satra is the institutional outfit of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. Sankardeva, the greatest socio-religious reformer of Assam started the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in the later part of the 15th century with a view to create an 'egalitarian society' where people of all caste and creed stand in equal footing. *Satra* is a socio-religious and cultural institution uncommon to the people of other parts of the country. The word *Satra* is a corrupt from the Sanskrit word *Sattra*. In Sanskrit literature the word has been used in two senses, firstly, in the sense of an alms-house and secondly, in the sense of a sacrifice lasting from a few days to a year or more. In Assam, the *Satra* institution bears the features of an alms house where disciples of Neo-Vaishnavism gathered for listening and hearing the name of God.

During the Vedic age the term *Satra* is used to mean the sacrificial house along with the time factor of the sacrifice. In later age, during the time of the development of '*Pancharatta dharma*' and in the time of Upanishad, the term is used to mean the cultural centre where importance is given in knowledge and *bhakti* or devotion. It is not known for certain when did the term '*Satra*' first became used in Assam for any purpose. It has been pointed out that there were *Satras* in the early kingdom of Kamarupa in the pre-Ahom time patronized by the kings of pala dynasty and people by the Tantrika-Buddhist monks. As known from extant epigraphic record, such a *Satra* with residential houses for the monks was at Guwahati itself maintained by King Samudrapala, one of the later Pala Kings of Kamarupa. Anantakandali, a contemporary of Sankardeva, has stated that his father Ratna Pathak had founded a *satra*. Similarly, Bhusan Dvija, one of the earliest biographers of Sankardeva, mentioned a *satra-grihas* where the saint used to hold religious discussion. Sankardeva maintained that tradition; and with the addition of his own innovations started the institution in its very embryonic form at Bardowa, his own place, itself, here he first started preaching. The full-fledged *Satra* as an institution as it is seen today developed at the hands of Damodardeva who built *Satra* at Patbausi and Madhavdeva, who built *Satra* at Barpeta. In Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism the word *Satra* is used to mean what *Pancharatta dharma*, and the Upanishads meant-to propagate spiritualistic knowledge and

devotional attitude. In Assam Vaishnavism, we understand by the word *Satra* as an assembly where religious discussions were held among the devotees and which were away from busy life. It may be recalled that in Sankardeva's days the daily sittings of the monks and such lay disciples, as used to attend them, were held in the open or under the shade of trees. Such meetings, independent of any construction whatsoever, probably formed the nucleus of a *Sankarite satra* with the '*Kirtan-ghar*' and the residence of the superior and the monks only came to be associated inseparably with the notion of *Satra*.

3. MONASTICISM IN SATRA

Satras are generally two types-monastic and non-monastic or house holding *Satras*. The division is made on the basis of celibacy of *Satradhikars* (head of *Satra*) and *bhakatas* (disciple). Monastic *Satras* are those *Satras* which has its celibate inmates (*kewalia* or *udasin bhakatas*) and the celibate pontiff (*udasin adhikar*). House-holding *Satras* are known as *grihasthi*, *grihi* or *ashrami Satra*, which has its house-holding inmates (*vishayee* or *grihasthi* or *asrami bhakatas*) and house-holding pontiff (*grihasthi* or *vishyee adhikar*). At present twelve *Satras* including Auniati, Dakhinpat and Kamalabari belong to the monastic type of *satras*, which being the ideal representative of the kind, are the most well-known and influential in the society.

It is interesting to note that Sankardeva, the founder of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam neither adopted nor in favour of celibacy as a way of religious life. The immediate successor of Sankardeva was Madhavdeva remained celibate in his life. The crucial point is that Madhavdeva, even remarked that celibacy was too difficult for an ordinary person to pursue. And also Madhavdeva advised that "Nobody amongst you should renounce the world or *grihasrama*, if you seriously desire to render *bhakti* to *Hari*. Do not dare to adopt celibacy taking me as your ideal." Instead of this, celibacy became a customary practice in a number of *Satras* placing Madhaveda as an ideal, and monastic way of life emerged in some *Satras* of Assam where both pontiff and the disciples remained celibate and avoided worldly pursuits. S. N. Sarma, the renowned vaishnavite scholar concluded that the ideal set by them and the advantages inherent in celibacy over married life helped celibacy to have a firm footing in Assamese Vaishnavism, though the number of Vaisnavas adhering to this (way) of life is fewer than those married."

The abolition of celibacy in the second decade of 20th century, however, converted the Garamur *Satra* into a semi-monastic *satra* or quasi-monastic *Satra* where the inmates are married, but the preceptor is a celibate. Thus, Garamur *Satra* may be said to have formed by itself a still different kind of a *Satra* system. In this regard, a comparison with the Barpeta *Satra* is often comes in. But Barpeta is a mixed *Satra* with both married and celibate inmates. The system of the *Satra*, however, is not based on the *Sanghati* system, although there is no celibate *satra* in the Kala *sanghati* order.

The interesting point to be noted is that Concerning marriage or celibacy there is no general rule within the *Satra* institution. In regard to marriage or celibacy enjoined upon the Superiors or clerics of the *Satras*, and different conventions grew up with different groups of *Satras*, or individual *Satras*. Anyway, the monastic ideal seems to have been greatly venerated, and it probably took a good range of time to overthrow it completely and make a *Sattra* where the Superiors and the clerics were all married men." Thus, it is not compulsory for an inmate that he would not come out from celibacy life; he can if he desires so. But for that he has to leave the *Satra* and return home.

3.1 Physical Description of Monastic Satra

In a monastic *Satra*, in order to enter the inner campus of the *Satra*, one has to go through a long entrance road marked by its gateway called *karapat* or *batchora* (gateway). Beyond the gateway is seen the establishment enclosure of the *Satra* situated in a quadrangle, having the residential quarters (*baha*) of the celibate devotees all around in four lines (*hati*), and that of the pontiff in the midst, by the side of the large prayer hall called *namghar* or *Kirtan ghar*. Attached to the *namghar* is the sanctum-sanctorum called *manikut* that contains the Bhagavata in manuscript form and the image of Lord Krishna. The pontiff called *adhikar* or *Satradhikar* is the head of the *Satra*. Normally, every *Satradhikar* has one junior called *deka* or *deka-adhikar* (Young Pontiff), who is the heir apparent to the religious head and who helps the *Satradhikar* in his functioning. But from when this tradition of two heads (senior and junior) came into being in the *Satra* system is not known. Probably, the creation of the office of *deka-adhikar* was to maintain a genealogical connection between the *adhikar* and his *deka*, so that the *deka* could perform and nunnery ritual and rites after his death. Haliram Dhekial Phukan has stated that the *adhikar* created the office of the *deka-adhikar* in order to make him *adhikar* after his death. As per existing procedure, the *deka* or junior *adhikar* is trained for the headship mentally, physically and culturally during his apprenticeship; and when the *Satradhikar* dies, he is installed ceremonially to the religious throne through performance of ceremony called *abhishek* (coronation).

3.2 Pontiff, Devotee of Monastic Satra

In the monastic *Satra* both pontiff and residential devotees are celibate person. The pontiff always belongs to either to the Brahman or the Kayastha community. The high caste affiliation of the Pontiff is maintained in the *Satra* and they remained and behaved like that. How is the life of the celibate pontiff and residential devotees in and out of

the *Satra* is important to understand monasticism in *Satras* of Assam. The pontiff is supposed to maintain a good health and an attractive personality. Besides he is to be well versed in the Sanskrit language and literature and cultivate moral values ordained by the scripture. It is his duty to maintain and protect the rules as enunciated in the *smriti* and the *dharma sastras* for the well being of the *satra* and the society. Life-style of inmates were governed by certain codes of conduct, such as living on bare income earned from begging, not earning more than what was necessary to maintain one's life and wearing simple dress. They were busy in the pursuit of culture and learning, traditional literature and language, art and culture.

In all monastic *satra*, the devotees are called *bhakat*, or more specifically *kewalia bhakat* (celibate disciple), live in a small house consisting of one or two rooms called *baha*, cloistered in a row of such houses called *hati*. Celibate devotees are recruited in their early years (5-10 years of age) by elderly celibate *bhakats* and under guidance and supervision of the latter they remain as apprentices for a few years. They generally come from the families of the *sishtyas* of the *satra*. The Sibsagar District Gazetteer of 1905 has recorded about Garamur *Satras* follows-

In a square round the garden stand the lines of huts in which the resident monks live. They consist of well-built rows of rooms which are much more spacious than those ordinarily occupied by village folks and are kept scrupulously clean. The whole atmosphere is singularly gracious and pleasing. Everything is fresh, neat and well to do....The children are recruited from the villages and trained to be devotees.

The celibate devotees who are different age group ranging from very young to old age live within a *boha* like one family. Though they have no blood relation, shared a common house with love and affection to each other and respect to the elders. The head of the *bhakats* called *Burha bhakat* and younger one called *aldhara*. For the promotion of *Satriya* culture, the *bhakats* have to become experts in music, dance and drama. It is interesting to note here that according to a filed study done in 2010 the total number of *bhakats* is 822 and the total number of *boha* is 307. The life style of the inmates in these is very simple. They normally wear white *dhoti* and *cheleng* (traditional dress) and when they go out of the *Satra*, they wear *dhoti*, *cheleng* and *kurta*. The life style of the inmates can be compared with Buddhist monk in many cases. But it is interesting to that there exists vast difference between celibate inmates and the celibate Pontiff in the monastic *Satras* of Assam. As we have already mentioned that along with high caste affiliation of the pontiff, they have also maintained class superiority. A *Satradhikar* is distinguished by his own dress, including the head-dress called *pag*, a style which his class imitated from Ahom King who had established them as their preceptor, or the Buddhist monks whose dress was marked by such *pag*. In the past, he felt or considered himself as god, and would never put his feet on the ground, and in the past used to travel on artistically designed boats, or on elephant, or borne by human carries called *dola* (palanquin). But this tradition of travelling with *dola* was abolished by Pitambardeva Goswami in the first quarter of 20th century. Both mentally and physically they formed a certain class of people quite distinguished from others in their dress and behavior.

4. TRANSITION IN MONASTICISM-CAUSES AND NATURE:

With the establishment of British rule in Assam in 1826, the socio-political scenario of Assam underwent tremendous changes. These changes even touched the *Satra* institution in many ways. The desire for material life and pleasure among the pontiff and the inmates began to grow. The inmates adapted to eating fish and eat of deer and goat and any commoner indulged in trade and business. In his letters to Hemchandra Goswami, *Satradhikar* of Auniati *Satra* written in 1912 Pitambardeva Gswami, *Satradhikar* of Garamur *Satra* while proposing to marry and abolish the celibacy from his *Satra*, wrote that "at the name of being *udasin* (celibate), monks of the *Satras* were engaged in illegal sexual relationship etc. Had this way of their activities been known to Government (or gone to judicial process), a few jails would have been filled up with such celibates..."

The monastic way of life lost its popularity in the *Satras* in the present days is proved while analyzing the growth of celibate disciples in monastic *Satras*.

Table-1:

Sl. no	Name of the <i>Satra</i>	Year-2000	Year-2010	Number of Inmates
1	Auniati	400	300	-70
2	Natun Kamalabari	200	165	-35
3	Dakhinpat	83	80	-3
4	Uttar Kamalabari	75	75	+0
5	Bhogpur	82	63	-19
6	Kamabaris	51	45	-6
7	Dhuhat Belguri	21	20	-1
8	Badula	10	15	+5
9	Madhya Majuli	15	15	+0

10	Jorabari	10	8	-2
11	Iswar Hati	5	4	-1
12	Jinkata Rajahua	3	2	-1

In the twentieth century monastic *Satra* had to face a lot of changes both in the internal and external aspects caused by various internal and external elements. The decision of abolishing celibacy as a way life from the Garamur *Satra* by Pitambardeva Goswami in 1915 can be considered as a setback to this tradition. Pitambardeva Goswami, the *Satradhikar* of the Garamur *Satra* forwarded some relevant cause behind his decision of abolishing celibacy. The *Satradhikar* said that though the Garamur *Satra* has been a monastic *Satra* since inception, the nature of the inmates has convinced him that they should be allowed to married life. The activities of the *Satra* may be carried on even by these married inmates. Those who have a desire and have age to marry, they may go for marriage. Although Garamur and the other principal *Satras* are found on the ideals of monasticism, in course of time, both the inmates and the Pontiff have become worldlier. As a result, the name *udasin* to mean the system of the *Satra* had a misnomer. For, *udasin* means one who is detached from, above all desires of married life, and fully devoted to spirituality and religious thought. But now the inmates and the pontiff act in opposition to what *udasin* really means. They were busy with material life and making property. They are more interest in such matters then even the family holders. Among the worldly possessions they are lacking in are only their wives. Moreover, there is no need of hundreds of inmates to carry on the daily and occasional agenda of the *Satra*; thirty to forty inmates, and even less than that, may be sufficient for doing such works. Thinking in this way, Pitambardeva Goswami invited all the inmates of the *Satra* on 13th March, 1915, and told them that any inmate having age for marriage, or who have attained the marriageable age, may marry.

The number of celibate *bhakats* decreased day by day. Various factors affected their life style which caused gradual detachment towards the celibacy way of life. No economically able parents today would like to send their sons to a life of celibacy. In 2005, when investigated it was found that of the 43 residing inmates of Dakhinpat *Satra* there was none whose parents could provide for education of their children. As a matter of fact, most celibate inmates are from poorer section of the society who had little scope for adopting vacations based on economic affluence of his family. In case of the Auniati *Satra*, which had about 350 inmates in the year 2005, almost 99 percent of them were found to have come from poor families. The devotees have to lead a very simple life and the life of inmates in comparison to the *Satradhikars* is depressed because of limited resources.

The facilities like education and enjoyment, information technology and all other modern developments and thinking provided by modern age have changed the socio-psychological environment of the *Satra* not remained untouched the inmates also. Most of the inmates now who have education and created a source of earning while staying at *Satra*, like employment in a private or a public sector were found to have left the *satra* and the life of celibacy in favour of having a married life. The cause of their leaving the *Satra* may be considered as a kind of escapism from poverty and deprivation. In fact, the inmates gradually found no cause of attraction in the *Satra* atmosphere for which there create spontaneous feeling for leaving the *Satra*.

5. CONCLUSION:

It can be concluded that monasticism is a unique feature of the *Satra* institution of Assam. Monastic *Satras* of Assam are unique both from the structural and philosophical point of view. But monasticism in Assam Vaishnavism gradually lost its popularity due to entry of modern way of life and thinking. It is often seen that while celibate Pontiff of the monastic *Satras* enjoys name, fame and reputation and disciples scattered all over the State considered them as their religious *guru*, the celibate residential inmates do not get anything being scarifying their lives. The twentieth century can particularly be said as a period of decadence for the monasticism in the *Satras* of Assam and now it exists like a system and a tradition.

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