

NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA, MAJULI: A STUDY OF ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE

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Abstract: *Sattra is universally a religious institution which signifies the Neo-Vaishnavite monasteries in Assam. These are the institutions which were sophisticatedly established by Saint Sankardeva and his disciple Saint Madhavdeva that played a vital role to mould the religious and cultural heritage of the Assam vis-a-vis Northeast India since the 15th century (Vidhya, R.K, 2014). The Natun Kamalabari Sattra of 1936 is one of the popular Sattra in Majuli known as Na-Sattra as an independent Sattra having a marginal relationship with former Kamalabari Sattra of Majuli. The Natun Kamalabari Sattra is a centre of cultural and religious activities of Majuli where bhakats (devotees) of the Sattra as well as the people of nearby villages work together. Except the daily religious activities they also celebrate other socio-cultural festivals and functions in the Sattra. The annual agenda of the Sattra includes various types of celebrations like religious and secular festivals, ceremonies connected with birth and death anniversaries of the earlier Gurus namely Shri Shri Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva, the Ata purushs, and the Sattradhikars (Chief of the Sattra) by means of devotional programmes including Dol Yatra and Rass Purnima with splendid and full of merriment.*

Key Words: *Socio cultural life, Natun Kamalabari Sattra, Majuli, Assam.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Sattra or *Namghar* signifies the Neo-Vaishnavite monasteries in Assam. Majuli is the largest river island of the world which was one of the nerve centres of the Neo Vaishnavite movement during its key days. Being the land of *Sattras*, most of its beliefs, customs, functions and festivals are governed by the *Sattras*. Even a secular festival like *bihu* is not out of the influence of a religious tone (Nath. D, 2009). There are more than 32 *Sattras* in Majuli (Medhi, D. 2008). Natun Kamalabari Sattra is one of them, known as *Na-Sattra* by the people of Majuli. It was established in Kamalabari, Majuli in 1936 holding the same tradition and heritage of original Kamalabari Sattra established by Badula Ata in 1673 (Mahanta, S, 2011).

There are five Kamalabari *Sattras* at present. The original Kamalabari Sattra is now situated at Titabar of Jorhat District, Assam, which was shifted to this place from Majuli in 1975 because of erosion in the *Sattra* by the river Brahmaputra. In the mean time the *Sattra* had proliferated creating two of its branches- the Natun Kamalabari Sattra and the Uttar Kamalabari Sattra. And other two divisions are Madhya Kamalabari Sattra and Kharjan Grihasti Sattra. All these four branches are situated in Majuli. All these *Sattras* are known for their cleanliness and also for performing arts of music, dance and drama composed by Shri Shri Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva.

In the *Sattra* there is no idol. *Guru asana* (seat of Guru) is kept in the sanctum represents the deity. It is the centre of cultural and religious activities. Except the daily religious activities, other socio- cultural festivals and functions are also celebrated in the *Sattra*. The annual agenda of the *Sattra* includes various types of celebrations like religious and secular festivals, ceremonies connected with birth and death anniversaries of the earlier *Gurus* (propounder) namely Shri Shri Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva, the Ata purushs (main disciples of Shri Shri Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva), and the *Sattradhikars* and special devotional programmes and fasting.

2. METHODOLOGY:

The empirical data for the present study was collected through observation and by interviewing the *Sattradhikar* and many other celibates and also the devotees of the *Sattra*. The secondary materials have been collected from various books and available writings in journals, books *etc.*

3. THE DAILY RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES PERFORMED IN THE NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA:

The regular religious activity of the Natun Kamalabari Sattra is consisting of 14 types of prayers known as *chadhya prasang* which is divided into three *prasangs*- *pua prasang* (prayer at morning), *bioli prasang* (prayer at evening) and *ratir prasang* (prayer at night).

The first *prasang* called *puar prasang*, starts very early in the morning. It consists of seven agenda.

The *puar prasang* is started with the singing of morning songs called *puar geets* with clap of hands by the celibates. After that they sing a *bhatima* (a kind of prayer song) which describes how mother Yasoda used to wake up Lord Krishna. It is followed by singing of an *upadesh* (a kind of prayer song) and the reciting of a prayer very politely to invite Lord Krishna which is called *Krishna daka* (calling Lord Krishna).

After completing of singing and prayers, a celibate called *pathok* (reader) reads some holy books. They first read few chapters from Namghosa Kulupya Ghosa. After that the celibate recites any two *kirttans* (prayer songs) from Kirttan Ghosa and a *ghosa* (prayer) and then all the celibates give *Joydhoni* (saying in chorus the glory of the names of Lord Krishna). The next agenda is the reading of any two holy books from- Janmorahashya, Prothom skandho, Ditiya skandho, Anadipaton, Ajamil uponakhyan (sastha skandha), Amrit mathon boli solan (astam skandha), Adhya skandho (dasam skandha), Rukmini haran, Rajokhuya, Kurushetrya, Niminobosidhya sangbad, ekadesh skandha, Dadash skandha, Bhokotipradip, Bhakti ratnakar, and Nam malika.

The last agenda of this session is the reading of the *Charit puthis* (Biography) of the two *gurus*- Shri Shri Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva by a *burha bhakat* (eldest celibate).

The *bioli prasang* is started in the afternoon. It comprises of four agenda. In the first agenda a celibate reads different *pad puthis* (holy book), divided into two sessions, *aag patha* (beginning) and *sesh path* (ending).

The books, recited in the *aag path* are- Jonmo rahashya, Pratham skandha, Dritaya skandha, Anadipaton, Sasta skandha (ajamil upanakhyan), Astam skandha (amrit mathon and boli solan), Dasham skandha (adhya), Rukmini saran, Rajkhuyo, Kurushetra (dasam), Niminobosidhya sangbad, Ekadakh skandha, Dadash skandha, Bhokoti pradeep, Ratnaboli, Ratnakar, Nam malika, and Kirtan ghusha, and in the *sesh path* he reads the holy books like- Nam ghosa, Bhakti ratnaboli, Borgeet, Kotha sutra, Bhatima, Gunomala, Upadesh.

After that a celibate recites *Kulupiya ghosa* (prayer) and *Upadesh* (prayer), and the *Charit puthi* (biography) of Badula Ata is recited by a *burha bhakat* (eldest celibate).

The last session *i.e.* in the night is called *ratir prasang*. This session is started with the recitation of *bhatimas* (prayer) like *guru bhatima*, *leela bhatima*, *deva bhatima* and *totoya* by the small celibates of the *Sattras*. It is followed by singing of two *borgeets* (holy songs composed by Shri Shri Sankardeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva) called *seva kirttan* with *khols* (a kind of drum) and *taals* (cymbals) performed by *gayan-bayan* (a kind of Sattriya dance and music performance).

The last agenda of the *ratir prasang* as well as the *chadhya prasang* is the reading of some passages from Dasam skandha composed by Shri Shri Sankardeva.

4. RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR FESTIVALS CELEBRATED IN THE NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA:

4.1. JANMASTAMI:

Janmastami or the birthday of Lord Krishna is celebrated with great festivity in all the *Sattras* and villages of Majuli. Some *Sattras* perform it for two days, while in some others it is performed for one day (Nath. D. 2009). In Natun Kamalabari Sattra it is celebrated for one day. On the 8th day of the dark fortnight of the month of *Bhadra* (August-September) *Janmastami* is celebrated. On that day early in the morning the prayer '*dino doyakhul debo damodar, damodor damodar dev damodor*' is recited by all the celibates. They offer *poka mythoi* (a kind of sweet ball made of fried rice flour) and *noivedya* (offerings consist of fruits mug pulse, chickpea, ginger, etc) in front of *Guru asana*. After *nitya prasang* or completing daily religious activities, *bhaona* (Sattriya drama) is performed at the evening. Three *kirttans* from *Sisuleela* (stories of Lord Krishnas Childhood) is also included in the *Chadhya prasang* of that day. Celibates observe fasting and will not go to the field for agricultural activities on that day. At night the Sattriya drama called '*janma yatra*' is performed. They also perform the drama in Assamese depicting the birth stories of Lord Krishna.

4.2. RASS PURNIMA:

In the Assamese month of *Kati* or *Aghun* (October-November) on the full moon day the *Rass* festival is performed. Lord Krishna's play with the *Gopis* (femal followers of Lord Krishna) including Radha forms the kernel of the *rass leela*. The *rass leela* is the epitome of *bhakti* (devotion). It symbolizes the merger of the soul with God- *atma* with *param atma*, through the merger of the *gopis* with Krishna (Goswami, N.C, 2006). In the morning on that day *nam prasanga* (prayer services) is held. In the *nam prasang* they recite *kulupiya ghosa* '*Dino doyakhil dev damodor Hari damodor*' and then the *pathok* (reader) recites three *kirttans* of the chapter of *Raskriya* from Kirttan ghosa. Bhagawata and *Charits* are also recited. And in the evening they perform *Rass yatra*, where they perform *bhaona* at the *Kirttan ghar* (prayer hall). It is celebrated for two days in the *Sattras*.

4.3. PHALGUTSAV:

In the full moon day of Assamese month *Phaguna* (February-March) and *Chaitra* (March-April) *phalgu ustav* (festival of colours) is performed. Mythical in origin, it has been stated that Lord Krishna played the game of colour at his birth place at Gokula along with the *gopis*. It is celebrated for two days in the *Sattras*. On the previous day of

falgutsav the image of Lord Krishna is placed in the *krittan ghar* and *holigeets* (holi songs) are sung. On the first day in the morning new cloths are offered to the *Guru asana* before *nitya prasang*. Coloured powders called *fakua* with *chandan* are distributed among the celibates for use on forehead. In the evening *holi* songs are sung and *bhaona* is performed. On the next day celibates sing *holi geets* and carrying the image of Lord Krishna organize a procession to the neighbouring villages and people offer betel nut, leaf and money to the God. Young celibates play with colours with each other. After that the image is placed at *manikut* (sanctum). During this festival *borgeets* of Shri Shri Sankerdeva and Shri Shri Madhavdeva are sung by the celibates. Along with these *borgeets* the songs composed by the former *Sattradhikar* of Kamalabari Sattrā, Late Chandra Kanta Goswami are also sung.

4.4. BOHAG BIHU:

Bohag Bihu is celebrated from the last day of the Assamese month of *Chaitra* (March-April). The first day is called *Uruka*, the second day is called *Goru Bihu*, the third day is called *Manuh Bihu* and the last day is celebrated as *Sera Bihu* in the *Sattrā*. On the *Goru Bihu* the celibates bath their cows in the nearby Tuni river with turmeric and one kind of pulse (locally called *matimah*) and then they are fed with pieces of gourd, brinjal, amber etc. The young celibates after taking baths pay homage to the *Sattradhikar* and the senior celibates. Then they do *nam-prasang*, recite *Charit puthis* and play on *khol* and *tal*.

On the day of *Manuh Bihu* they offer new cloths to the *Guru asana* and also to the *Sattradhikar* and *buraha bhakats* (eldest celibates) of the *Sattrā*. After the end of *nam-prasang*, there is a rule of feeding *jolpan* (curd, flat rice, *kumol saul*, *pitha* etc.) to the celibates of the main four *bohas* (household), namely *Guru atoir boha*, *Dakhinkulia Krishna atoir boha*, *Chakrapani atoir boha* and *Bhagawati atoir boha* by the *burha bhakats* of each *boha*. On the previous day of *bihu* there is also a rule of giving *sidha* (contains items of *jolpan*) to the *Sattradhikar*. The day is marked by the performance of some *sattrya* forms of dance, music like *gayan-bayan*, *chalinach*, *ojapali*, *bhaona* at night.

The last day is known as *Sera bihu*. This *bihu* has a great significance to the *Sattrā* as on the day of this *bihu*, *Badula Ata* (the founder of Kamalabari Sattrā) came to upper Assam for the spread of the religion.

4.5. BHOGALI BIHU:

This *bihu* begins from the last day of the Assamese month of *Puha* (December-January). In the *Sattrā* it is celebrated for two days. The first day is known as *uruka* and the next day is known as *bihu*. The young celibates built *meji* (structure with bamboo sticks, hay and wood pieces) and burnt it in the presence of the *Sattradhikar*. After that the young celibates play different games and take the blessings from the senior celibates. They take special foods like different kinds of *pitha* made from rice and coconut prepared by them. There is a belief in the *Sattrā* that on that day they have to eat burnt potatoes, otherwise on the next birth they will be born as pigs (Goswami, N. C. 2006). At noon they all assembled in the *Kirttanghar* and offer new cloths to the *Guru asana*. Then they perform *namprasang*, recite *Bhagawata* and *charitputhis*, and perform *gayan-bayan*.

4.6. KATI BIHU:

It is celebrated on the Assamese month of *Ahin- Kati sankranti* (October-September) day. On that day a *tulsi* plant (basil) is planted in the middle or at the entrance of the *Sattrā* on a platform (*bheti*) made by mud. New cloths are given to the sanctum. In the evening *prasang* starts with the *kulupiya ghosa*, 'Ram Raghupati' or 'Joy Hari Ram', then recites *Sishuleela* from *Krittān ghosa*, then the *Bhagawata* and other *Charitputhis*. *Naivedya* is also distributed among the celibates.

5. BIRTH AND DEATH ANNIVERSARIES OR GURU TITHIS CELEBRATED IN THE NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA:

5.1. JANMUSTAV OF SHRI SHRI SANKARDEVA:

The birth anniversary of Saint Sankardeva celebrated on the 10th day of the bright fortnight (*sukla dasami*) in the Assamese month of *Ahin* (September-October). It is celebrated for one day. New cloths are offered to the *Guru asana*. All the celibates congregated for prayer, distributed *prasad* (food item offering to the God), reciting the holy book *Bhagawata* and *Charitputhis*. Sometimes meetings are also arranged and lectures on Shri Shri Sankardeva are delivered. Inmates observe fasting and not go to the field on that day.

Sometimes a special programme called *dhemali hamora* is also arranged on that day. A special *prasad* called *poka mithoi* is distributed. The celebration of this special day was first started in Sualkuchi, and then it is celebrated in Upper Assam (Goswami, N.C.2006). It is interesting that while the birth anniversary of the great Vaishnava reformer is celebrated all over Assam with elaborate agenda and cultural programmes, the *Sattrā* that claims ideological origin from him, celebrates this in most minimal extent. The organization of meeting in imitation of the public of Assam is a new development (Nath. D, 2009).

5.2. ATASAKOLOR TITHI:

Death anniversary of Mathura Das Ata who was one of the favourite disciple of Shri Shri Madhavdeva, Narayan Das Thakur Ata a favourite disciple of Shri Shri Sankerdeva, Borbishnu Ata and Keshav Charan Ata another two favourite disciples of Shri Shri Madhavdeva are observed in the Assamese month of *Ahin*, *Puha*, *Phagun* respectively. Inmates observe fasting and will not go to the agricultural field on those particular days. New cloths are offered to the *Guru asana* on these *tithis* (special days). These *tithis* are celebrated with performance of *nam-prasang*, Bhagawata recitation, *Charit path*, *gayan bayan* but *bhaona* is not performed.

5.3. TINI JONA GURUR TITHI:

In the Assamese month of *Bhadra* (August- September) death anniversary of the two *Gurus* and the founder of the Kamalabari Sattrra, Badula Ata are celebrated in the *Sattrra*. New cloths are offered to the *Guru asana* and inmates observe fasting and not go to the field on these days. These *tithis* are marked by performance of *nam-prasang* in the *Kirttan ghar*, *gayan-bayan*, *jhumura*, *chalinach*, *ojapali*, *borpetia dhemali*, *bahanach*, and music, *bhaona*, recitation of *charit puthis etc.*

5.4. TITHIS OF THE FORMER SATTRADHIKARS:

Death anniversary of the former *Sattradhikars* of Kamalabari Sattrra is also celebrated in the Natun Kamalabari Sattrra. *Tithis* of the former four *Sattradhikars* of Kamalabari Sattrra, Shri Shri Krishna Kanta Goswami, Shri Shri Lakhmi Kanta Goswami, Shri Shri Chandra Kanta Goswami and Shri Shri Ghana Kanta Goswami are celebrated in the Assamese month of *Jeth* (May-June), *Ahar* (June-July), *Magh* (January-February), and *Fagun* (February-March) respectively. All these *tithis* have to organize by the *Sattradhikar* himself. These one day affairs are marked by the recitation of Bhagawata, *Charit puthis*, Kirttan ghosa, performance of *gayan-bayan*, *biharnach*, *ojapali*, *chalinach*, *bhaona* and distribution of *prasad*. New cloths are offered to the *Guru asana* on each *tithi*. In each of the programme the *Sattradhikar* have to offer *Sorai* (offering) containing betel nut and leaf and also money. Inmates observe fasting and will not go to the agricultural field on those days.

6. SPECIAL DEVOTIONAL PROGRAMMES CELEBRATED IN THE NATUN KAMALABARI SATTRA:

6.1. PALNAM:

It is one of the heritages of the Natun Kamalabari Sattrra, organized in the Assamese month of *Bohag* or *Jeth*. Earlier it was a seven day festival organized in imitation of what Saint Sankardeva had organized at Belguri Dhuwahat for safety and wellbeing of Saint Madhavdeva (Nath, D. 2009). But the period has been reduced to three days in course of time due to economic reasons and all the rituals of those seven days are now completed within three days. It is celebrated for the welfare of the people. People from far places used to come to join it. It is the congregational prayer or chanting of the name of God by inmates of the *Sattrra* in group in rotation. People offer salt and rice in the festival. On the first and second day they perform three rounds (*pals*) each day and on the last day they perform the last one. Total seven rounds or turns are completed within three days. It starts from 12 noon after *nirya prasang* everyday. In each turn they recite *kulupiya ghosa*, other selected *ghosas* from Kirttan ghosa and *upadesh* also. At the end of each turn *gua pan* and at the end of the last turn *prasad* is distributed among all.

6.2. HARI KIRTAN:

It has to be celebrated by each celibate individually. A celibates once during his lifetime has to take the responsibility of this obligatory service. Each celibates celebrated this *Hari kirtan* for three to four days and it is held between February and mid of April. But the *Hari kirtan* of the *Sattradhikar* is performed after his death by the next *Sattradhikar* for seven days. The concern celibate is required to invite celibates from other *Sattrras* also to participate. He has to arrange all the programmes by his own. Apart from *nirya prasang*, *bhaona*, *gayan-bayan*, *biharnirya*, *chalinach*, *ojapali* are also organized during these days.

6.3. FASTING:

The celibates of the *Sattrra* observe fast on some specific days of the year like *Ekadasi* (11th day of every lunar fortnight), *Amavashya* (last night of the dark fortnight), *Purnima* (full moon days) and *Sankrantis* (cusp of every month). But the small celibates are no need to observe fasting.

7. CONCLUSION:

Natun Kamalabari Sattrra is one of the centres of cultural and religious activities in Majuli. It has some peculiar nature of the festivals and functions. Except the religious festivals like *rassleela*, *phalgutsav*, *janmstami*, the secular festivals like *bihu*, the *Sattrra* has given a religious and spiritual character and they also interpret it in their own way. For example the *Sattradhikar* of this *Sattrra* has stated that worship of *tulsi* plant destroys sinfulness (*pap*) and

earns religious merit (*punya*) as *tulsi* is the beloved of the God. Similarly interpreting *Magh Bihu*, he says that the *Bhogali Bihu* of the month of *Magh* is a very old festival. It is a life giving festival, and very pure. Bali, the traditional *Asura* king (demon) was sent to the other world (*sutalpuri*) one day before completion of his enjoyment on the earth on the *sankranti* (last) day of *puha*. The day left unenjoyed by Bali was enjoyed by men on earth with all sorts of affluence and happiness (Nath.D, 2009). Along with the *tithis* of Shri Shri Sankardeva, Shri Shri Madhavdeva and Shri Shri Badula Ata, the *tithis* of the four former *Sattradhikars* and *burha bhakats* are celebrated with due honour and solemnity in the *Sattra*. Special devotional programmes like *palnam* and *hari kirttan* are also observed in the *Sattra* and the inmates observe fasting on some specific days in a year.

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