

SATRA INSTITUTION OF MAJULI

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Abstract

The Satra, a neo-vaishnavite religious institution in Assam, India is almost five centuries old. The Satra institution has faced many changes in the growth and extensions throughout a long course of history. During a long time the Satra institution has multiplied in a large number and it has become a special feature of Assamese society and culture. *Sankaradeva*, the great Vaishnavite saint of the 15th and 16th centuries was the guiding spirit for the initiation and development of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. The Satra is a religious institution in Assam, India, are the Vaisnava monasteries, symbolic entities of the Assam-Vaishnavism, which are the residential places of the Vaisnava friars called the *bhakats*.

Key words: *Neo-Vaishnavism, Satra, Bhakati, Sankardeva, Majuli.*

1.1 Introduction:

The *Neo-Vaisnava* movement of organization in India in 12th century and it had gradually spread in the parts of the county and it devolved in Assam the 15th century. The Neo-Vaisnava movement took a new shape in Assam with a new dimension. The Neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam in the 15th and 16th centuries by *Sankardev*. The Bhakti movement in India is found to have established on the concept of the deifying of *Lord Vishnu* first practiced in the southern part of India. The Satra is a religious institution in Assam, India, are the Vaisnava monasteries, symbolic entities of the Assam-Vaishnavism, which are the residential places of the Vaisnava friars called the *bhakats*. The beginning of the establishment of the satras in Assam can be traced in the neo-Vaishnavite movement in the 16th century under the leadership of *Sankardev*. It was *Sankardev* who steered the Neo-Vaisnava movement in the state of Assam that promoted a liberal way of living for the common masses, irrespective of caste and creed. That new religio-cultural wave touched all the spheres of the social life of Assam including religion, literature, drama, visual and performing arts and music. In fact, the so-called mainstream culture of the Assamese people in current times is rooted in that cultural platform designed and developed by *Sankardev* and his followers *Madhavdev*, *Damadardev* and *Haridev* etc. are tried to pare Vaishnavism in Assam. The Neo-Vaisnava movement cannot be compared with any other religious movement of Assam. Lack of spiritual meditation created has in Assam socio – religious life. In the meantime, social reformer *Sankardev* founded a new cult of work shipping, god known as “Vaishnavism” or “*Ek Saran Nam Dharma*”¹ meaning Vishnu is at the root of all god and goddesses and he is to be worshipped only through *Nam Prasanga*². The main motive is there is only a one god, which is Bisnu or Krisna. “*Ek dev ek Seb Ek Bine Nai Kew*”³ As it is said in the Bhagavata-purana and Gita, Lord Vishnu assumes incarnations in various forms from time to time with a view to redeeming the world as well as to graze his devotees. Narayana is one such incarnation that is hailed in the Bhagavata-purana as well as in the Gita. *Ek sarana-nam dharma* is the absolute submission to only one who is none other than Krishna and it consists in the performance of name, i.e. the recital or singing of the acts of Lord Krishna and listening to his glory. It is glorified by two aspects of recital of and listening to the glory of Lord Krishna for which it is aptly called *Nam-dharma*⁴

¹ *Ek Saran Nam Dharma* is another name of neo-vaishnavite.

² It is most popular way of payer to God of neo-vaishnavite.

³ The meaning of ‘*Ek dev ek seb, Ek Bine Nai kew*’ – God is only one. In Indian philosophy there is more gods. But Sankardev’s philosophy is there is only one god name Lard *Krisna* or *Bisnu*. ‘*Eka-sarana-nam-dharma*’, as the very term implies absolute surrender to one does not allow the worship of any other Gods or Goddess.

⁴ Neog, Maheswar. *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam: Sankardev and His Times*, p. 5.

In preaching the principles of Vaishnavism, Saint *Sankaradev* based his conception on the texts of the *Bhagavata-Gita* and *Bhagavata-Purana* which were rendered into Assamese verse by the learned saint for easy access of the common people. *Sankaradev's Eka-sarana-nam-dharma* preaches the lesson of absolute devotion to Vishnu or Lord Krishna in total exclusion of Idol worship which he debarred the vaishnavas to go far. Among all the founders of the religious sects in India *Sankaradev* enjoys a unique and most honorable place for his unqualified scholarship and the yeoman's task of rendering the scriptures into Assamese for the common benefit of the illiterate mass of his time.⁵

Assam caste is a process of differentiation which places some people in rank that is higher than that of others. Like Indian society unclean and untouchable is the main barriers of Assamese society to constitute a grater Assamese nation unclean and untouchable strictly followed in Assam during pre - *Shankari* period, *Shankardev* wants to abolished the barriers between different castes of Assam. Somehow been he able to ready the barriers between different cast and community no doubt, the main peculiarity of Indian society also in Assamese Society is caste system caste system, caste system create human mentality as superior and inferior caste system is the barriers of Socio- economic development in Assam, inequality is a great hindrance of Assamese society. In the *Neo-Vaisanva* has no division of human by birth, cast, and religion. Saint *Sankardev* gave equal position to all disciples. This equal concept helps to change the Assamese society. With the help of *Neo-Vaisanva Sankardev* planned to make a grater Assamese nation. *Sankardev* create groups with members of difference tribes and communities in Assam and North East also. Like *Narottam* from Naga communists, *Gobindra* from Garo tribe, *Sansai* from Muslim for the unity of Assamese society.

Neo-Vaishnavism had a charging wave of reformation and renaissance in Assam during the 15th and 16th century, bringing about considerable changes in almost all aspects of life including social, cultural and religious aspects. This period was presided by practices of *Tantrism* and even sacrifices of birds and animals, even including human sacrifices at a number of temples. This mode of worship was considered to be a part of the religious set up of the society.⁶

1.1 Description of Satra

The Satras in Assam are a unique type of multidimensional socio-religious and cultural institutions, a place, where Guru stays with devotees and preaches through congregational prayer, religious discourses, sacred cultural manners, art and literature. Indeed it's an institutionalization of socio-religious amity with a sacred ideology of Neo-Vaishnavism.⁷ *Batchora* (Main Gate), *Namghar* or *Kritanghar* (Prayer Hall), *Monikut* (house of jewels), *Hati* (Like a Hostel of *Bhakat* and followers) is four major units in satra.

- 1.1.1 ***Batchora (Main Gate):*** The *Batchora* is main entrance of Satra, is known as *Karapat*. Some Satra is two gates with a small house on same way. This small house use on mane popups like rest in rain, take away footwear entry to Satra etc.
- 1.1.2 ***Namghar or Kritanghar (Prayer Hall):*** *Namghar* or *Kritanghar* is prayer hall. The *Namghar* or *Kritanghar* is constructed in the center of would Satra campus.
- 1.1.3 ***Monikut (house of jewels):*** *Monikut* is 'house of jewel' and its attested eastern end of *Namghar* or *Karitanghar*.
- 1.1.4 ***Hati (Hostel):*** *Hati* is rears of houses where votaries live. Disciple and Preceptor are living in this row of houses. It is maximum numbers of four in a Satra. *Hati* is constructed surrounding of Satra campus.

Except these main four units of Satra there is another units is museum, *Toll* (School of Sanskrt teaching), guest house etc.

⁵ Das, Tarali. *Sundaridia Sattra of Assam: Continuity and Change*, p.19.

⁶ Sarma, S. N. *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, p.4.

⁷ Neog, Maheswar. *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam: Sankaradev and His Times*, p-319

1.2 Majuli:

Majuli is a river-island of the Brahmaputra River, situated within the District of Majuli in the upper Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, India. Majuli is also known as world largest river island and other identity of for the natural environment and there cultural characteristics. The most important cultural heritage of Majuli is the present several numbers of Satras. Satras tradition and there cultural activities has made Majuli the hub of the Neo-Vaisnava Cultural and tradition of Assam.

“Majuli, the Ratna-Dvip or pearl-island, with its monastic institution and ethnic-cultural mosaic, is a jewel in the valley’s Crown. A repository of Vaishnava tenets and Assamese culture, it was not always an island but a part of the south bank of the Brahmaputa. As late as the reign of the Ahom monarch Jayadhwajja Singha (1648-63) the region. Then known as Majuli, was an expanse of land between the Brahmaputra or Luit, which flowed on its north, and its tributary the Dihing, which flowed for some distance parallel to it before debouching. Some inexplicable geological phenomenon around 1662-63, probably abnormal high floods, caused the creation of another channel of the Brahmaputra which merged in to a section of the Dihing’s flow, giving Majuli its present island character.”⁸

The Majuli is also a natural hub. Therefor Majuli is a place for national and international tourist. According a British Tourist ‘Nearly all of the Majuli lies too low for the cultivation of transplanted rice, and the staple crops are summer rice and mustard. Much of the country is still under high reed jungle, much under fine tree forest, which is rendered beautiful by festoons and loops of creeping cane. It is a country of luxuriant vegetation, of light sandy soil covered with fresh dew grass, of deep pools surrounded by umbrageous trees, of village paths and tracks bordered and carpeted with ferns.’⁹

1.2.1 Geography of Majuli

The position of Majuli District in terms of geographical coordinates lies in between 26O45.N to 27O15.N latitude and 93O45.E to 94O30'E longitude, with an average height of 84.5 meters from the sea-level. The total areas of the island as per the government records of 1950 to 1971 are 1246 square kilometers, and 1997 to 1998 are 924 square kilometers and 875 square kilometers respectively. It is surrounded from all sides by the Brahmaputra. Know the north-eastern corner where it is connected to the land of the North Lakhampur district through a man-made land connection. Along the northern shoreline of the island there flows the Luit or the Lohit River, which is the upper branching, and erstwhile main track, of the Brahmaputra. Its eastern portion is known as the Kherkatiya Nadi (Khetkatiya river). The current mainstream of the Brahmaputra flows in parallel to the southern shoreline of Majuli. Crossing these water masses, there is Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts on the north and Jorhat and Sivasagar districts on the south of Majuli.¹⁰

1.3 Satra of Majuli :

Our study confined upon the Satra of Majuli so we to describe a brief description some important Sattra of Majuli. Majuli is described as the *Satrya cultural* capital of Assam. It was way back in the 16th century that *Sankardev* along with his disciple *Madhavadev* laid the foundation of the Satra Culture in Majuli, which ushered in an era of distinctive religion – cultural heritage.

The *Belguri Satra* the first to be established in Majuli, was named after the place where the two great Saints *Shankardev* and *Madhavadev* met for the first time. Ever since that meeting of the great minds and the subsequent establishment of the *Satras*

⁸ Dutta, Apup kumar: *The Brahmaputra*, p.154

⁹ Allen, B.C.: *Assam District Gazetteers, (Sibsagar District) Vol – VIII, 1906, p 5.*

¹⁰ Dutta Parasmaoni, p 24

that followed, Majuli emerged as the crowning glory of Vaishnavite culture in Assam. The followers of *Shankardev*, *Madhavadev* and *Damodardev* established 64 Satras in Majuli during the 16th and 17th Centuries. Ever since these Satras have been preserving, practicing and propagating the religious and socio – cultural ideals of these great saints of the by *Satras* which were established in Majuli only 35 *Satras* remain at present.

1.3.1 A brief description of some main Satra of Majuli:

1. ***Sri Sri Auniati Sattra:*** Founded by Niranjan Pathak Dev, originated by the Ahom King Jayadhaj Singha. The Cane fans made by the artisans of this Satra are example of unparalleled craftsman ship. *Anuiati Satra* was establishing lower part of Majuli, Cutting some wild betel (*Aunipan*) so the Satra known as *Auniati*. It is famous for the museum of the Satra has an enviable collection of historical relics, old Assamese utensils, Jewelry handicrafts and ivory works. The *Auniati Satra* published a news Magazine “Assam Bilasini” way back in 1871. This was the second Assamese news Magazine.
2. ***Sri Sri Dakhinpat Satra:*** It was founded by Banamali Deva who was an devoted exponent of the *Rash leela* under the patronage of Ahom King *Jayadhawaj Singha*. The Satra Known as *Dakhinpat* because it was establishes south part of Majuli. The *Dakhinpat Satra* basically follows the ideals of *Damodardev* the famous *Raasustsav*¹¹ of *Dakhinpat Satra* is the oldest in Majuli during the festival, the *Reseswar vrindavan* is worshipped in the tenth Satradhikar of the Satra. Many valuable books on Medicine have been preserved in his Satra Jalghari an ancient water clock and an ancient sword within a stick are some of the attractions of the Satra. The *trantasar* a manuscript about woeshipping rituals manuscripts on astrology Charit Puthi biographical manuscripts on paints and Purana Hindu Scripture are also found here.
3. ***Sri Sri Garamur Sattra:*** Garamur Sattra establish the end of Ladaigar so the name of the Satra known as Garamur. It is one of the four important Satra’s which received royal patronage during the reign of the Ahom King Jayadhawaj Singha. Some ancient including a bartoop Cannon used during the Ahom reign have been presered in this Satra which was founded by Bangshi Gopal Dev. The Raas Leela perfumed at this Satra is famous throughout the state. The then Satradhikar, *Pitambardev Goswami* was a great freedom fighter – in feact many call him father of the freedom struggle in Majuli and are of the view that he deserves the Bharat Ratna. A classless Society was what he desired. He was a progressive farmer who himself used tractors in cultivating sugarcane and paddy. He introduced Co – acting in the Rassa Festivals of Majuli.
4. ***Sri Sri Begenaati Sattra:*** This Satra was affected twice by erosion by the Brahmaputra, thus compelling it to shift to its current location the grandson of Shankar Deva’s Stepmother *Muraridev*, is the founder of this Satra. Later the Ahom King Lakhmikanta Singha Patronized this Satra and donated vast tracts of land and wealth the Satra suffered a seven setback when its Monikut was destroyed and its wealth plundered by the Burmese soldiers in 1826.
5. ***Sri Sri Natun Kamalabari Sattra:*** The *Kamalabari Satra* founded by *Sri Sri Badala Padma Ata*, they chief disciple of *Madhavdev*. The Satradhikar and *Bhakats* of these Satra had celibate lives. Decorated hand fans made of cane are made in this Satra.
6. ***Sri Sri Uttar Kamalabari Sttra:*** One of the foremost culturally developed Satras of Assam. *Natun Kamalabari* and *Uttar Kamalabari* Satras impetrating in Satria dance and music. This Satra has staged performances in different parts of India and even abroad.
7. ***Sri sri Natun Samaguri Satra:*** As its name suggests, it is a new branch of Samaguri Satra, which was established by *Chakrapani Ata*, a follower of *Shankardev* and *Madhavadev*.

¹¹ *The Raasustsav* is a part of Lard Sri Karisna Life History.

8. *Sri Sri Narasimha Sattra*: One of the Primary Satras of the *Elengi* Group of Satra, it is famous for the idol of Kalia Gosain one old manuscripts and relics. This Satras is co – cited near Silikhaguri Majuli.

The most famous and significant royal Satras of Assam are known as *Chari-Satras* (four Satras) namely *Kamalabari Satra* (1600-1625 A.D.), *Dakshinpat Satra* (1653 A.D.), *Auniati Sattra* (1654 A.D.) and *Gormur satra* (1715 A.D). This four no's of satra is play a vital role in Assam national life and social integrity. In the Ahom kingdom this Satra is going to most powerful Satras of Majuli. Till now the *satriya* impact in Majuli is very powerful. The Satra is building their culture, human behavior, life style and social life of Majuli.¹²

1.3.2 List of Satra in Majuli (at present time)

1. Auniati Satra
2. Ahaotaguri Satra
3. Dhakanpat Satra
4. Goromur Satra
5. Utar Kamalabari Satra
6. Natun Kamalbari Satar
7. Begenaaati Satra
8. Bhgpur Satar
9. Natun Chamoguri Satra
10. Elegi Narsigha Satra
11. Bihimpur Satra
12. Bor Elegi Satra
13. Dikhomukhiya Bor Elengi Satra
14. Ouba Satra
15. Elegi Bahjegoni Satra
16. Prachin Chamoguri Satra
17. Elegi Tokubari Satra
18. Belesandhia Satra
19. Majuli Bor Elengi Satra
20. Aadi Bihimpur Satra
21. Adhar Mahora Satra
22. Sakupara Satra
23. Dhakanpat Achomi Satra
24. Madhya Majuli Kamalabari Satra
25. Elegi Madharguri Satra
26. Shkola satra
27. Dloni Samaguri Satra
28. Ananta Kalsila Satra
29. Garamur Saru Satar
30. Kahar Jan Na Satar
31. Natun Chokla Satra



¹² Goswami, Kesavananda Dev, *Sattra Sanskritir Rup-Rekha* p.18.

32. Puniya Satra
33. Purniya Satra
34. Chokla Totaya Satra
35. Addi Elegi Satra

1.4 Some Important Festivals and Ceremonies of the Satras of Majuli

Majuli boasts of a multiplicity of ethnic tribes which have contributed to its rich and colorful cultural heritage. Majuli as the land of Satras has been cherished the rich cultural life since the medieval periods, and the people of the Majuli is entirely intermingled with the religion particularly Vaisnavism and the Satras of the place. Palnam, Ras, Janmastami, Barsik-Bhaona, and Bihu are major festivals of Majuli.

1.4.1 PALNAM: Is the religious festival organized by the Auniati Satra of Majuli. *Palnam* is a combination of two words, 'Pal' means turn by turn, 75 and 'Nam' means congregational prayer or chanting the name of God. Consequently Palnam means organizing the continual congregational prayers or chanting the name of God from the text of Bhagawata, Kirtangosa, and Namagosa by the 'Bhakats' devotees of the Satra in rotation.

1.4.2 RASLILA: Majuli has earned the adequate fame for the classical performing arts and among these the Raslila or Krishna Lila is the exceptional. The Raslila is the story of the life of Lord Krishna presented in form of performing art with music and dance and it had great influence on the spectators, spiritual life and people of Majuli. It is a unique and biggest classical festivals of land of Majuli. Raslila is an annual festival celebrated on the (Purnima) full moon day in the month of October and November during the autumn season.

1.4.3 JANMASTAMI: Is celebrated as birth day of Lord Krishna, observed on the eighth lunar day of the dark fortnight in the month of August (Assamese Bhadra).

1.4.4 Holi or Phalgustav : 'Holi' is a popular Hindu festivals, celebrated almost each and every part of India, Phalgutsav, dual-Yatra or generally termed as Phakuwa celebrated in the month of February – March (Assamese Fagun Month). Holi or Phalgutsva it is believed that Lord Krishna played colour (Rang and Abir) with gopis (beloved female devotees) and fellow friends at his birth place Gokula, hence it is a festival celebrated enthusiastically playing with colours. Whereas the dual-yatra compiled by two words 'dual' means temple like decorated house enshrined with seating image of Lords Krishna and 'Yatra' means procession, so dual-yatra is a procession of Lord Krishna's idol sitting inside the temple like house observed by Satra and community . During the procession all the natives offer the prayer and offerings and play colours. Dhakhianpat Satra, Garmur Satra of Majuli is celebrated the colours festivals in his religious tradition, but Auniati Satra doesn't celebrated the Holi.¹³

1.4.5 Bhaona and Bar-sabha: *Bhaona* is a most important and almightily institution of Assamese social life comes from Satria tradition Bhaona held in Assam by all section of people belonging to all caste and clan. The festival follows the grand congregational prayer reading of Bhagwata, distribution of Maha-prasad, and performance of the Bhaona (Vaisnavite theatrical performance) goes up to whole night. Bhaona and Bar-sabha is a classical satiya tradition on Assamese national Life. The land of Majuli calibrated minimum one *Bhaona* and *Bars-sabha* every villages per year.

¹³ Nath, D., *Satra Society and Culture Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garamur Satra*, p-179

1.4.5 Bihu: Bihu is the most celebrated festival of the whole Assam and the National festival of Assam. Three type of Bihu is celebrated in Assam, Bohag Bihu (Rangali Bihu) observed in the month of April, Kati Bihu in the month of October, and Magh Bihu in the middle of January. Bihu is a Secular festival of Assam and in Majuli also.

Conculstion

Satra is the special institution of Assam. Satra established in Assam for permanently saves vaishnav culture. It can be refried as a rare cultural institution of Assam. It the Satra was established for the spread of Vaishnivsm but actually it is a cultural institution. Because Satra passed approximately five dreads with the all atmosphere of Assamese society through vaishnavism specially Satra was the productivity of Vaishnavism only found in Assam. The ordaining activities of Satras are very powerful. The Satriya life means a nice, obedient and screed. The Satriya life controlled by the strict norms a value. The Satra institution of Majuli and Assam also performed *Bhakti* movement very neat and culture of religion though it is also referred as the center of education and culture.

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