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Research Article

ROLE OF SATRA & NAMGHAR IN THE EVOLUTION OF GENESIS OF ASSAMESE IDENTITY

Mehjabeen S. Rahman*

University of Science & Technology, Meghalaya,

*Email for correspondence: mehjabeens.rahman@gmail.com

Abstract

Assam is the home of different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures and speaking different languages and dialects. The population of Assam consists of the inhabitants who migrated into the region at various periods of history from Tibet, Burma, Thailand and Bengal etc. Over time they got integrated as a population and have given birth to the greater Assamese nation. The amalgamated Assamese identity was initiated by the Great Saint Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva with his Neo-Vaishnavite Movement. The movement evolved new institutions of Satra and Namghar which began to serve not only as the instrument spreading the faith, but also helped to sustain and to stabilize Vaishnavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social and cultural life. Though Neo Vaishnavism was a religious movement but it has defined the culture of Assam & has its bearing on the livelihood. As the doyen of cultural renaissance and harbinger of Bhakti Movement, Sankardeva took on the orthodox elements of the society and introduced cultural initiatives like Bhaonas & Borgeet etc which had in actual defined the Assamese identity. With its dynamic philosophy of inclusiveness Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism has given birth to a new Cultural Nationalism focused on a national identity shaped by cultural traditions and language, not on the concept of common ancestry or race. The Cultural Nationalism was brought forward to the indigenous people with the help of Satras and Namghar which has a major role to play in the preservation and development of the indigenous culture of the region. The paper is an attempt to study the role of the institutions of Neo Vaishnavism, the Satra & Namghar in the evolution of genesis of Assamese identity and its inclusiveness in nation building. The managerial structure and operations of the Satra shall also be explored in the perspective of its position in the modern Assamese Society in the study. The paper shall go in to the area wherein in the genesis of the Assamese Identity, the Namghar is one of the major pole bearers, playing the multi-faceted role of Cultural Centre, Proto-type Panchayat, and Forum for Decentralized Planning and Decision-making. The paper is also an attempt to understand the impact of Neo-Vaishnavism on the Economic Organization of the society along with the role of women and their empowerment for the sustainable development of a progressive & egalitarian Assamese.

Key Words- Cultural Renaissance, Inclusiveness, Nation Building, National Identity, Proto-type Panchayat.

Introduction

Assam is the home of different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures and speaking different languages and dialects. Hemmed in, as India is, by the sea on the south-east and south-west, and by the lofty chain of the Himalayas on the north, the only routes between it and the rest of Asia which are practicable for migration on a large scale, lie on its north-west and north-east, the so-called Aryans, and many later invaders such as the Greek, the Huns, the Pathans and the Mughals entered India from the north-west, from the north-east, through Assam, have come successive hordes of immigrants from the great hive of the Mongolian race in Western China. In Assam, although in the plains large sections of the population, like that of Bengal, are of mixed origin, there are also numerous tribes who are almost pure Mongolians and the examination of their affinities, in respect of physique, language, religion and social customs, with other branches of the same family forms one of the

most interesting lines of enquiry open to Ethnologists. (Gait, 1905). The population of Assam consists of the inhabitants who migrated into the region at various periods of history from Tibet, Burma, Thailand and Bengal etc. Over time they got integrated as a population and have given birth to the greater Assamese nation. The amalgamated Assamese identity was initiated by the Great Saint Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva with his Neo-Vaishnavite Movement. Assam Vaishnavism has been constantly playing a significant role in the process of assimilating diverse elements- indigenous and non-indigenous into the Assamese culture (Gait, 1905).

Cultural Renaissance - Forging Cultural Unity through Vaishnavite Movement

“Dhanya dhanya kali-kala dhanya nara-tanu bhala dhanya Bharata braise”

Cultural nationalism is a form of nationalism in which the nation is defined by a shared culture. It is an intermediate

position between ethnic nationalism on one hand and liberal nationalism on the other Cultural nationalism will thus focus on a national identity shaped by cultural traditions and by language, but not on the concepts of common ancestry or race (Encyclopedia Britannica, Retrieved, 2008)

If one can define the concept of “cultural nationalism” as the above, then the teachings of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva can be rightly be described as an intergrationalist philosophy. As the doyen of cultural Renaissance, harbinger of Bhakti Movement and a strong proponent of Vaishnavism, Srimanta Sankardeva took on the orthodox elements of the society. He had an inclusive and integrationalist approach whereby, he inculcated that one single thread of cultural unity i.e. Vaishnavism unites the whole Assam with the rest of India. (Encyclopedia Britannica, Retrieved, 2008)

*“Kauti kauti bosore ase jar mahapunya
rashi, khi khi kodastit manushya hoi
bharat boorish asi”*

– Only those blessed very few human beings who have earned righteous deeds of millions of years as deposits in millions of the birth can have the exclusive privilege to be born as human being on the blessed land of India. Such was the concept of “Cultural Nationalism” in the numerous writings of Sankardeva that he forged the cultural unity between the rest of India and Assam.

In the 15th century AD the social fabric in India was torn by all-out degradation and cultural distortion and corruption permeated all section of the society, right from the ruling class to the priestly class. Various malpractices were committed in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure. Assam too was experiencing political turmoil with the different principalities fighting to hold sway over the entire region. This chaos and instability was reflected in the religious sphere also. Assam in the 15th century presented a kaleidoscope picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. There were people who loosely adhered to Vaishnavism or Saivism and there were others who practiced Saktism bordering on extreme Tantricism. The followers of these cults indulged in evil practices like animal and human sacrifices, magical rites, spells and the like. The poor & downtrodden became victims of these ghastly practices. It was at this juncture, that the great spiritual leader, social reformer, playwright and composer-Srimanta Sankardeva appeared on the social scene of Assam. He was a multi-faceted genius who gave a direction to the chaotic Assamese society by initiating a fresh approach to the existing Vaishnava religion that gave rise to a set of new values and aided in social synthesis. The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam in latter period of the 15th Century ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form, in literature as well as in the vocal and visual arts. The movement was at once unique in nature and

revolutionary in terms of its impact. The uniqueness of the movement lay in the fact that unlike other contemporary cults in the rest of India, Srimanta Sankardeva’s Neo-Vaishnavism rested not on a discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but its emphasis was more on ethnic integration, societal reforms and spiritual uplifts through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region, at a time when the society in Assam was in a turmoil fragmented and faction-ridden as it was. It was revolutionary in the sense that Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life. It encompassed their social, cultural and religious spheres even as it brought about a change in the very outlook of life and the world. Neo-Vaishnavism stands out among the different Bhakti- cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character, which found expression in the move to create a egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy. This new creed of fact started by Srimanta Sankardeva is officially known as Eka- Sarana- Naam- Dharma. Sankardeva preached devotion to a single God, Lord Krishna or Vishnu. (Bhuyan, 2008)

Inclusiveness – the Philosophy of Neo-Vaishnavism

In his magnum opus Kritan Ghosa, Srimanta Sankardeva stated all living beings as the creation of one God:

*“Kukura srigala gardhabaru atma Ram
janiya sabako pari kariba pranam”*

And no distinction should be made on the basis of caste regarding the prayer of God:

*Kirata Kachari Khasi Garo Miri
Yavana Kanka Goala
Arama maluka rajaka turuka
Kuvacha meecheha chandala
Ano jati nara Krishna sevakara
Sangata pavitra haya*

Sankardeva visualized an equal society, where members from all sections of life irrespective of caste, tribe and community will be able to sit together for the prayer of God and dine together. This great and reformist idea of the saint truly reflects itself when proselytized members from Naga, Miri, Garo and many other tribal communities of the valley to form the embryo of an equal society. He announces in his Kirtana Ghaosa:

“Nahi Bhakatita jati-ajati vicara”

(There is no sense of caste difference in Bhakti.)

Members of such tribes as the Koches, the Ahom, the Kachari, the Chutiyas and the Nagas soon took shelter under the new creed of Vaishnavism (Sharma, 2014).

Satra in Preservation of Indigenous Culture of Assam

The hallmark of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam is the evolution of two distinctively unique institutions, viz., The **SATRA** and the **NAMGHAR**, both of which began to serve not only as the instrument spreading faith but also

intimately associated with the social as well as the cultural life of the Assamese society.

The Satras of Assam are the most distinguished and influential socio-cultural institution of the state. Satras propagated Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and can be traced to the time when the movement initiated by Sankardeva was still in its nascent stage. Today the Satras are the fountainheads of culture and heritage. The cultural history of Assam in respect of fine arts and craft, of education and learning and of literature and heritage since the beginning of the 16th century till the advent of the British developed centering around the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement which in turn found expressions through the institution of Satra. For centuries, certain Satra have preserved the cultural traditions of the movement initiated by Sankardeva in their pristine purity. They have relentlessly encouraged the arts and craft, like dance, drama, music, book-illustration and the making of decorative objects for the beautification of the Satra interiors- the *Satriya Architecture* (Borkakoti, 2006).

The Satras over centuries has become intimately connected with the Assamese life and culture paving way From Majuli to Koch Behar, the Satra dominates the social landscape of Assam and the entire state is integrated one religious whole by this network of Satras. Today, the number of Satras in Assam is well over 500 with numerous Vaishnava householders affiliated to one or the other Satra. The preservation of the Satras is a matter of great importance, more so in the light of the fact that they contain manuscripts, artifacts and antiques of immense historical value as well (Nath, 2009).

Satras from a Modern Management Perspective

Satra is a place for Guru (Satradhikar) and Shishya (Bhakats). The Guru – Shishya tradition has been kept alive quite effectively and 500 years is a good enough time to say that it is time tested.

The Satradhikars are recognized social leaders in the sense that generally their consent is sought for any decision in the areas of their jurisdiction.

Instances like-

- a. Advising on the future path for the children of the disciples taking into account the family and social needs.
- b. Advising on cultivation programmes for villages depending on suitability of land etc.
- c. Fixing and formulating yearly religious and cultural programmes.
- d. Acting as judge, sort of, giving judgments on family and social disputes.
- e. Enforcing a desirable social and moral code of conduct
- f. Acting as reference points, they have standardized many notions, procedures, methods, grammars, codes and systems in the whole Satra life, Art, performance etc.

The major systems in place-

- 1) A revenue collection system and a network.
- 2) A banking system for transaction of goods and services.
- 3) An hierarchical system of administration.
- 4) The Satradhikars and their representatives used to travel a lot for religious as well as other administrative purposes ; thereby acquiring firsthand knowledge of the places and the people- a strength by any reckoning. Some Satras (Auniati et al) used to form Sahars out of a cluster of villages in distant places, came there periodically, met the people, interacted, held religious discourses, settled disputes, collected revenues, made new disciples and set organizational patterns

Alleviation of the Satras in the Modern Assamese Society

Satras are taking steps to alleviate its position and image in the Modern Assamese Society -

1. Modification of the Satra concept – Keeping the religious authority and aspects intact, a separate body needs to be formed within the domain of the Satras to undertake some management functions .e.g.
 - Undertaking economic projects like agriculture, sericulture, horticulture, floriculture, pisci-culture etc. to utilize the Satra land and that of the disciples for higher productive gain in business lines.
 - Improving infrastructure to act as tourism destination points to project Satra culture, Art etc. They can be Hubs of Eco- Tourism and Study Centres for Traditional Wisdom as well.
 - Satra life is very strongly community oriented. It can be very effectively used for activities like Library movement, Sports movement, Cluster development for hand looms and handicrafts, food processing, herbal medicines, paramedical service etc.
 - Since the Satras have command over the people, propagation of government development schemes, social welfare schemes (AIDS awareness, Two children norm etc) can be smooth.
2. One of the curses of the modern age is unbridled consumption. The rich countries of the world have proved how the lust for consumption can lead to social, financial and environmental disaster. The Satras practice a life of necessity based consumption. This value can be propagated for a healthy living which ultimately is environment friendly. Our Satras need to be outward looking to have wider acceptability in this context. They can definitely contribute towards rationalizing the rat race for material achievement that damages the family life, traditional culture, and lead to stressful life that damages the body too.
3. Satras are scattered all over the state. If these can be made to bloom as envisaged, these will act as nuclei to orchestrate many changes (act as catalyst to social changes and activate a chain of economic parameters). A good network of the

Satras can be a very effective marketing tool for products, services and values.

4. Culture which has no economic strength is not culture. Only religious rituals, community feasts, dance and songs will not hold any promise for the future. The very fact that about 1000 Satras with 50 odd lakhs of followers are crying for mere survival speaks volumes about the necessity to inject modern management into the Satra concept.

Assamese society has acquired its strength over the years from the immense contributions, the Satras have made to the cultural mosaic of the state. Broadly, we can categorize the contribution as- moral and social, promotion of ethnic integration, educational contribution, literary contribution, contribution to music, oral tradition and contribution to other social activities.

Role of Namghar in the genesis of Assamese Identity

Namghar-Satra network provided a well-organized & yet decentralized religious structure that is a unique feature of Vaishnavism of Assam. In 1503, Sankardeva constructed the 1st Namghar with the help of the initial followers. He composed the prayers himself. Recitations from the Bhagavata and religious discussions were held in this Namghar. Sankardeva was conversant with the raga-based music and composed his devotional songs- the Borgeets based on ragas. He popularized his cult with the help of a pantomime where he developed a genre of philosophy, art and music in the form of Borgeets, Anikya Nats or Baonas. The Namghar served as the ideal platform to showcase these art forms and attract the common mass to identify with the philosophy of the Neo- Vaishnavism. The Namghar signifies two principles-

Equality of mankind and Recognition of the worth and dignity of all things alive

The existence of the Namghar is noticed in almost all Assamese villages so much so that the identity of village folks is closely tied to the Namghar they attend. In fact, the Namghar came to serve as a forum of not only religious but socio-cultural activities of the community. For the last five hundred years the Namghar has been serving as the village public hall with the multifaceted role of a village prayer hall, a cultural centre, a village court and a village parliament, thereby providing a common forum for the villagers to assemble in an atmosphere of goodwill and cooperation. The ideals of Sankardeva of an equal society, where members from all sections of life irrespective of caste, creed, tribe and community will be able to sit together for the prayer of God and dine together was fulfilled by the involvement of the Namghar.

Namghar as a community prayer hall

The name itself signifies its role of a prayer hall for the word 'Naam' means prayer and 'Ghar' means house so the Namghar is also known as the House of Prayers. The Namghar has been designed in such a way that people from all spheres of life can enter and take part in the

congregational prayers and attain salvation by taking refuge in God (Deva). The Namghar is constructed without any walls and sometimes with only half walls so as to symbolize the ideals of equality of all mankind irrespective of caste, creed, tribe, religion or language. The *Naam Prasangas* (congregational prayers) are according to the *Eka-Sarana* traditions. The 'Naams' are led by a leader called the '*Naam Loguwa*', who sits at the end of the central region facing the sanctum sanctorum. The west end of the Namghar often leads to an independent room – the *Manikut* which houses *Singhasana*, a wooden throne. A sacred book by either Srimanta Sankardeva or his disciple Mahapurush Madhavdeva is kept on the throne. An *Akhyoy Banti* (bell metal lamp) is kept in front of the shrine.

Namghar as a Centre for Preservation of Indigenous Culture

Srimanta Sankardeva composed Bhaonas (a theatre form centering on the theme from the Bhagavata-Purana and the Ramayana) where people from all walks of life can take part in the enactment of the Bhaonas in the Namghar. No discrimination on the basis of caste or class or religion is made while distributing the roles in the Bhaonas held in the Namghar. The village folks contribute in cash or kind according to their capacity to make the Bhaona a success. The staging of the Bhaonas in the village Namghar brings all the village folks under a common cultural umbrella.

Namghar as a Proto-type Parliament

The foundation of Local Self Government was laid down in the 15th Century by the Great Saint Srimanta Sankardeva. The eminent feature of the Namghar is that it recognizes the importance of the collective wisdom and social progress through participation of all for re-construction and stability of the villagers. Srimanta Sankardeva conceived the idea of community development and Panchayati Raj much before the concept was brought by the British Raj. A general body consisting of the eldest members of each household of the village is formed and is known as the Raji. The Raji takes decisions on various issues of their community life, be it reconstruction of the Namghar to the establishment of educational institutes. The Namghar thereby provides an effective forum of decentralized planning and decision-making. By facilitating the involvement of the whole village in the decision-making process for the determination of social goods and allocation of resources to achieve them, the Namghar is ensuring the development of the people, by the people and for the people.

Namghar as a Forum for decentralized planning and decision-making

The corporate life of an Assamese village moves centering round the village Namghar. The Namghar in its capacity as a Proto-Type Parliament has traditionally been a vibrant centre of Community development activities. Collective decision regarding various issues of community life ranging Public Works like construction of roads, water tanks and

drains to setting up educational institutions are taken up in the Namghar itself. Since at the Namghar, the people of the village themselves make decisions on issues which directly matter to them, the Namghar provides an effective forum for decentralized planning and decision-making.

Namghar as a Village Court

The *Raij* tries out cases of moral or social delinquency. The parties in dispute appoint their own *Raij –Medhi* or the *Barmedhi* from their own Satras to try out their cases. Punishments according to the nature of the offence are meted out and the rulings are binding to both the accuser and the accused. There are certain limitations also regarding the nature of the cases tried as such criminal cases are kept out of the jurisdiction of the Namghar and minor cases of moral and civil in nature are tried. Thus, the Namghar provides a common platform for the villagers to assemble and discuss on a collective basis and resolve their local disputes and problems in accordance with their local judicial procedures.

Namghar as a Community Granary & a place of Shelter during natural calamities

It serves the purposes of community belongingness with having a community granary wherein the villagers contribute a portion of their production for community use. During flood and other natural calamities also the Namghar provides a place of shelter to all the people of the village.

Impact of Neo-Vaishnavism on the Economic organization of the Society

The pre-British economy of Assam constituted mainly of self-sufficient village communities. Nature was bountiful so there was never dire scarcity of food. With no centralized governance and absence of any revenue system, the means of production was not well developed and as such no proper channels of irrigation was seen. Srimanta Sankardeva's activities were not confined to religion only. He was a great social reformer and created a new social dynamics. He was a great management expert, who used many concepts which are now practiced by the management experts. In order to develop work culture, Sankardeva inter-related work ethics with religion by denouncing the Bali System (Sacrifice of animals) and introducing the system to Prasad distribution in Congregational prayer of the Namghar.

The Prasad would consist of Sprouted Moong (Gram), Cucumber, Banana, Sugarcane, Ginger and Coconut. Belonging to the Bhuyan Clan who were renowned agriculturist and being a Shirostomani Bhuyan himself Srimanta Sankardeva paved a path wherein the people belonging to a particular Namghar had to cultivate the items used in the Prasad in their own village. This led to the introduction and development of various agricultural methods. So fruitful was the Agro-Economic concept of Prasad system introduced by Sankardeva in the Namghars that it led to the evolution of an agriculturist society in Assam.

The Singhasana, a wooden throne, which is housed in the Manikut of the Namghar also gave rise to a artisan group excelling in wood works (Acharya, 1990).

Empowering Women for the Sustainable Development of a Progressive Society

Srimanta Sankardeva's vision of a progressive & egalitarian Assamese society was rested majorly on the upliftment of the status of women in the society. The inclusiveness of Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism signified the importance of the role of women has to play for the sustainable and stable growth and development of Assamese society.

Sankardeva pronounced his own Granddaughter-in-law, Kanaklata as a Satradhikari, the principle head of a Satra. Sankardeva's idealism behind the inception of the village Namghar was also to empower the women folk of the village to take active part from the congregational prayers to the arrangement of the Prasad to the day to day running of the activities of the Namghar (Neog, 1998).

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that the role of Sankardev's Neo-Vaishnavism and more importantly the hallmark of it – the Satras & the Namghar has contributed immensely in the process of assimilation and socialization of the evolution of the Assamese Identity. With its dynamic philosophy of inclusiveness Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism has given birth to a new Cultural Nationalism focused on a national identity shaped by cultural traditions and language, not on the concept of common ancestry or race. The Cultural Nationalism was brought forward to the indigenous people with the help of Satras and Namghar which has a major role to play in the preservation and development of the indigenous culture of the region. The managerial structure and operations of the Satra were also explored in the perspective of its position in the modern Assamese Society.

In the genesis of the Assamese Identity, the Namghar is one of the major pole bearers, playing the multi-faceted role of Cultural Centre, Proto-type Panchayat, and Forum for Decentralized Planning and Decision-making. Focus was also given to understand the impact of Neo-Vaishnavism on the Economic Organization of the society along with the role of women and their empowerment for the sustainable development of a progressive & egalitarian Assamese Society based on peace, goodwill, mutual respect, social-justice and self-help.

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