

# A study on Satra tradition of Assam

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## ABSTRACT

‘Satras’ are the important historic sites of social and cultural revolution of Assam. ‘Satras’ are an integral part of religious life of a large section of people in Assam, the north-eastern state of India. These places of worship are associated with the origin and development of the Vaishnavite culture. Sankardev, Madhabdev and their contemporaries established the satras to promote and preserve the ideals of the Vaishnavism. Sankardeva set up the Than or Satra at Bordowa with an onus on the idea of equality. With the same idea, many more satras came up in other parts of Assam. The Satras got prominence from the times of Madhabdev and Damodardev. The objective of the Satras is to promote religious and spiritual ideas. The Satras since their inception have been providing spiritual and moral lessons to the society. Shravan (Hearing), Kirtan (Singing religious hymns) and other religious activities take place at the Satras which increase the inclination towards god and guide them to fulfil their duties. The Satras also give importance to songs, dances, drama and other cultural activities. The various festivals of Satras also help in strengthening the unity among various groups of the society. Therefore, the Satras do not only have religious significance, but they contribute towards culture and literature. In this proposed research paper tries to analyses the Satra tradition of Assam

## Keywords

Satras, Assam, Vaishnavism, Society, Culture

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## Introduction

Satras are the outcome of Neo-Vaishnavism propagated by Sankardev. These Satras have been exerting great influences on the social, religious and cultural aspects of Assam since the 16th century. The Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam is not separate one from that of Bhakti movement in other parts of India. The Vaishnavite Bhakti movement got momentum across India in the 15th century. North India witnessed the rise of this spiritual movement in the 14-15th centuries. While Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Kabir were the exponents of Vaishnavite in north India, Chaitanyadev in west Bengal and Sankardev in Assam advocated the same ideas and ideals. The ancient texts such as ‘Kalika Puran’, ‘Jogini Tantra,’ claimed the prevalence of Saktism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism in Assam much before the birth of Sankardev. But, the external activities of all these three branches altered the original meaning of religion. There were malpractices in the name of religion. Sankardev realised that without the unity among people, the progress of the society will be hindered. Therefore, he adopted the easy means of the ancient religion and tried to ensure unity in the society. Sankardev visited different pilgrimage sites across India for 12 years. Based on his experiences from pilgrimage, Sankardev promoted the Neo-Vaishnavism or ‘Aksaran Bhagawati Dharma’ in Assam. Madhabdev, Damodardev and Haridev also followed Sankardev’s footsteps. The branch of religion of Sankardev was based on the ideologies of ‘Bhagavata Purana’ and the ‘Bhagavad Gita’. He composed songs, poems and plays to attract the public towards the religion. On the other hand, he established the ‘Satras’ as sites of religious discussions. Later, the Satras played pivotal role not only in promoting the religion, but also helped in the development of Assamese culture.

The word ‘Satra’ was used in the Indian literature since times immemorial. There was mention of the word in the

Rigveda, the oldest literature of India. The word was stated in the 13th rik of the 33rd sukta under the 7th mandala. It has been perceived that the word ‘Satra’ was first used in this ancient text. The scholars provide different definitions of Satras. The ‘Hem Kosha’ dictionary defines Satra as—a religious institution in Assam, a monastery, a session (Barua, 934). According to ‘Adhunik Asomiya Abhidhan’, ‘Sanskrit-Inraji Abhidhan’ and ‘Sanskrit-Asomiya Abhidhan’, a Satra is a Yajna or Yagya. The meaning of the word has been described in many ways in different books and dictionaries. Satra is a religious place where the worshippers pray and worship the god. The Satra can be defined as a place of worship where the noble things are discussed with devotion. Discussion on the Bhagavata is a major part of the Satras.

## Methodology and source

Descriptive and analytical methods are used in this research paper. The primary data for this study are collected from field study and various books, Journals, Articles etc. are used as the secondary source of data.

## Discussion on the topic

Sankardev promoted the ideologies of the Bhagavata in Assam towards the end of the 15th century. Before that, Vishnu and other deities enjoyed prominence in the Hindu religion. As the Bhagavata gained the importance in the 14th century, the worship of Krishna started to get the dominance (Sarma, 7-9) instead of Vishnu. Sankardev derived his ideas from the ‘Shrimad Bhagwat’ ‘Gita’ and ‘Padma Puran.’ Based on these scriptures, he advocated the Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. Sankardev and his disciples established Satras and Namghars to spread the religious messages across Assam. Following the establishment of

Bordowa Than by Sankardeva, many such Thans or Satras were established with the same objective of ensuring equality in the society. Sankardeva established the Satras with an aim to discuss and practice religion, culture and literature in a serene ambience and make it a way of life. His disciples and contemporaries also set up Satras with the same principles. Sankardev's disciples such as Madhabdev and Damodardev not only established Satras for religious activities, but it also turned into a place of public discussion.

Sankardev set up the Satras after his return from the pilgrimage. During that time, Satra were not full-fledged. Damodardev established a full-fledged Satra on a piece of land provided by Ramrai. Sankardev was impressed with this Satra and asked Madhabdev to take inspiration from it. The Satras gained the momentum in development from the time of Madhabdev and Damodardev.

Though after the demise of Sankardev, the Vaishnavite community in Assam was divided into four groups, there are no major differences among them. There are differences in some of the rituals and external activities only. Differences are noticed among these four groups in terms of Nam-Dev, Guru-Bhakat, festivals and customs. It was only after the death of Sankardev, that the rifts were perceived in the Vaishnavite community of Assam. The beginning of the dissidence was attributed to the unwillingness of Sankardev's disciple to take part in the Mahapurush-Tithi organised by Madhabdev (Dev Goswami, 1). Thus, Brahma Sanhati became a separate branch of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. Auniati, Garmur, Dakshinpaat and Kuruwabahi are four Satras under this Sanhati or branch. Questions were raised about the descendants of Madhabdev after his death. It was because of the differences among Purushuttam, Saturbhuj Thakur, two grand children of Sankardeva, Mathura Das Burha Aata and Gopal Aata, Purush Sanhati, Nika Sanhati and Kaal Sanhai came into existence. Norowa, Kowamora, Dighali and Samaguri Satras are under the Purush Sanhati. Nika Sanhati includes—Barpeta, Madhupur and Kamalabari Satras. Kaljar, Dihing, Mayamora, Bahbari Satras belong to Kaal Sanhati. The other Satras under Kaal Sanhati are Aahatguri, Haladhiaati, Kathpar, Ikarajan, Khoiramochora, Na-Ghoria etc.

Thus, the concept of Satras which was initiated by Sankardev veered towards the development. The Satras, established in the 17th century was run in a feudal system as they were financially supported by the Ahom kings. Many Satras were established during the reigns of Jayadhwaj Singha and Gadadhar Singha. But, it has been found that punishment was given to the violators of Satra culture during the rule of Gadadhar Singha.

### Nature of Satras

The Satras in Assam are divided into three groups according to their nature—Udashin Satra, Ardha Udashin Satra and Grihasthi Satra. Women cannot stay in the Udashin Satras. The followers of Udashin Satras are indifferent to the worldly pleasure and engage themselves only in the worship of god. In the Ardha Udashin Satra, there are separate accommodations for the married people and others. In such Satras, Satradhikars and Deka Satradhikars remain indifferent towards the conjugal life. Grihasthi Satras are those places of worship where the followers fulfil the

responsibilities—both domestic and spiritual. Auniati Satra is an Udashin satra. While, Dakshinpat and Barpeta Satras are Ardhan Udashin, most of the Satras belong to the category of Grihasthi Satra.

On the other hand, Satras are divided into three categories such as Mul, Aajnapar and Salabanti. The Satras which were established by the Gurus themselves are called Mul Satras. Aajnapar Satras are those which were set up by the disciples of the Gurus in accordance with their Aajna (direction). Salabanti Satras are the branches of the Mul Satras. Most of the Satras of Assam belong to this category as they were established with any revered material or resource of the Mul Satras.

### The structure of Satras

Irrespective of their branches or Sanhatis, the structure of all the Satras is the same. The major elements of a Satra are—Namghar and Monikut, Guru Griha, Vaishnav Griha, Charihati Bhoral, Atithisala, Natyasala, Korapat and Bhogghar.

Namghar and Manikut are two integral parts of a Satra. The Manikut and Namghar are established in the middle of a Satra with east-west direction. Manikut is also known as Bhajghar. Epics such as the Kirtan, Dasham, Namghosha, Ratnawali are kept above the incarnation of Vishnu or the Guru Asana. There is a dome like structure towards the west of the Namghar or Kirtanghar. Towards that the main door or the Singha Duar is located. There are spacious verandahs in all the four sides of the Satras. The Satradhikar has the supreme power to run the Satra. The Satradhikar is free from the responsibilities of married life and there is a separate house for him which is called Gurugriha. The four sides of the Namghar or Kirtanghar are surrounded by the houses of the followers. These houses are called Vaishnav Charihati. While many Satras have separate guest houses for the guests, in some Satras, the guests have to stay at the Charihatis. There are arrangements of Natyasala and Akharagriha (Practice room) for the performances of Bhaona in and outside the Satra. The main room at the entrance of the Satra is known as Korapat. The house where the offerings for the god are prepared is called Bhogghar. A full-fledged Satra also accommodates Doulgriha, Sowghar, Padsila etc.

### Tradition of Satras

Tradition means customs or rituals which are observed since the ancient times. Therefore, with the changing times, the tradition also perceives changes. The community prayers are named as Prasanga in the Satra tradition. There are certain norms for the community prayers which are known as Chaidhya Prasanga or 14 Prasangas (Dev Goswami, 17). Though Madhabdev introduced these Prasangas, it was Purushattam Thakur who developed it later. But there are differences in terms of 14 Prasangas according to the Satra to Satra. Some Satras observe only 14 Prasangas—in the morning, noon, afternoon and evening. The observance of 14 Prasangas was later relaxed in many Satras. When the political power started to impact the financial side of the Satras, the followers or the worshippers couldn't give proper attention to the spirituality. The Satra tradition was

hampered in many Satras established by the early spiritual leaders of Vaishnavism.

Now, the full-fledged Satras are noticed only in Barpeta, Majuli and Patbausi. Because, the number of Aajnapar and branch Satras is higher in comparison to the Mul Satras. Manikut, Namghar and Doulgriha are the major parts of the branch Satra. Changes have been noticed in the performance of the Bhaona as well as songs and dances. While with the changing times, Baresohoria Bhaona and Hejari Bhaona got prominence, modern instruments are also being used. Another important event of the Satras is the election of the Satradhikar. At present, democratic election for the Satradhikar takes place only in the Barpeta Satra. In many Satras, Nirmali Lowa Utsav is organised in a grand manner. The play which is performed in this event should be written by the Satradhikar. It is an evident that the Satradhikar has expertise in the religion as well as art and culture. But gradually, many Satras are leaving such rituals.

### Conclusion

As the impacts of globalisation are making inroads to every nook and corner of the globe, it has become challenging to keep the tradition of Satras alive with an indifferent attitude towards the world. At present times, most of the parents are reluctant to send their children to live a life of a worshipper at the Satras. Most of the children return to the homes after a certain point of time. But Udashin Satras have been playing a pivotal role in promoting the Satra culture and tradition in Assam and abroad. The efforts to keep alive their culture is significant in terms of history and culture of Assam

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