

Impacts of Bahari Satra on The Socio-Religious Life of The Adjoining Peoples In The District of Barpeta, Assam

Abstract

Bahari satra is one of the most important religious centre of mahapurushiya sect. The Satra was established by Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva in 1375 sakabda or 1453 A.D. (*Bangayagiri, 1931: 12*). The people of Bahari and its adjoining areas are closely related with the satra and the satra has lots of impacts like- social, religious, political economic etc. among the people living in the society. This paper is a humble attempt to study the impact of Bahari satra on the socio-religious life of the people living in the adjoining areas.

Keywords: Satra, Socio-Religious, Impact.

Introduction

Religion which acts as a source of balance and stability provides the vital force for making up the foundation of a society. Religious life types at any particular period of history point to the socio-economic realities of the time as well as its uncertainty, development or prosperity. To see however, of the meaningfulness of religious life one has to study and explore the faith symbols at its core as well as the realities they try to concretize. (Philomena, Richards :1987) Religion, which can also be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by which people struggle with the ultimate problems of human life manifest itself in the form of cults, deities, shrines or in the form of object. It also get identified with some organized establishment, church or institution with beliefs and essential practices, code of conduct and rituals prescribed for their adherents as well as with deep seated vested worldly interests. (Diokalia, R.P: 1987.). At this level religion presents a highly complicated and sensitive problem. Religion may be defined as the 'people's belief in spiritual beings and forces. The social life of the people is related with religion. The moral and ethical basis of the society is derived from religion.

In Assam *satra* is the main institution around which all cultural and religious activities move. The *satra* acts more or less as the guardians of morality by keeping close vigilance over their disciples. By maintaining regular agents at different localities and personal visits, the heads of the *satra* try to tone up the moral of the people (Sarma, :1999).

The *satra* is a unique socio-religious and cultural institution of Assam and was originated in the medieval times. It is a heritage institution of neo-*vaisnavite* movement of the state. Almost eight hundred *satras* are scattered all over Assam. The *satra* institution in Assam has produced deep impact on the socio-religious life and also the socio-cultural and socio-economic life of the people of Assam. The appeal of the religion is simple which can be understood even by unlettered people. If one wants salvation from this mundane existence, it is only through *bhakti* or devotion that he or she can attain it through *naam-kirtana*. *Satras* have become the centers where the devotee's congregation large number and join in the prayers to God. This has imparted sense of unity or oneness among the people (Rajguru: 1988).

Review of Literature

Studies have been made by different scholars on *satra* institution. Most of the studies mainly focus on neo-*vaisnavite* movement and the *satra* institution in Assam. "The neo-*vaisnavite* Movement and *satra* Institution of Assam" (1999) by Dr. S.N. Sarma is made attempt at systematic study of the *satra* institution. "Cultural Heritage of Assam" (2004) by Maheswar Neog is the collection of a few important studies in Assamese culture by Dr. M. Neog which deals with various aspects of the society, culture and religion of Assam. Another important book is "Early



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History of the *Vaisnava* Faith and Movement in Assam, Sankaradeva and His Times, (1965 reprint 2008) by Maheswar Neog. This work gives a detailed account of Sankaradeva with his background and a resume and appraisal of his work. In this compact volume is presented almost all that we need to know about the Hindu culture of Assam as it expressed itself through *vaisnavism* and the *eka-saraniya* faith which may be described as Assam's expression of the mediaeval pan Indian *bhakti* movement. In this work Dr. Neog did not miss anything that is apropos to the study of Sankaradeva. He has treated all aspects of the subject in his twelve chapters. "Satra Society and Culture, Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garmur Satra" (2012) by Dambarudhar Nath, mainly deals with the *bhakti* movement and the *satra* institution, its origin and evolution, historical retrospective of Garmur *satra*, and state, Pitambardeva Goswami and social reforms, cultural activities, administration and economy of the *satras* of Assam. The significance of this work lies in that it is a rational and analytical work and based on modern historical methodology "Barpeta *Satrar* Itihas" (1959 reprint 2006) by Gokul Pathak dealt with the varied religious-cultural activities of the people in relation to the *satra*.

Though some scholars focused some of the problems of the region, very little work has been done so far on the micro level history or the history of a particular area. There are no much literary works available which can give us detail information about Bahari and Bahari Satra. Among the earlier works mention may be made of *Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva Charita* written by Bangayagiri(1931), *Harideva Charitamrit* by Sri Rajanikanta Deva Goswami, *Janaganar Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva* by Sarat Chandra Goswami, *Amar Param Guru Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva aru Bahari Satra* by Gakul Talukdar, *Harideva Mahapurush* by Reena Goswami, *Bhagavatacharya Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva* by Sarbeswar Talukdar etc.

Keeping in mind the trend of researches and studies, the proposed study is a humble attempt of the systematic study of the impact of Bahari Satra on the socio-religious life of the adjoining peoples. It intends to examine towards the socio-religious life of the village as well as the *satra* based peoples with the source materials available so far.

Area of the Study

The most important religious centre of Bahari is the *Satra* institutions. The *Satra* was established by Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva in 1375 sakabda or 1453 A.D. (Bangayagiri: 1931). Bahari *Satra* is situated at east of the undivided Kamarupa and present Barpeta district of Assam. This is a distance of about 90 km. to the north-west of Guwahati city and 12 k.m from Barpeta town. It comprised 780 families a population of 3352 of which 1672 are males while 1680 are females (as per census. Report 2011) It was bounded by Bongaon Tahsil on the north, Rampur Tahsil and Hajo Tahsil on the east, Barpeta Tahsil on the west and the Nagrijuli Tahsil on the south. The mighty Brahmaputra River is in the near most side of the village.

Objectives

The objective that has been formulated for the study is to know about the socio-religious impact of Bahari *satra* among the people living in and around the locality.

Methodology

Historical method is a technique developed present past events in their correct perspective. It helps us to know how to write history which is not an easy job, because of the nature of historical facts. As history is both and science and art, the methods to be used of writing history would be different from those of all other discipline. While complete objectivity is impossible to achieve, the goal should be to reconstruct the past as nearly as it really happened. To carry out the proposed research work it is preferred to adopt historical research methodology based on Synthetic operation. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of information. For the collection of primary data, I have applied personal interview and observation as well as participant observation method to collect information on the studied problem. Secondary data consisted of relevant books and articles etc.

About Bahari Satra

Bahari is a very ancient and historical Satra of Assam. It is located south-east part of the district Barpeta at the bank of river Brahmaputra with charming natural beauty. According to another legendary source the ancient name of Bahari was 'Dantapur' (Bangayagiri:1931), because some people of this village were very cruel. Before 560 years ago, Harideva came to this village and the enlightened this cruel people at that time by establishing a *satra* institution in this locality and he established a holy *satra* in this village at that time in 1453. (Bangayagiri: 1931). After Harideva establishing the *satra*, the village was known as '*Baso- Hari*' or the shelter of Harideva. And it is believed that the word Bahari came from the word '*Baso- Hari*'.

According to another view, there is a kind of bird named '*Bahari*' lived in this village during the reign of Ahom. The name of the village comes with the name of this bird '*Bahari*' (Talukdar, Somnath(ed.) *Haridevjyoti*:2015)

Ancient 'Durdantapur', Dantapur and Bohoti is today known as Bahari. It is the historically famous village in Assam. The historical background of this village is well known. Before 560 years ago in 1453 A.D., Harideva established the Bahari Satra in order to spread *vaisnavite* religion and by establishing this Satra, Harideva established *vaisnavite* religion among the people. This time is called the golden age of Bahari; because it is believed that the society of Bahari was gradually civilized with that time onwards.

Bahari is a centre of Vaisnavism. In 7th century, the vedacharya Scholar Narattama from Kanyakunja was welcomed to this village by some intelligent people of this village in order to enlightend the village 'Bahati'. Harideva was the ancestor of this scholar Narattam. This enlightened scholar brought the stream of *vaisnavite* religion to Bahari. This stream is constantly flowing till today. It is 561 years passed of Harideva's establishing Bahari Satra. After

Harideva's death, his followers make a dynamic society in Bahari with the prevailing of Haridevas religious tradition. This society is an ideal society in the history of Assam.

Bahari *satra* does not only cater to the religious needs of the people. It has multi prolonged influence on different aspects of the people. The *satra* has tremendously influenced the social and cultural life of the people of the area as well as the surrounding territories. By unfolding spirit of one God, it has demonstrated the path of simple living and high thinking. The *satra* has also focused on how to lead a simple life to the devotees, most of who are poor and illiterate people. The philosophy of the *mahapurushiya* religion has also moderated to a great extent the rigid caste system by establishing equality among different caste group. The motto of the religion is that all are equal in the eye of law and everyone has access to the *kirtanghar*. Thanks to such philanthropic attitude, the rigidity of caste system which is observed in other places is not experienced here in Assam. People residing in *satra* become mild and gentle in behaviour. Following discussion deals with the impacts of *satra* situated at Bahari on the socio-religious life of the people of adjoining area.

Impacts of Bahari Satra on the Socio-Religious Life of the People

The society of Bahari is one of the fully *satra* centric. Within the periphery of the *satra*, influence of the *satra* on the people either directly or indirectly is immense. People of Bahari are votaries of the deity of Krishna in their day to day life and pro *vaisnavite* in their culture and tradition. But it does not mean that they are engaged in *hari-kirtana* all the time. In this context Uday Nath wrote- "Although simplicity, detachment to worldly pursuit and worshiping to God are hallmark of *satra* institution, yet it is not fully engaged in religious activities alone. It has contributed irreproachably to the social and cultural progress of the people of Assam in general and the people of Assam in general and the people of Bahari in particular. Some other contributions of the *satra* and demonstration of simple and comfortable life to the socially backward people, to open the door of monotheism for all caste and creed, dilution of the rigid caste system by admitting the human values and equality for all and helping in the growth of handicrafts and inspired to the people for works etc. are the contribution of this *satra* to open some essential way of work" (Nath: 2001).

Vaisnavite satras of Assam are the social facts and cultural realities. Assamese society cannot be represented without referring to the *satra* institutions. Most of the performing art forms of India including Assam are evolved out of religious institutions. The *satra* has been working as a centre of various art forms such as *bhaona*, *thiya naam*, *ojhali*, *ghosa kirtan* etc. At Bahari *satra* also such programs are held. The social context of these art forms cannot be ignored as the performing arts certainly emerged out of men and society. The *bhaonas* and the dramatic shows with mythological themes that are enacted in the *satra* compound depict stories showing the

success of goodness over the evil. In the other art forms such as *ojh-pali* and *ghosa-kirtan* the names of God are sung in chorus.

Bahari *satra* also serves as centre of learning and played an important role in imparting informal education. At Bahari *satra* various episodes of Ramayana, Mahabharata and Purana are recited in every evening. Thousands of people come here for listening to such type of epics.

The educative role of Bahari *satra* may also be seen in its day to day activities. Bahari *satra* besides being a religious institution also serves as center of recreation and amusement. Sankaradeva introduced *bhaona* performance as it can serve as the medium of religious propaganda but also came to be a source of pleasure, and recreation. Bahari *satra* has its own administrative and economic structure. It is administered by the democratically elected *satra-samittee* under the supervision of *Majumdar* and *President*. Bahari *satra* influences the economic life of the people. The management formulated certain laws and regulation for smooth running of these treasuries, which are still in vogue. Even today the poor people living in the *paras* get benefit from the *paras* fund. These treasuries enlivened the economy of Bahari helping the traders and craftsmen."(Pathak, 1959 reprint :2006).

The performing art forms of the Bahari *satra* comprising *ojha-pali*, *bhaona* etc., are important and powerful propaganda media to distract the attention of the people towards a particular program. Bahari *satra* with the performance of these art forms contributes immensely in enriching the social cohesion and social integration. The two Epics and the Purana have been serving as instruments for national cohesion. *Bhaona* and *ojh-pali* are performed by the local people at Bahari.

The commitment of the devotees to the *satra* arises concomitantly with establishment of the *satra* itself. This is still lightening the cultural horizon of Bahari like *akkhay-banti* of Bahari *satra*. According to some devotees, the rites and rituals of the *satra* are being carried on from 1375 Sakas in whose shape was founded by Harideva.

People of Bahari society are involved on a mass scale in the rites and rituals attached with different *satriya* festivals like *janmastami*, *tithis*, *domahi* and *doul utsav*. These impart a sense of cohesion and oneness among the people and they belong to a family.

Mass participation in rituals like holy, *pek yatra*, *karbhar* to the *satra*, fasting in different festivals of *satra* like *tithis*, *domahi* etc. produce a sense of catharsis in the mind of the devotees.

Rites and rituals produce deep spiritual impact in the minds of the people. They come to believe in the oneness of the self with his creator. He becomes a firm devotee who dedicates everything at the feet of the God.

The *jeth Sabha* of Bahari *satra* is an important traditional festival in Bahari. In the month of

Jeth (June/July), the *sabha* is observed in the *amabashya tithi* of jeth month in every year according to the Assamese calander; because in this tithi Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva was died. It is also known as the death anniversary of Harideva. In that day many devotees from various parts of Assam and abroad come to Bahari satra and thousand of earthen lamp lightened in the *satra* premises. So this occasion is observed by the villagers as '*Sabha Mahotsav*'.

The underlying spirit of the rites and rituals observed in the '*Satra* is service to God is service to man.'

Religious activities have great educative value. They teach people how to lead a good life with good thought and actions. These help in wiping off hatred, animosity, greed and other vices.

Mass participation in rites and rituals by the devotees dilute racial and caste prejudices. The underlying notion is 'Ram' resides in every soul. So offer your obeisance to everybody. There is no distinction between high and low among the devotees.

Devotees living within the territorial boundaries of the *satra* come to offer obeisance to lord Krishna in the *kirtanghar* on important occasions like completion of *shradha* ceremony on the occasion of death of a person, the ceremonial purification of a girl after attaining puberty and in this connection after completion of the fasting of the girl, on the day of marriage by both of bride groom and bride, on the birth of a child, after proselytisation or salvation, birth day of children or adults etc. These rites bring a sense of order in the society.

Religious activities observed by the people inculcate in them a sense of cleanliness in their daily chores like cooking, cleaning, washing etc.

Conclusion

From the observations noted above, it is clear that Bahari *satra* play a prominent role in the social and religious life of the people residing in Barpeta town. At Bahari *satra*, the *satra* activities

produce lasting effects on various aspects of life and living of the people and still continue to do so in the present time. It imparts stability to the society and gives a new meaning to the socio-religious life. The *vaisnavite* philosophy of tolerance to other religious beliefs, secularist philosophy and belief in the God have created an atmosphere of peace and communal harmony. Moreover the peoples living in the adjoining areas are assigned different duties in connection with *satra* activities is something unique in character.

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