

## The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of South Kamrup

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The neo-vaisnavite movement in the Brahmaputra valley was in sway during 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. under the stewardship of Srimanta Sankaradeva and his followers Madhavadeva, Damodardeva, Harideva and others.<sup>1</sup> The Southern part of the Brahmaputra in the erstwhile *Desa Kamrup*<sup>2</sup> made significant contributions to this movement leading to the foundation of a number of *Satras* at Herando, Camaria, Garaimari, Allibari, Urput, Sikarhati and many more places<sup>3</sup>. These *Satras* became the epicenter of the Socio-economic and cultural life of the surroundings. However the *Satras* lost their economic importance with the enactment of the Assam Act IX, 1961, they are still relevant in socio cultural activities of the region. Scholars like M.Neog and S.N.Sarma in their works viz. *Sankaradeva and His Times* and the *Neo-Vaisnavite movement and the Satra institution of Assam* respectively simply mention about the influence of the movement and the *Satras* of South Kamrup, and no independent study has been made till date. Therefore, it is attempted in the following lines, to have a glimpse of the wave of the neo-vasnavite movement and the circumstances leading to the foundation of some of the *satras* of South-Kamrup with the help of the *Charit Puthis*, copperplate grants and relevant documents available.

a) **Hari Brahmana of Maniyari : Kathaguru Carita (kgc)**, a biographical account of Sankaradeva and his great apostles mentions one Brahmana named Hari. He belonged to Maniyari village near Palashbari and was entrusted with the responsibility of propagating the religion of Sankaradeva<sup>4</sup>. One day three 'Bhakats' of his pantheon visited the residence of Hari Brahmana, who received them with a lunch. While his wife refused to clean the place after the lunch on the plea that the guests were of non-brahmana caste (Saloi), Hari rebuked her and cleaned the place himself. This indicates Hari Brahmana's sincere respect towards the ideal of untouchability of Sankaradeva, for which large numbers of people were attracted to the faith very soon. It is claimed that Sankaradeva came to Patbausi (Barpeta) at the age of 90<sup>5</sup> and stayed there for 14 years. If his date of birth is accepted at A.D.1449, Hari Brahmana of Maniyari might meet Sankaradeva in between A.D.1539 and 1553.

Without an explanation M. Neog claims that this Maniyari *Satra* was other wise known as Khatiamari *Satra*<sup>6</sup>. However it is recorded in a certified document relating to the *Dharmottara* grant of Khatiamari *Satra* that king Sivasimha (A.D. 1714-1744) made a grant of 32 *puras* of land and 26 men to the *satra* in Maniyari mauza under Barhanti paragona<sup>7</sup>. The *Baharistan – I – Ghybi*, an itinerary of a Mughal general Mirza Nathan records of a war camp at this Maniyari village under the erstwhile Desa Rani<sup>8</sup>. The *Bhakats* (devotees) of Khatiamari *Satra* give credit of foundation of the *Satra* to a brother of Damodardeva named Ratnapathak, while the *Carit Puthis* record one Bhusandeva to be the founder of *satras* in South Kamrup under the command of Damodaradeva, and no where we have come across a reference to Ratnapathak, probably he was installed there by Bhusandeva. From these information, it may be surmised that following the invasion of Mirza Nathan, the Maniyari *Satra* of Hari Brahmana was shifted to the adjacent place Khatiamari under the revenue village of Brahanti Rangamati and at the time of creating a *Dharmottara* grant of the *Satra*, the donee Kampal Sarmah a cognate of Ratnapathak was the *adhikary* (Head of the *satra*). This is why today we find no *satra* in Maniyari village itself, while the Khatiamari *Satra* is called as Maniyari *Satra*.

## b) Padhiya Madhav and Heramdo *Satra* :

The *kgc* and the *Padhiya Madhav Atar carit (pmc)* narrate a story how one Madhav Bhuyan from the then Desa Beltala<sup>9</sup> became a disciple of Madhavadeva. The early life of Padhiyamadhav is not known. Both the *kgc* and the *pmc* simply state that he left for pilgrimage from the village Bonda of Desa Beltola with a *sannyasi* of Jagannatha temple of Orissa at his early age and after a visit to India's sacred places for 12 years returned to Urpot in Dakhinkol wherein his two brothers lived. At their advice he met Madhavadeva who was then settled in Sundari in A.D. 1567 and stayed there for 12 years. So this meeting might take place in between A.D. 1567 and 1579. Padhiya first met Naryan Thakur, one of the 12 apostles of Sankaradeva and close associate of Madhavadeva who made him put off his mendicant attire and to wear plain clothes. He was initiated by Madhavadeva and sent to Heramdo under the custody of one Krishnai *atai*, who had already started a *namghar* of the neoVaishnavite pantheon of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. He married the two daughters of Krishnai and became father of four sons. In response to the repeated requests of Padhiya and of the inhabitants of 'Herambo

Rajya' i.e. Desa Rani<sup>10</sup>. Madhavadeva paid a visit to South Kamrup. In course of this tour Madhavadeva stayed at Herando for 3 months and anointed Padhiya formally to be the Adhikari of the Satra and authorized to initiate other people. It is also claimed by a section of *charit puthis* that on his way back to Camaria Madhavadeva finally selected some places suitable for a *Satra* and following his command, Chaturbhuj Thakur, a grandson of Sankaradeva laid the foundation stone of the satras at the villages of Urput and Barphulguri while Sikarhati *Satra* was established by one *bhakat* from Nahati of Barpeta *satra*. In a survey report prepared by Maniram Dewan himself at the dawn of the colonial rule, these are recorded as Mahapurusia *Satra*<sup>11</sup>. It is not certainly known when and how two of the grandsons of Padhiyamadhava ascended to the seat of the adhikari of Sikarhati and Urput, while the Barphulguru *Satra* remains without an Adhikari till date. However a strong tradition is current among the people of the Satras and the surroundings that king Sivasimha was received with garlands of flower by Bhakats of Sikarhati *satra* under the leadership of Purnaram, a fifth generation representative of Padhiyamadhav in a place where presently the Banihat L.P.School is standing<sup>12</sup>. Sivasimha or his representative the Barphukan of Guwahati in all probability paid a visit to this place in A.D.1724 when he rebuilt the Candika temple at Chaygaon<sup>13</sup>. The king then made a *dharmattara* grant of land to Sikarhati *Satra* and the people of the *Satra* request Punaram to make his permanent residence there and allowed an extensive area of about 200 bighas of land out of this *Dharmattara* grant for his own use for generations. Since then the place where the king or the king's representative was received came to be known as Murmala (*mur*-Head, *mala*-Garland) and thus Murmala *Satra* within Sikarhati *Satra* area had thus emerged. This might be the reason why the Rajmedhi of Barpeta *Satra* used to collect the *rajkar* i.e the land revenues of the *Satra* while the *gurukar* was received by this branch of Padhiyamadhav's family. Later on the Murmala *Satra* was divided into two viz. Banshigopal *Satra* and Kaliathakur *Satra*. Jogen Chandra Mahanta, a teacher of Amranga Banihat Higher secondary School, and a 5<sup>th</sup> generation representative of Purnaram is the present *satradhikar* of the Bangshigopal *satra* at Murmala.

### c) Barvisnuata and Camaria Satra :

One of the most celebrated *satras* of South Kamrup is at Camaria about 40 kms west of Palshbari. As desired by Madhavadeva one Kangsari later on known as Barbisnu founded the *Satra* in A.D. 1580<sup>14</sup>.

His original home was at Barkaraibari to the north of the Brahmaputra. In a boat disaster he lost all of his belongings and some how reached Malancha and took shelter of a richman. He also married the daughter of his rescuer and used to live nearby. Once in search of seeds for cultivation Kangsari had to spend a night in Narayan Thakur's house. This Narayan Thakur was instrumental in bringing Padhiyamadhav of Herando into the neo-vaishnavite panteon when he was attracted to the religion of Sankaradeva. After some days he went to the place of Madhavadeva along with Narayan Thakur and got initiated into the faith. He was also authorized to initiate his wife and three sons. Other people soon gathered round him and a *satra* at the place grew up. A month before he paid a visit to Herando, Madhavadeva spent some days in Malanca and honoured the *satra* by taking part in a drama performance (*Nrisimha Yatra*)<sup>15</sup>. This Malanca Satra later on shifted to Camaria due to erosion of the Brahmaputra in A.D. 1588. P.D. Goswami, the renowned folklorist of North East India in his autobiographical account records that a *Satra* at Nahira belonging to Mahapurusia sect was established by one of his ancestors Saruram, who was the *Bhagavati* (reader of the *Bhagavata*) of Camaria Satra. Camaria lies mid way between Barpeta, the head quarter of Sankaradeva in Kamrup and the *satras* on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra for which it was used as liaison and transit camp of the neovaisnavites in their journey to each other's place. Thus its importance increased day by day and it earned its own fame as a centre of copying the sacred books composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva and his apostoles and the place for religious discourses. The Ahom king Lakshimi Simha (A.D. 1769-80) therefore lost no opportunity to get legitimacy for the Ahom rule in this part of the territory of a Garo Chieftain, the Raja of Luki by Patronizing the satra. He built a miniature Visnu temple within the satra campus and donated 800 bighas of land and 40 *gots* of men for the maintenance of the *satra*<sup>17</sup>.

#### **d) Santabhusan and Garaimari Satra:**

After the death of Sankaradeva (1568 A.D.) a conflict developed between his two chief disciples – Damodardeva and Madhavadeva. Sankaradeva anointed Madhav as the successor of his religion. Aggrieved at this Damodardeva revolted and refused to acknowledge the supremacy of Madhavadeva and founded a new sect. To translate his desire into reality, Damodardeva sent Bhusandeva or Santabhusan to Dakhinkol (South Kamrup) who arrived at Garaimari under the Camaria Paragana and

founded a Satra'. It is recorded in the *kgc* that Sankaradev's son Haricharan Thakur under the instruction of Madhavadeva paid a visit to Garaimari Satra probably to arrive at a compromise between the two factions in Dakhinnkol. Bhusan did not comply with Haricharan Thakur's wishes, for which the dissatisfied Haricharan left Garaimari immediately. Naturally a competition to establish their *Sakhasatras* (branch of the satras) took place between the two. Thus the satras of Camaria and Garaimari became the epicenter of this Movement in South Kamrup. The Satras of Khidirpukhuri, Jambari, Amtanga, etc. were grown up at the initiative of the sons and successors of Santabhusan and his grandson Ramdeva awarded with a *Dharmattara* grant of 440 puras of land in A.D. 1724 by king Sivasimha in the erstwhile Chamaria peragana<sup>19</sup>. Enriched with this grant the Garaimari satra became successful to establish a *satra* even in Tangara village under *desa* Beltala (present day Rukmini Gaon under dispur Police Station). People of the other faction stationed at Camaria Satra were also not sitting idle and were in touch with the Royal house. As stated earlier a *Dharmottara* grant of 800 bighas of land and 40 gots of men were made to Camaria satra by King Laksmisimha in 1771 A.D. to Ramdev Satriya in the same paragona. *Sakhasatras* were founded at Bhalukghata, Lengta, Marabhitha and Malabari at the initiatives of the *satradhikar* of Camaria satras.

#### e) Palashbari Satra :

Buchanan Hamilton an agent to the English East India Company, while sitting in Goalpara compiled *An Account of Assam*. He mentions of a *satra* at the village plashbari rich with wealth and Bhakats. The Syamrai *satra* at Hudumpur and the Manpur *Satra* are two active Satras found within the municipality area of Palashbari Town. Any relation of these two satras with that of Hamilton's Account is yet to be established. According to a strong tradition still current among the people of Hudumpur Satras extended all probable help to the Ahom king Chandrakantasimha in his armed engagement with the Burmese, wherein the Ahoms were defeated. This was why Palashbari was otherwise known as Haraghat or Harahat.

A copper plate grant recently discovered by the present author leads one to think that a branch of the Srihati *satra* of present day Sualkuchi village on the north bank of the Brahmaputra was established in the Hudumpur village adjacent to present day Palashbari municipal area.

One Devahari Brahmana of the Satra was awarded with a *Brahmottara* grant of 10 puras of land for his knowledge of ailments and treatment of elephants<sup>20</sup>. The lands of the grant lies in between the Hugali Bil on the west and the river Kalbog on the east at the border of the two principalities of Desa Rani and Desa Barduar.

The plate is now in the custody of the Satradhikar of the Rajapukhuri Satra, who however claim their genealogy from one Baladeva and not from Devahari; while nobody of Hudumpur Satra and Manpur Satra know about the existence of a copper plate grant and also of Devahari. An intense investigation may reveal the truth of this grant. At the present state of our knowledge it is understood that the Ahom king Sivasimha made an attempt to use a section of Satras as centres of elephant's training caught from the Desa Rani and Desa Burduar. At the same time by granting lands and men within their territories Sivasimha declared his authority over the principalities and thus claimed the legitimacy of the Ahom rule.

#### **f) Nityananda and Chintamoni Gosain of Allibari Satra:**

Apart from the Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva we have two *satras* belonging to Chaitanya Pantheon of Bengal. A copper plate inscription of Dharmasimha of Desa Rani of the Dakhinkol records a land grant in Allibri village to one Nityananda Gosain and Chintamoni Gosain of Allibari *satra*. The inscription records the date on 14<sup>th</sup> Jestha, 1583 Saka. But examining critically M. Neog places it in 1683 A.D. (1761 A.D.)<sup>21</sup>. The other *satras* of the pantheon are said to be established at Rampur by one Nintyananda. It is not known if the two Nityanandas are the same person.

#### **g) Adityamohan Das and Krisnapuri Satra :**

The trend to establish new *satras* and thus to propagate neo-vaisnavism was continued also in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the tradition one Adityamohan Das, a relative of Joyram Atai of the days of Padhiya Madhav of Heramdo *satra* was initiated in the Srihati *satra* of Sualkuchi and came to Sarpara village near Palashbari. He took his name as Krishnapuri and established a *satra* in 1943 and the second one in Rampur in 1968. Krishnapuri did not get any grant for obvious reasons from the government of the colonial power or of the independent India. He was therefore dependent upon the offerings of his disciples.

Thus it is seen that neo-vaisnavism in South Kamrup was firmly established at the initiative of a group of people. The first group was composed of Hari Brahmana, Srimanta Madhavdeva himself and his apostles Padhiya Madhav of Heramdo and Barvisnu of Camaria. The second group was headed by Santabhusan while the third by Nityananda and Chintamani. The last group was headed by Adityamohan Das alias Krishnapuri. At their initiatives about fifty *satras* were founded which are still a living institution with some modification. It is also seen that some of these *satras* received royal grants of lands and men from the Ahom rulers. Imitating the practice one Dharma-simha of Desa Rani also issued a copper plate grant to Allibari *satra*. It leads us to think that after A.D. 1682 the Ahoms left no stone unturned to introduce their revenue system based on paiks to which Desa Kamrup was not acquainted with. The previous rulers, viz. the Koches and the Mughals divided the territory into a number of paraganas and collected the revenues in cash. Contrary to this the Ahoms by granting land and men attempted to infiltrate the paik system and thus to claim their legitimate authority over the lands and people of South Kamrup.

In this context it is also understood that under certain political situations the Koches, the Mughals and the Ahoms patronized some of the sectarian leaders of neo-Vaisnavism which eventually led to the growth of the *satras* of South Kamrup.

#### *Notes and Reference*

1. For the origin and development of neo-vaisnavite movement in Brahmaputra valley one may consult K.L.Barua, *Early History of Kamrupa*, Guwahati, 1996; pp.203-211; M. Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*, Guwahati, 1965; S.N.Sarma, *The Neo-Vainavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, Guwahati, 1966; Bapchandra Mahanta, *Aitihāsik Patabhumit Mahapurās Sankaradeva* (in Assamese), Dibrugarh, 1999; Sisir Kumar Das, *The Polyphony of the Bhakti Movement*, Guwahati, 1998 Amresh Dutta, *The Indian Perspective and Sankaradeva*, Guwahati, 2004.
2. The term *Dakhinkol* to mean the entire Southern part of the Brahmaputra in the erstwhile Desa Kamrup is mentioned several times in *Katha Guru Carit (kgc)*, the bio-graphies of the neo-vaisnavite saints of Assam including Srimanta Sankaradeva and Srimanta Madhavadeva, edited by U.N.Lekharu, published in 1964 the same

work had been reedited by M.Neog and published by the Guwahati University in 1986. The term is also found in the *Baharistan-I-Ghybi* and a number of *Buranjis* edited by S.K.Bhuyan and published by the Dept.of Historical and Antiquarian Studies Assam. The concept of Dakshin Kamrup (South Kamrup) had been derived from this *dakhinkol*. Details in this regard may be found in the present author's write up entitled. 'The emergence of the term Dakshin Kamrup' in the first volume of the *Museum Bulletin*, Dakshin Kamrup Girl's College, vol.1, 2002, pp. 26-28.

3. South Kamrup, locally called as Dakshin Kamrup is rich in this Satra institution with a number of not less than 50. For the complete list of these Satras one may consult in 'The Satra institution of Dakshin Kol-a brief introduction' by the presrnt author and published in the *Souvenir*, UGC Seminar on performance of traditional folk culture of South Kamrup, *Dakshin Kamrupat Nava-vaisnava Pravah, Ek Alochana* (in Assamese), Palashbari, 2004. M. Neog (ed), *Pabitra Asom* (PA), Jorhat, 1964, pp. 269-92.
4. U.Lekharu(ed). *Katha guru carit* (kgc), 1964, P.115.
5. *Ibid*: Bhumika, (introduction).
6. M.Neog, PA, p.286; B.C. Allen (ed.), *Assam District Gazetteers*, IV, 1905, p.112.
7. G.Adhikari, 'Khatiamari Satrar Dharmattara Nathi' in *Dakhinkol*, Annual publication of Palashbari Sahitya Sabha, Mirza 781125, 15<sup>th</sup> issue, 1994-95, edited by Dr. P.Kalita, pp.30-31.
8. M.I.Bora (tr and ed), *Baharistan-I-Ghybi*, vol. II, Guwahati, 1936, PP.588-89.
9. The Ahom rulers for convenience of their administration divided the Lower Assam into some units called *Desa*. Thus we find *Desa* Kamrup, *desa* Rani, *Desa* Beltala, and *Desa* Darrang.
10. Why this place is called Herando or Heramod is not known. However the inhabitants of the village call it is apart of the Heramba rajya of unknown origin. The village now under the Dakshin Rani mauza was under the principality of Rani under the Ahom Administration. The *Desa* Rani belonged to Khasi Community, vide A.J.M.Mill's *A Report on the Province of Assam*, 1854.
11. Maniram Dewan. *Buranji Vivek Ratna*, edited by N.Saikia, Dibrugarh, 2002, p. 17

12. An earthen mound on which the king was received of about five meters in height and fifteen meters in breadth and length was visible upto A.D. 1987. it was demolished in 1987 by the then school managing committee to clear land for construction of a new school building during the first regime of Asom Gana Parishad government 1985-90.
13. G.Adhikary, 'The stone Inscription of Candika temple at Chaygaon.'. *proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Golden junilee sxxsion, Gorakpur University, 1990, pp. 647 ff.
14. A.K.Adhikary (ed.). *Bar Vishnu Atar Charit*, 1981; Narayan Das, 'Cinaki' in *Dakshin Kamrupar Aitihya* (in Assamese) by N.K.Adhikari, Boko, 2003.
15. M.Neog, *Sankara Deva and His Times*, 1965, P.136
16. P.Goswami, *Manar pakhi Ubhati Ure* (in Assamese), Guwahati, 1998, pp. 72-76
17. M.Neog, (ed.). *P A*, 5<sup>th</sup> reprint, Guwahati, 204, p.276; B.C.Allen (ed), *Assam District Gazeetieer*, VI, 1905, p.112. A.K.Adhikari, *op. cit*.
18. G.Adhikari 'Identification of Ramdeva Medhi of the Dharmottara Grant of Garaimari Satra', *Proceedings of the NEIHA*, 22 second season, Darrang, pp.74-77.
19. *Ibid*.
20. "The C.P.Grant of Devahari Brahmana of Srihati Satra". *Proceedigns of NEIHA*, 25<sup>th</sup> session, Shillong, 2004, pp.100-104.
21. M.Neog (ed.) *Prachya Sasanavali*, Guwahati, 1974, p.127