

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ROLE OF THE NAMGHAR IN ASSAM

*A Comparative Study of the Namghars
of Borbhogia Village and
Bordowa Than/Satra.*

ABHIJIT BHUYAN

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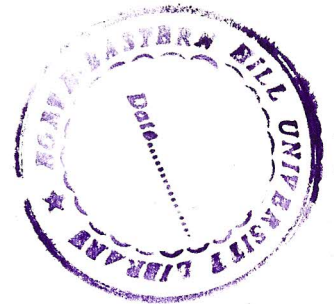
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Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata

SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ROLE OF THE NAMGHAR IN ASSAM :

A Comparative Study of the Namghars of Borbhogia
Village and Bordowa Than/Satra.

Abhijit Bhuyan



Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata



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FOREWORD

I am happy to write a Foreword to the book Socio-Cultural and Political Role of the Namghar in Assam: A Comparative Study of the Namghar of Borbhogia village and Bordowa Than/Satra, written by Mr. Abhijit Bhuyan.

In his research study the author has enquired about the role of the Namghar institution in socio-cultural, economic and political life of the people of Assam. The author has really made an original contribution in analyzing the role of Srimanta Sankardeva in creating the composite Assamese culture with the ingredients from all ethnic groups from within the geographical boundary of the Brahmaputra valley. He has shown to us how the new creed of Neo-Vaisnavism initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva had all the tenets of social movement, one that was so powerful and innovative that it left no section of the society in Assam untouched.

Taking note of the fact of ongoing socio-political turbulence in Assam, the author argues that the institutions of Namghar can emerge as vital centers to spread the message of peace, harmony and integration, so central to the Neo-Vaisnavite philosophy. From this perspective, the book is undoubtedly very important and provides us a new outlook in establishing social harmony, peace and progress in Assam.

I am sure this book will be useful not only to the scholar in the relevant field but also to the policy makers.

I sincerely congratulate the author of his successful efforts in writing this book.

Jayanta Kumar Ray
Chairman
Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute
of Asian Studies, Kolkata.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I received help and cooperation from many individuals and organizations in the course of conducting my research project. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my deepest gratitude to everybody who has helped me in this effort.

I am particularly grateful to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, for giving me the opportunity to undertake this research project.

A special thanks to Dr. Anuradha Dutta, Professor, Peace Studies, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Dispur, Guwahati and to Prof. B.P. Chaliha (Retd.) from the Department of Assamese, Gauhati University.

I would like to acknowledge the help and cooperation extended to me by Mr. Bipul Bora, Mr. Upen Bora, Mr. Hiteswar Saikia and Jogeshwar Bora in collection of data and also for assisting me in my fieldwork.

I also express my sincere thanks to Ms. Hema Bharali, noted Gandhian social worker, for her kind help and giving me valuable insights.

I acknowledge the facilities provided by the officers and staff of the research section of the District Library, Dighalipukhuri, Guwahati as well as those of Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Dispur, Guwahati, of the Indian Council of Historical Research's Library at Gauhati University campus and of the Library at the Srimanta Sankardev Kalashetra, Guwahati.

I would acknowledge the help offered by the Guwahati and Nagoan Branch of Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha.

Abhijit Bhuyan

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CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Title:

Socio-Cultural and Political Role of the *Namghar* in Assam: A Comparative Study of the *Namghars* of Borbhogia village and Bordowa *Than/Satra*.

1.2 Statement of the Problem:

The *Neo-Vaisnavite Movement* initiated by the great *Vaisnava* saint from Assam, *Mahapurush* Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568), found concrete expression in the distinctively unique institutions of the *Satra* (*Vaisnavite* monasteries, literally meaning, "holy areas") and its offshoot, the *Namghar* (community prayer halls). Both the institutions have been intimately associated with the social, cultural as well as religious life of the Assamese society even as they define the very basis of Assamese socio-cultural identity. Serving as they do as the custodian of the entire genre of *Neo-Vaisnavite* philosophy, art and culture in Assam, the *Satras* are veritably, a part of a living cultural tradition, carrying forward the religious

and cultural traditions initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva. Though born in the sixteenth century they are vibrant entities till date. Stemming as an offshoot of the *Satra*, the institution of *Namghar* can be noticed in almost every Assamese village. The establishment of the village *Namghar* came about with the idea of popularizing the *Neo-Vaisnavite* creed to the masses. The *Namghar* came to serve as a forum of not only religious but also socio-cultural activities of the community. Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples, through the institution of *Namghar* established a new democratic order in Assam, which was instrumental in providing a solid base for the evolution of Assamese socio-cultural life. Resting, as it does, on the twin principles of equality of man and recognition of the worth and dignity of every living being, at the core of its functioning lies its commitment to structure the society along egalitarian lines. This leveling spirit of the *Namghar* permeates all its functional spheres - religious, cultural, educative or in terms of citizen participation for that matter. This allows any individual, irrespective of his caste, class or creed to participate in all activities of the *Namghar*, ranging from the enactment of *Ankiya Nats* or *Bhaonas* (a theatre form developed by Srimanta Sankardeva) or participating in *Naam Prasargas* or congregational chanting of prayers. It may be noted here that the *Namghar* uses some forceful audio-visual means for the purpose of communicating its ideals of equality and humanism to the masses.

One striking feature of the *Namghar* is that it recognizes the importance and necessity of collective wisdom and social progress through participation of all for village re-construction and stability. The *Namghar* provides a common platform for villagers to assemble and discuss on a collective basis their common issues and problems and also to resolve their local disputes in accordance with their local judicial procedure and methods. In this sense, the *Namghars* initiated the system of *Panchayati raj* and programmes of community development-methods by which people who live in local communities become involved in helping to improve their

own economic and social conditions and thereby become effective groups in the programmes of national development. Accordingly, the *Namghar* has been found to serve as an institution of effective popular participation at the local level in such contexts as self-help, community development, social mobilization and socially equitable distribution of development benefits. By facilitating an active and meaningful involvement of the masses in the decision-making process for the determination of social goods and allocation of resources to achieve them, the *Namghar* actually ensures development of the people, by the people and for the people. Development in a real sense is possible only when it is in tune with the social, cultural, economic and political environment of a region. It may be mentioned here that the *Namghar* lays emphasis on certain principal aspects of people-centred development. Thus, it aims at awareness-raising by which people are sought to be made aware of and thereby identifying, on a collective basis, areas calling for positive action, having a direct bearing on their lives. This automatically maximizes self-reliance and hence people-centred development. Furthermore, the *Namghar* lays stress on sustainable development by underscoring ecological and environmental concerns so as to link the development processes to the ever-fulfilment of the needs of posterity.

As an agent of community development allowing effective popular participation at the grassroots level, the village *Namghar* can contribute immensely to building a vibrant group of citizens, who by playing their part in the planning and implementation of respective development strategies relating to their own areas, contribute to the overall process of national welfare starting from the village level.

The *Namghar*-centric egalitarian and non-hierarchical associational life in civic communities generating social capital in the form of a wide network of trust, facilitates inter-personal co-operation and hence, in the final instance, provides a basis for

participatory governance. As a matter of fact, the *Namghar* can serve as an important and powerful category of state-civil society partnership. It can, as a representative institution of the civil society, act as a decisive intermediary variable of political activity, strategic action and organization.

1.3 Objectives:

This study has been undertaken with the following objectives:

Firstly, despite the availability of a great deal of literature on the general role of the institution of the *Namghar*, not much work has been done with particular reference to the role of the *Namghar* as an agent of community development. Accordingly, the prime objective of the study is to explore the aforesaid area and to find out how the *Namghar* allows the people of a region to participate in the process of collective decision-making for ensuring their development.

Secondly, though a lot of work on Srimanta Sankardeva has already been done, his role in different perspectives such as a religious leader, social reformer and most importantly as one who has looked at the overall development of the community has not been looked into from the point of view of a political scientist. The objective of my study is to probe into the role of Srimanta Sankardeva as a harbinger of community development activities. I am also interested in finding out the changing role of the *Namghar* from the beginning to the present day.

Thirdly, I am interested in finding out the role of the institution of the *Satra* in terms of upholding the cultural traditions of the Assamese people.

1.4 Main Hypotheses:

The hypotheses of the present work are as follows:

- i. Srimanta Sankardeva was a great social reformer who made significant contributions to the all-round development of the Assamese society.

- ii. The *Neo-Vaisnavite* institution of the *Namghar* is an important representative institution of the civil society at the grassroots level. In this capacity, the *Namghar* acts as a forum for collective decision-making and citizen-participation,
- iii. The *Namghar* has been playing an important role in the socio-cultural life of a particular region.
- iv. The institution of *Satra* commands a special place in the socio-cultural milieu of Assam. As custodians of the rich heritage of *Vaisnavite* philosophy, art and culture, they can play a significantly enormous role in terms of communicating the message of peace and integration in today's society.

1.5 Methodology:

This study is based on the historical analytical method supplemented by empirical investigation. To have a proper historical analytical perspective, I have relied on secondary sources in the form of published books, journals, periodicals and newspapers in both English and Assamese for securing data. As for empirical investigation, the Borbhogia *Namghar* in Sonitpur district and the Bordowa *Than* or *Satra* in Nagoan district have been selected for my purpose.

Although there are many *Namghars* in Assam deserving attention, I chose to concentrate on the Borbhogia *Namghar* and the *Namghar* of the Bordowa *Than* or *Satra* in particular. The following reasons can be attributed for such a decision:

Borbhogia Namghar:

- i) Firstly, the Borbhogia *Namghar* has been in existence since the pre-independence era and has accordingly been contributing immensely to the socio-cultural development of village of Borbhogia. The *Namghar* has been able to withstand the ravages of time. It is still serving as an effective forum for popular participation and community development at the grassroots level.
- ii) Secondly, the Borbhogia village is marked by a fair degree of

diversity in terms of caste-composition with three distinct categories of people – the General caste category, the Scheduled Tribe (ST plains) category and finally the OBC (Other Backward Classes) category.

Bordowa Than or Satra:

The Bordowa *Than* or *Satra* also known as the Batadrava *Than* was chosen by me for the following important reasons:

- i) The origin of the Bordowa *Than* is traced back to Srimanta Sankardeva himself. The saint himself was born in Bordowa, then called Tembuwani. Accordingly, as the birthplace of the saint and indeed of the *Neo-Vaisnavite movement*, the place has an especially rich history with a great symbolic value, commanding great reverence from and exerting a tremendous influence on not only the people of Bordowa area but also the people of Assam in general.
- ii) Secondly, *Namghar* of the Bordowa *Than*, being a component of the larger institution of the *Satra*, its analysis would help me look into the role of the latter in reaching out to the people at large.

Sampling is an important tool of data collection in social science research to gather information. The method enables the researcher to draw conclusions of the entire universe of study by selecting and then analyzing only a small representative portion of it, instead of considering each and every unit of the population.

For my investigation, the proportionate stratified random sampling was made use of. In this method the population is subdivided into homogenous strata and from each stratum, a random sample is drawn in proportion to the latter's share in total population. Since the *Namghar* is meant to promote equality among its followers without any caste-based discrimination, it was decided to fix the strata on the basis of caste status.

In **Borbhogia village**, there were 150 households in all. The caste-based break-up of the households was as follows: -

General Category	120 households
OBC	25 households
ST	5 households
TOTAL	150 households

The following chart shows the proportion of each category to the total number of households: -

Caste Status	Number of Households	Proportion of each stratum
General Category	120	0.8
OBC	25	0.16 (approx)
ST	5	0.03 (approx)
TOTAL	150	0.99 (approx)

The overall size of the sample was fixed at 50 households. The strata sample sizes were as follows: -

Strata	Sample size
Gen. Category 0.8 x 50	40
OBC 0.16 x 50	8
ST (Plains) 0.03 x 50	1.5
TOTAL	49.5

For the sake of convenience, the fraction in the case of the sample size figure of the ST (Plains) category was ignored. Thus from the general category, a sample of 40 households was taken up for empirical investigation and 8 households were taken up from the OBC category. It may be noted here that the village being rather elongated in shape, the houses are constructed in rows, one after another, with the road passing through the middle. This factor facilitated the process of selection of sample household from each category. The selection of sample household from each category was done by the lottery method. Moreover, for the selection of respondents from each household, the lottery method was resorted to. I personally administered the schedule to the respondents. The schedule was a partially structured one. Though

the questions were in English, they were translated into Assamese while being actually posed to the respondents.

With regard to the **Bordowa area**, there are 700 households within a radius of two and a half kilometers from the *than* compound comprising Borhisa and Soruhisa villages which together go to constitute the area under the direct influence of the Bordowa *Than*. I selected 80 households from the area for the purpose of conducting interviews, covering both male and female respondents from different age groups. The lottery method of data collection with fixed interval was resorted for the purpose. I also interviewed people responsible for the management of the *Satra*.

1.6 Review of Literature of Contextual Relevance:

Up until now, a lot of work has been done on the *Neo-Vaisnavite Movement* initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, but despite the same being a much researched area of investigation in the region, very few studies have yet been made with particular reference to the role of the *Namghar*. Having said that, I have relied on a number of secondary sources in the form of books, journals, periodicals, articles, English and vernacular magazines, dissertations and thesis. Firstly, I would like to refer the names of the following books by the following authors, which have given me put things in a historical-analytical perspective as well as a conceptual framework, for the purpose of my study:

I. Books:

1. Maheswar Neog, in his book, *Sankardeva* has traced the background of the *Movement* at the very outset of the book. Subsequently, he goes on to discuss Srimanta Sankardeva's *Neo-Vaisnavite* order, the tenets and practices of the faith and his attempts at social reorganization. Significantly, in the chapter titled *An Anthology of Songs and Verses*, in the fourth stanza of one of his poems the readers can get an insight into Srimanta Sankardeva's concern for all living creatures.

2. *Unique Contributions of Srimanta Sankardeva in Religion and Culture* by Dr. Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti is a comprehensive one dealing with diverse themes ranging from the life sketch of Srimanta Sankardeva and his philosophy to *Ankiya Nats* and *Bhaonas* of the saint. The chapter titled, *Ethnic integration by Srimanta Sankardeva*, gives the readers an insight into how Srimanta Sankardeva through his *Neo-Vaisnavite* creed brought the composite Assamese nation into being.
3. *Sankari Sanskriti Adhayan* in Assamese, edited by Bhabaprasad Chaliha contains several essays devoted to the cultural and social dimensions of the *Neo-Vaisnavite* faith. The essay titled, *Asamiya Samajik Jivanor Duti Bishista Anusthan : Namghar aru Satra (Two significant institutions of Assamese social life : Namghar and Satra)* by Dr. Sarbeswar Rajguru, deals with the *Namghar*, its origins and structural components as well as the various socio-cultural activities centering around the institution.
4. Dimbeswar Neog, in his book titled, *Jagat-Guru Sankardew-The Founder of Mahapurushism*, throws light on the essence and philosophy of *Eka-Sarana-Naam- Dharma* or *Neo-Vaisnavism* initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva. The book also deals with the various works of Srimanta Sankardeva and his direct disciple, Madhavdeva.
5. *Sankardevar Byaktitya aru Satra Vyavastha (Sankardeva's Personality and the Arrangement of the Satra)* in Assamese by Bapchandra Mahanta contains a detailed analysis of the institution of the *Satra*, including its various phases of evolution.
6. *The Contribution of the Sankardeva Movement to the Culture and Civilization of India* by Maheswar Neog familiarizes the readers with the overall contribution of Srimanta Sankardeva to the social, cultural and religious life of the Assamese people even as he initiated the *Neo-Vaisnavite Movement*.
7. Olle Tornquist's book titled, *Politics and Development- A critical introduction* throws light on the concepts of civil society and

- social capital in Chapter 10, where the author highlights the various dimensions of the concepts. On the whole it is a book for students of politics interested in addressing problems of development in the developing world.
8. Another contributory book for my study has been the one by Jean Baechler, titled, *Democracy*. The author in chapter 9 has dealt with certain relevant themes such as *democratic deficiencies, democratic corruption* and also *the resurrection of democracy*. The book also deals with the relationship between the existence of civic and political virtues among the members of a society and the success of public institutions and indeed of democracy.
 9. B. K. Barua in *Sankardeva-Vaisnava Saint of Assam* treats in details the cultural contributions of Srimanta Sankardeva, ranging from the plays (*Ankiya Nat' or Bhaona*), their various forms, timings etc. to the poems, songs and verses composed by the saint (*Borgeets, etc*).
 10. Another book partly dealing with the cultural aspects of the *Neo-Vaisnavite* creed is the one by Arunima Bharali, titled, *Assamese Culture-As reflected in the Medieval Assamese Literature*, where the author highlights the various media of preaching the *Vaisnava* religion in the form of religious plays (*Ankiya Nats*) and songs-*Borgeets* and *Bhatima*.
 11. George H. Sabine in his *History of Political Theory* talks of the concept of civil society and how the state and the civil society are interrelated. He opines that while the civil society depends upon the state for intelligent supervision and moral significance, the state, however, depends upon civil society for the means of accomplishing the moral purposes which it embodies.
 12. An important book from the point of view of the operation of the different forms of folk media as traditional channels of spreading awareness among the rural masses in India is

Shyam Parmar's *Traditional Folk Media in India*, where the author lists out such channels operating across the country and suggests their potential role even in contemporary times.

13. A conceptual framework of the meaning, nature and causes of a social movement can be found in *Social Movements in India*, edited by M.S.A. Rao. Having defined a social movement as sustained collective mobilization through either informal or formal organization, the author deals with the various theories on the genesis of social movements in the form of relative deprivation, strain and revitalization theories.
14. In his book titled *Education Polity and Society- A Study of Education and Democratic Consciousness*, Ehsanul Haq has highlighted how institutions in the society and polity go on to influence the socialization process and in turn can get affected by it. Thus the role of education supportive of a democratic, secular order is stressed among other things.
15. In the book *Democracy* by David Beetham and Kevin Boyle, a unique question and answer method of offering explanations has been made use of. Thus, as part of the response to the question marked no. 15, one can find the idea of a "democratic or civil society". The need for having social associations, whereby public opinion can be articulated from below, rather than managed from above, has been stressed.
16. Sir Edward Gait's, *A History of Assam* provides a comprehensive account of the history of the region and can be said to be an authority on the same. The evolution of Srimanta Sankardeva's movement has also been covered by the book and it provides relevant information about the course of its development.
17. The book titled *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam* edited by Arun Bhuyan contains a specific chapter written by Dambarudhar Nath titled *A Satradhikar's Role in National Awakening*, devoted to the role of the noted freedom fighter from Assam,

Sri Pitambar Goswami, the *Satradhikar* of Garmur *Satra* in Majuli situated in Jorhat district of Assam, who played a leading role in mobilizing the people of the island during the National Freedom Struggle.

18. M. N. Srinivas' *Social Change in Modern India*, gives some insights into the *Bhakti Movement* in India. In one of the chapters, the author talks of the *Bhakti Movement* and particularly points its employing regional languages instead of Sanskrit for "purveying to a vast and unlettered populace the contents of Sanskritic Hinduism". The main tenets of movement has also been referred to in the same chapter.

II. Theses:

1. The Ph.D. thesis by S.N. Sarma, titled, *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and The Satra Institution of Assam* is a comprehensive one tracing the evolution of the movement in detail. The thesis also highlights the institution of the *Namghar* as a multi-dimensional institution covering various aspects of Assamese society. Besides, a reading of it gives us a fair idea of Srimanta Sankardeva as a great social reformer.
2. Another Ph.D thesis is the one by Maheswar Neog, titled, *Sankardeva and his times-Early History of the Vaisnava faith and Movement in Assam*. While highlighting the social implications of Srimanta Sankardeva's *Neo-Vaisnavite Movement*, the author deals with the institution of the *Namghar*, its genesis and functioning.

III. Souvenirs:

The souvenir released on the occasion of the inaugural ceremony of the new *Borbhogia Namghar* gives a detailed account of the historical background of the *Namghar* and how it has evolved through the years. The *Bordowa Aalipukhuri Sankhipta Parichoy* (A brief introduction to Bordowa Aalipukhuri) and *Bordowa Thanor Poriso* (An introduction to Bordowa *Than*), both in Assamese, acquaints the readers with the *Bordowa Than* or *Satra*. Another

souvenir that I have referred to is the *Setubandha* released on the occasion of the *Bhaona* festival in September 2003, organised by Assam *Satra* Mahasabha and Srimanta Foundation.

IV. Journals and Periodicals:

From this category, I have consulted issues of *Mahapurush Jyoti-Journal of Srimanta Shankardeva Sangha*, *Yaatra-Journal of Assamese Literature and Culture* and *Katha Guwahati*, carrying articles by various scholars on various aspects of *Neo-Vaisnavism*, as well as issues of the *South Asian Journal of Socio-Political Studies*, the *LASSI Quarterly*, the *Economic and Political Weekly*, the *Third Concept* and the *Mainstream* carrying topics on the theme of local-self government and *Panchayati Raj* in India.

V. Magazines:

From this category, I have referred to editions of the monthly magazine in Assamese, namely, *Chintamani* dealing with *Neo-Vaisnavite* themes and the September, 1998 issue of the *Gariyoshi*, another Assamese monthly magazine, with the latter being a special issue dedicated to Srimanta Sankardeva. I have also referred to issues of the *Frontline* dealing with community development themes.

VI. Newspapers:

I have referred to both English dailies including the *Assam Tribune* and *the Hindu*, carrying relevant articles and editions of the Assamese monthly called the *Manikanchan* which carries articles on Srimanta Sankardeva and his faith.

Abhijit Bhuyan is a Research Associate in the Peace Studies, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development (OKDISCD), Guwahati. He is currently working on: '*The role of Bodo Women in the Socio-Political Movement for Bodoland*' and '*The functioning of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council*'.

As a Junior Research Fellow at OKDISCD, he has completed a research project entitled, *Gandhian Non-Violence as a means of dispute settlement in Assam: A case study of Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh (TAGS), Kumarikata*. At present the author is pursuing his Ph.D. project on "*Human Security and Gandhian Satyagraha*" at the Guwahati University.

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