

The Role of Satras in the History of Medieval Assam

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A study of the religious history of Assam indicates that Neo-Vaishnavite movement, initiated by saint Poet Shankardev during the fifteenth century is remarkable for its many sided contributions in respect to culture of the Brahmaputra valley. The movement evolved the Satra institutions and Namghars where religious discussions were made. This institution was established by Mahapurush Shankardev. Its development was initially completed by Madhavdev, Damodordev and others. The constant conflict for supremacy by the Kings, the political condition of this part of the country was unstable which brought chaos in the society. The people of Assam who were already divided into several castes and tribes were hostile to each other. One reason of this hostility may be political. Shankardev himself, from time to time, was governed by different monarchs such as Chutia, Ahom and Koch. Himself, he was a noble from a Bhuyan family. Thus he knew well the attitude of the rulers and the ruled. Besides there were other tribes like Khasi, Jayantia, Garo, Rabha, Kachari, Lalung, Tewa, Miri, Misings etc. who inhabited in this region. Most of these people had their own superstitious ideas and a sacrificial religion. The most popular religion in the valley was 'Tantricism' or "Shakti" worship which involved both animals and human sacrifices. It was at this time that Shankardev appeared on the religious scene in the region and tried to bring the entire region and its people under Neo-Vaishnavism. He viewed his faith as a means of bringing people of diverse culture groups under one umbrella with a view to unite them and at the same time discouraged the senseless killings in the name of religion.

The special feature of Neo-Vaishnavism is the Satra Institution. Each Satra is marked by the existence of a Namghar. Easy of access, Namghars meant for congregational prayer, are found in almost every village in Assam.

The disciples of Shankardev came from different castes and tribes and held high position in the Guru's time. Some of these were

Bolai from Miri, Ram from Kachari, Damodar from Bhutia, Purnananda from Kaivarta, Jayahari (Javan) from Muslims, Haridas from Bonia, Garogovinda from Garos and Narahari or Narottom from Nagas. There were others too from Khasi, Jayantia, Mikir, Lalung etc. People from different trades and occupations also embraced this religion. Singhasana, Mayurasana, Gururasana and the Manikuts were made by such skilled artisans, while screens for Ankia nat and Ankia bhaona were weaved by weavers. The drums (daba) and other utensils made of brass and metals, used in the Namghars were made by blacksmiths (Kamar). Some were involved in gayan, vadan, acting and other cultural activities. Sankardeva knew Sanskrit well but he preached in the language of the common man. This alone made his faith more acceptable among the people. There were other reasons too. Sankardeva besides being a religious reformer was also a social reformer who tried to integrate different sections of the society by giving them a new identity.

Satras may be described as a democratic institution where people from different castes assembled for a common cause. They also provided the downtrodden and the handicapped hopes of a better world. Here they expressed their thoughts and got an opportunity to overcome their problems. Satradhikar, the head preacher of a Satra, was responsible in guiding the bhakats (disciples) in all spheres of their religious life and activities. A Satradhikar must possess enough knowledge to guide them. We have examples of many Satradhikars who possessed enough talent in music and knowledge of Satriya activities. The Satradhikars were learned individuals. They wrote books in Assamese and translated Sanskrit works. Some of them were also poets. Not only this they encouraged people to undertake literary and cultural activities.

The name of Satradhikar Pitambar Dev Goswami of Garmur Satra stands out prominently among his counterparts. In addition to his responsibilities within his Satra, he travelled a lot. On one occasion he camped at Baithalansu, now in the district of Karbi Anglong, where he established 26 schools and 6 Namghars. Travelling on elephantback he is known to have visited many interior Mising villages. The nucleus of today's Mising community's progress, in every respect, is the outcome of his hard labour. The performances of Nakamalabari, Uttar Kamalabari, and Samaguri Satra were similar to those of Garmur Satra. This shows that the Satras and Satradhikars were not only interested in the religious

upliftment of their followers but were equally concerned about their social and economic development. Thus it can be said that the Satras played a very important role not only in the all round development of the people of Assam but also helped to keep them united.

Bibliography

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