

# STATE AND SATRA: A CASE STUDY OF BARPETA SATRA (FROM 16<sup>th</sup> to MID 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY)

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## ABSTRACT

The relation between state and *satra* has been a decisive one. Satras from the very beginning of its initiation had maintained a distinctive relation with the state. The Barpeta Satra, a socio-religious institution was established by Sankardeva in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. From its establishment it had to face many ups and down in different phrases of history, starting from a socio-religious institution to political entity with the passage of time. Thus this paper tries to study the transition of the relation between the Barpeta Satra and the State from 16<sup>th</sup> century to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper has been divided into three parts. The first part elucidates the theoretical perspective of the State and Satra followed by a review of literature. The second part highlights the different phases of Sankardeva's Neo-vaisnavism and gives a brief description of the Barpeta Satra. The third part provides the conclusion of the paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Barpeta Satra, State, Sankardeva, Neo-vaisnavism

## I. INTRODUCTION

The correlation between religion and politics continues to be fascinating and deceptive. Generally there is an interdependent and 'triadic relationship between state, religion and society'. Religion provides moral basis of the State's authority as well as an institutional and metaphysical structure for social transaction. In turn, religion is influenced by changing of political power and social norms and attitudes. The role of religion and religious institution in politics is influenced by the specific kind of state and society relation that obtains in a given historical conjuncture.

In this context, Marxist aphorism 'Religion is the opium of man' and 'Religion is heart of heartless world' sees economic transformation as the driving force of history, leading to a classless society in which the influence of primordial sentiments will increasingly disappear, has importance. Despite the postulation that religion is an epiphenomenon of an exploitative economic structure; works as an instrument for smooth exploitation by the ruling class, its role to fight against that exploitative social order is now widely recognized. Religion is seen by Antonio Gramsci to have a direct relationship to the socialist revolution and to revolutionary forms in general. In any such event, religion is always used as a political force. Regarding the relationship between religion, politics and social change Max Weber's work *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit Capitalism* (1905) says that the Protestant ethic was an important force behind the development of capitalism in Northern Europe. Robert N. Bellah in his *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan*, however, demonstrated that it was not only Protestantism that helped capitalism grow but religions in other social context too possessed such potentiality. Analyzing the role of religion in socio-economic change, Robert N Bellah viewed that religion established the very foundation of Japan's modern industrial economy.

*Barpeta Satra* is an important medieval socio-religious institution of Assam. It was established in the year 1583 by Madhabdeva. Though there is a drastic change in the physical structure, from the daily sittings of the *bhakat*s and such lay disciples to a systematized form and maintenance in the past 500 years. Maintaining continuity for more than five centuries the institution attains a special importance in the socio-religious and political sphere of the state. The most important institution inherited by the people of Assam from the socio-religious reform movement led by Sankardeva itself turned into a power structure with the passage of time. This backdrop would help to have an analysis of the political trajectory of the *Satra* institutions over the years.

## II. NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT AND THE SATRA INSTITUTION

In the last decades of the fifteenth century, the religious history of Assam took a new turn with initiation of the *Vaishnava* movement (Bhakti movement). It took about two centuries to firmly get established the *Vaishnava* faith as the supreme religious sect in the Brahmaputra Valley. The *Vaishnava* movement in Assam however was not an isolated phenomenon from the current of *Vaishnava* revival that swept over India during that period. The

Movement also evolved a new religious institution known as *Satra* which began to serve as an instrument of spreading the faith, which finally helped to sustain and stabilise *Vaishnavism* by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social life. In the initial years of the neo-*Vaisnavite* movement the word *Satra* was used in the sense of a religious sitting, not as systematized institution. In course of time these religious sittings of devotees began to develop on a clear line and finally emerged as a well-developed institution having a distinct structural characteristic. The political situation of the state at the time was not very favourable for Sankaradeva, to freely preach the doctrines of his creed. Several rival powers professing divergent religious views were creating ferment in the country, and Sankaradeva had to proceed carefully in his mission, even at the risk of his life. He declared spiritual equality for all men and loudly proclaimed that even a *Chandala* is superior to a Brahmin if that *Chandala* becomes devoted to *Hari* (God) whole heartedly. He rejected caste superiority as a ground of respect among men, otherwise equally venerable, as lovers of God. He had among his disciples' people from the Mahamedan community, aboriginal races of Assam, as well as from high class learned Brahmins. The most pious amongst them held the forefront position in his system irrespective of his caste, and founded religious orders of their own. In his *Kirtan*, Sankardeva stated all living beings as the creation of one God and no distinction should be made on the basis of caste regarding the prayer of God. Sankardeva's Neo-*vaishnava* movement in Assam aimed at reforming the complicated Brahmanical ritualism and instituted a social reform programme targeted to teach the common people; the simple ways of living and belief, equality of men irrespective of their caste or tribe identity, and practice of non-violence. His major thrust was however, on the eradication of the complicated and elaborate systems of rituals and practices associated with propitiation of multitudes of gods and goddesses under which peasant and workers faced extreme exploitation from all powerful priestly class. Sankardeva, therefore, introduced simple way of congregational prayer, *nam-kritana*, to the Supreme God-Vishnu or Krishna –and propitiate him with simple devotion – *bhakti*. The two aspects of his teachings-belief and submission to one supreme God, and rejection of caste distinctions in the religious plan as an attempt to create a unified society of universal brotherhood, was not in consonance with the ideal of the Ahom feudal state. The Ahom state, therefore, closely observed the Neo-*Vaishnava* movement in a suspicious way and planned to curb it down especially when Sankardeva proselytized Madhavdeva at Belguri Dhuwahat, which was then within the Ahom territory. Neo-*Vaisnavism* of Sankardeva in Assam, like other parts of India met with strong opposition from the Brahmin priesthood, as it was a crusade against the excesses of the priest craft. They managed to gain the ears of the Ahom king of Assam. Thereafter Sankardeva had to undergo a lot of troubles, which culminated in beheading of his son-in-law at the order of the Ahom king. In great disgust Sankardeva left the jurisdiction of the Ahom kings, and sought refuge in the lower Assam which was then under the rule of the Koch kingdom of Cooch-Bihar. The hostilities of Brahmins followed Sankardeva in the kingdom of Cooch-Bihar, the king who was himself a Hindu. Sankardeva had to face a big trial in the court of Koch king, but came out victorious. Sankardeva subsequently entrusted the responsibility to Madhavadeva, his favorite disciple, to carry forward the movement. Another eminent disciple of Sankardeva and successor of the movement was Damodardeva (1488-1598). During the time of these two successors, the *Satra* got its institutionalised structure. Due to ideological differences among the disciples after the death of Sankardeva, the *Satra* institutions got divided into four independent sectarian divisions, known as four *Sanghatis* -*Brahma*, *Purusha*, *Nika* and *Kala sanghati*.

Although Koch King Naranarayana patronized Sankardeva but it was during the time of Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641) and Koch King Vir Narayana(1627-1632), the attitude of the state towards *Satra* or neo *vaishnavite* movement had changed. It was because the Movement by that time became popular among the masses and secondly *Brahma Sanghati*, which was organised under the brahmanical leadership of Damodardeva was able to attract people from higher class of the society. So, by that time the *Satras* were able to have both these dominant sections of the society- masses, which constituted the major section of the society and the higher class, who were qualitatively dominant in the society. It has been recorded that although Pratap Singha gave financial as well as moral support for establishing *Satra* institution in Assam, but their rapid development made him suspicious of the institution and therefore he ordered to destroy them. The attempts of the authority however failed to check the growing popularity and development of the *Satra* institution. Especially Barpeta *Satra* had a huge number of devotees or bhakatas. At this point of time, the state had only one option; that was to adopt a cordial relation with the institution for their own benefit and *Satras* as means for establishing relation with their subjects. The process of *Satras* emerging a royal religious institution started from this period, by receiving material support, from the state in various forms; particularly of landed property. It has been recorded that King Vir Narayan (1627-1632) made a grant of eight hundred *Puras* of land to Barpeta *Satra*. In fact, this grant provided a firm footing to the *Satra* and gave it an economic security. Consequently, a sort of relationship developed between the *Satra* and the state in which they became indispensable for the each other's survival. The growing number of disciples under the domain of Barpeta *Satra* made the ruling authority suspicious of its mass-based development. The *Satradhikars* received great honour from disciples of the

Satra. The *Satradhikars* always had an immense influence over their disciples in all aspects of their life. Therefore it became necessary for the state to depend upon this dominant institution to attain moral legitimacy from its subjects. During the Moamoriya rebellion of 18<sup>th</sup> century the cordial relation between the Ahom state and Barpeta Satra remain intact as the Moamoriya rebellion did not affected the Barpeta Satra.

After the *Moamoriya* rebellion, the state faced Burmese invasion (1817-26). The *Moamoriya* rebellion checked the very root of the Ahom monarchy; still it was running in a destabilized way till Burmese invasion took place. The Burmese invasion completed the dark period of the Ahom state, which the *Moamoriya* left uncompleted and opened the door for total dissolution of the monarchy of 600 years. At the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the monarchy suffered from both internal strife and external threat, internal instabilities were in the form of personal clashes among the officers of the monarchy and the external threat was coming from the advancing of colonialism and the Burmese policy of territorial expansion. The period of Burmese rule was also significant to the *Satra* as to Assam in general. Burmese caused several destructive activities in *Satra*, they destroyed their valuable properties as well. The *charit puthis* of the *Satradhikars* of the Barpeta Satra have recorded that the Burmese encamped at Barpeta and ruled it through a network of administrative management.

The Burmese rule came to an end by the Treaty of Yandaboo (24<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1826). They renounced their entire claim to the British, ending their rule of almost four year in Assam. Occupation of British marked the close of the Ahom rule in Assam, under which patronage the Barpeta Satra consolidated, leaving little trace of its influence over so many *Satras* with which the monarchy had once intimate relationship. Increasingly, the Barpeta *Satra* with tremendous social influence, property and power quietly shifted their allegiance to the new authority, trying to retain their same status in the new situation as they had enjoyed during the earlier times. As a matter of fact, the Barpeta *Satra* from the very beginning maintained cordial relationship with the British. As *Satras* were the most influential socio-religious institution at that time, the colonial government also wanted it to be under its influence. One was armed with its political power i.e. the new authority and the second one was with socio- religious power, provided moral as well as institutional support for social transaction, both were interdependent. Therefore Jenkins (1834-1861), Agent to the Governor General in Assam, and Commissioner of the State invited all *Satradhikars* who claimed ownership of landed properties received from the royal office in the earlier period, to present before him the documentary evidence in support of their claim. The step did not have any further importance other than to prove the change in political power. It is because that although some of the *Satras* could not prove the documentary evidence of their landed property and temporally lost their property, but in course of time, the Government (British) re-granted their lands. The Barpeta *satra*, one of the principal *Satra* of Assam had lost its proof of land grant (copper plate) during the Burmese invasion. Subsequently it failed to produce its claim before the British administration when the documentary evidence was asked for. Consequently the *Satra* had to lose many of its *devottar* and *dharmottar* lands. However, the Government later considering the status and credibility of the claim granted one thousand *puras* of land to the *Satra* in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The gratitude of the *Satra* on this act was reflected in its support to the colonial government. Later during Lord Chelmsford's visit to Barpeta in 1920, the administration made the land grants to the *Satra* permanent. The colonial government tried to prove that keeping allegiance to the defunct Ahom aristocracy, who were no longer in power, would serve their purpose, and that, therefore, they would not retain the wealth and influence unless the British government supported and approved. The colonial governments succeed in their aim and started a friendly relationship with the *Satras*. Both of them offered support to each other, the British helped them materially and the *Satras*, in establishing the British rule. It is noted that almost all the high office bearers and Governors of Assam of the British period, made it a point to visit the principal *Satras* after their assumption of the offices.

The nineteenth century showed initiation of reform process in the Indian society. The social reform programmes were integral part of the India's struggles for freedom. In many places in India people showed their resentments over untouchability, child marriage and poor condition of women in the society. The process to eradicate the iniquities of the society - child marriage, widow marriage, untouchability and eradication of opium however did not receive enough support from the socio-religious institution of Assam i.e. *Satra*. The *Satra* institution in this context had a significant role to play as well as reform the societal rules and regulations. The *Satradhikars* were aware of the situation, but they were unwilling to interfere in all social affairs. Regarding the abolition of opium, the *Satradhikar* of Barpeta *satra* wrote to the colonial government about his wishes for abolition of the opium, but not immediately. This is because the opium was considered as an antidote of diarrhea diseases. In support of such attitude, A.W. Watham, the British secretary mentioned the importance of the opinion of the *Vaishnava* guru at the floor of the Legislative Assembly on abolition of opium.

Parallel to such programmes, the *Satradhikara* of Barpeta *Satra* undertook some measures to make the villages

self-dependent through the Hati system. He started the cooperative movement in Barpeta and innovate certain aspects of the village economic life. The result of such initiatives was that the relationship of Barpeta *Satra* with the colonial administration got strained, more particularly after the 1926 session of the Indian National Congress at Gauhati, where the *Satradhikara* met Gandhiji. In subsequent times, the *Satras* got divided into two houses, one supporting the freedom struggle and other maintaining a relationship with the ruling British.

There is however records that the *Satradhikara* of Barpeta *Satra* during the First World War contributed 500 rupees to the Government Relief Fund although he could not subscribe to the War Loan Fund. Overall, it appears that the approaches and stand of the *Satradhikara* of the Barpeta *Satra* showed contradictions. There was an expression of pro-state attitude in the initial years, which later had changed with the spread of nationalistic sentiment. It may be because of the fact that the structural and behavioural pattern of the *Satra* institution had deep impact in his early years which later had changed after the joining the Gandhian National Movement or at times being a dominant leader of the socio-religious institution it might be a kind of ceremonial behaviour.

### iii. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the *Satra* institution which was a hallmark of socio-religious reform movement led by *Sankardeva* lost its primary aim in course of time due to material as well as political ambition of most of the leaders of the institution. With the passage of time they played direct or indirect role in the political affairs of the state resulting in the failure of its ultimate goal once prospect by Sankardeva and his disciples. The *Rajaghoriya Satras* established and patronised by the royal family always played role in favour of the state from the medieval period. The behaviour of these *Satradhikaras* at present time has not changed from the nature of their predecessors in the medieval monarchical system. It is interesting to note that at present every candidate contesting in the Assembly election or parliamentary elections from *Satra*-based constituencies visits the *Satras* seeking blessings of the *Satradhikaras* and support from the inmates of the *Satra*. Indeed all *Satradhikaras* are maintaining some kind of political influence and tries to enjoy all possible types of the royal prerogatives. With such developments, most of the *Satras*, especially those with Brahmin abbots, lost their progressiveness and reformist thrust. In such an environment there is scope to argue the neo-*vaishnavism* no longer remained a people's religion and the *Satra* institution no longer remained a socio-cultural-religious institution that was geared to create a higher and wider plane of cultural or societal identification.

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