



Research Paper

Bordowa Satra: Foundation of Vaishnav Dharma in Assam

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Acknowledgment

Satras are the Vaishnava Monasteries predominantly found in the state of Assam, introduced by Vaishnava Saint Sankardeva. Advent of Satras signifies evolution in religious and cultural sphere of Assam. This article researches on Bordowa Satra, the first satra established by Sankardev, both its structural and cultural elements.

Keywords: Bordowa, Satra, Vaishnava, Namghar, Kirtanghar

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In the early 15 century many parts of our country witnessed degradation of socio economic and religious life. Then there emerged a period of reformation from 15 to 16 century. As a result, there arose bhakti movement in southern parts of India, where in Assam this reform movement is known as Neo Vaishnavite Movement. Srimanta Sankardev a man of versatile and a great reformer and a nation builder is the founder of New Vaishnavite Movement. The greatest contribution of Sankardev led to set a New age, new culture, new identity to Assamese society. The satras, called by the British writers as the spiritual colleges, are the centres of proselytization. Emerging as a major religious – cum- social institution, their number grew to more than one thousand by the middle of the 18th century and are still a countable force of social change and acculturation in the plains of the state. The most important aspect of these satras was their monastic character.

Satra, Thaan or Namghar was established and came into being as way to religious purpose and all these institutions were flourished under ideology of Neo Vaishnavism propounded by Sankardeva. These intuitions depict the socio religious scenario of Assamese society in early 16 th century, these are basically run by the satradhikas, bhakats and local people. Sankardeva, according to the earlier chronicles of Assam has established his first satra at Bordowa, in his birth place, then different centres of Assam he has visited as he had to travel from one place to another. Satra has become the integral essence of the Assamese life and culture and unified the society from west to east of the land. Derivation of the term “Satra” as per the majority of opinions expectantly perceived from the Vedic sculptures “Satapatha Brahmana” And “Naimisa- ksetra” in the sense of a revered sacrifice, it can be traced in abundantly in the Bhagwat purana also.

The study of Vaishnavism in Assam is important in the historical and social spheres because its initiation brought a considerable change amongst the Assamese people both in the social and cultural levels. In Assam, the Bhakti or Neo vaishnavite movement was launched by Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva in the sixteenth century. The movement led by Sankardeva did not differ in fundamental points from the similar Bhakti movement in India. Spending twelve years outside Assam in different holy places of India, where he entered in to religious discourses with different theologians and could study the religious trends of the period, Sankardeva introduced a creed, adhering the main principles of Bhakti, which could revolutionaries the entire face of the life of the people and lead to the formation of a broader civil society. He emphasized congregational singing of the Nama or chanting the name of God and made the Sanskrit scriptures, accessible to all, by reinterpreting them into Assamese because before him the scripts used were monopoly only for the Brahmins. Sankardeva translated the Bhagavata purana in to simple Assamese hymns and verses which the non-literate could understand and recite. Sankardeva taught a simple creed which is called “Ek SARAN NAM DHARMA”; the religion of supreme surrender to one and that one is Krishna- Vishnu who in the form of Narayana, assumes incarnations from age to age to redeem the world to grace his devotees.

GEOGRAPHY

The Bordowa Satra is located about 140 km from Guwahati and about 18 km North-West from Nagaon town, Assam, India at 26° 24' 51" N latitude and 92° 3' 22" E longitude. Within the premises there exist Narowa Satra and Salaguri Satra, the thaan campus covers an area of 16 bighas of land approximately.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Bordowa satra has a very rich historical background, as this was the first institution organised by Sankardev after returning from his first pilgrimage in about 1494 A.D. for the propagation of his religious philosophy 'EK SARAN NAM DHARM'. Initially there exist Namghar or Kirtanghar along with Singhasana or Thapana within the Monikut. The original name of Borduwa was "Tembuwani", as it was situated on the bank of Tembuwani river on the south bank of mighty Brahmaputra in the present district of Nagaon. The surroundings areas of Tembuwani were very low and prone to floods and remaining other upper lands were covered by dense forest. There were no habitations in these areas before Chandibora the forefather of Sankardeva came to this place. There was a belief that Bordowa was also known as Aliphukhuri. But Aliphukhuri was a small village near Bordowa.

PHYSICAL STRUCTURE OF BORDWA THAAN:

1 TORAN: There are two gates or "Batsaras" (torans) on two sides. They are the Toranas of Norowa satra and Salaguri satra respectively. The main entrances to the Thaen are on the eastern side of the compound at Narowa and another from the southern side of the compound at salaguri, each toran or batsora are curved with sculptural representation of Vaishnava culture



Fig: 1 Toran (Gate) of Norowa satra



Fig: 2 Toran (Gate) of Salaguri satra

2 KRITANGHAR: In the middle of Bordowa thaen complex the great kritanghar (mandapa) is located. It was actually made by Sankardeva. The original kritanghar was replaced by one Assam type Building measuring 180ft. length and 85ft. breath with an attached Monikut in 1958. It can be noted that though modern technique is applied at the time of reconstruction of the kritanghar yet the traditional style of same is also maintained to some extent. A large number of bhakts, jatris visit Bordowa thaen and join the daily nam prasanga (prayers) in kritanghar. The main entrance of kritanghar is known as "Sinhaduar".

3 MANIKUT: The Manikut (garbhagriha) is attached with the kritanghar adjoining the eastern end. In the Manikut the sacred scripts are kept. including old manuscripts written on sanchi leaves by the Vaishnava gurus

are kept and preserved here. The Manikut has two entrances one is on northern side and the other door connects this house with the kritanghar.

4 NATGHAR-The Natghar stand in front of the kritanghar. The Natghar measuring 120x80 is meant for staging of Ankiya Bhaona during festival time. This house is also used for holding of general council, religious gatherings and spiritual discussion as and when required. During “DouI” festival a large number of devotees were assembled in Natghar every year.

5 The Alohi ghar- The Alohi ghar is to the North of kritanghar. It is an assam type building measuring 90x30. It attached both rooms, kitchen and lavatories for accommodations facilities to the pilgrims coming to the Thaan. The Alohighar is also known as “Jatri Nivas”. The building is divided in two parts, one is named by Ai “Kanaklata Jatri Nivas” and other part is named by “Damodar Ata Bhavan” in their memory.

6 The Sabhaghar- The Sabhaghar is located in the south east corner of the kritanghar. it is an auditorium type serving as general council hall and also a place for Aakhara (practice).

7 The Akashiganga-The Akashiganga is towards the north of Bordowa Thaan. It was initially at place where big “Bata” tree was standing, mark of Lord Krishna’s resting place on his way to Dwarka from the kingdom. To meet the scarcity of water Sankardeva invited Ganga invoking God.

8 The Old well- The old well of the days of Sankardeva is located by the side of north padasila griha. It has been used since the time of Sankardeva. Presently its water is drawn primarily for jogan dhowa. (to wash away the dirt of gram and green gram used as prasada in daily prayer services)

9 DouI Mandir- The DouI mandir is located on the southern part of Bordowa Thaan. Every year Holi festival is celebrated here with great enthusiasm.

10 Silikha Briksha – The silikha tree first planted by sankardeva has been present in the west of the thaan. under the tree sankardeva wrote out most of his valuable works for preaching of “EK SARAN DHARMA”.

BORDOWA MINI MUSEUM-

The Museum is situated at the heart of the Bordowa Thaan Near the Akashiganga lake. The Bordowa Mini Museum was set up in 1985. The main aim of setting up this museum is to preserved the cultural heritage of Vaishnava community of Assam. Most of the objects are wooden artefacts believed to have been once a part of the Thaan used for various socio – religious purpose. But some of the collection of wooden structures kept in the museum are less recognized because of proper care and importance.



Fig: 3 -Wooden door frame



Fig: 4 -wooden door frame



Fig: 5- Vishnu image

CONCLUSION

Bordowa satra contributes a lot towards the Vaishnava culture present today in Assam. Sankardeva advocated “EK DEVA, EK SEBA, EK BINEY, NAHI KEWA”, means that one should worship one God, who is Lord Krishna. During that phase the societies of assam were vowed towards Saktism and Shaivism and they supported the sacrifice system, so Sankardeva had propagated Vaishnava dharma which get rids of sacrifices and brings peace and tranquillity in the minds of people. it is a very interesting observation conducted in the premises of the satra, which signifies a lot about the principles and cultures of Vaishnavism.

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