



Research Paper

Understanding the Role of Women in Religious Institutions: A Glimpse into the Sattrra Culture of Majuli

Jyotshna Saikia

MA in Political Science , Dibrugarh University.

Abstract:

Religion in every society is considered as the path to stay close with the divine power. In India, religious values and norms play a remarkable role in regulating the lives of Indian people especially the female section of the society. Women are mostly influenced by religiosity, and their role and status in the society is frequently determined by complex relationship between genders. The hegemonic role played by the men in the Vaishnava religion as well as in religious institution is also come under the purview of patriarchy. This paper has focused on understanding the role of women in the institution of Sattrra (A socio-cultural and religious institution of Vaishnava religion present in Assam). The highlighting part of this paper is that, it discusses about women's participation in every possible way in the affairs of Sattrra. The changing role and position of women with the changing nature of time can also be seen in the Vaishnava religion of Assam.

Keywords: Religion, Sattrra, Majuli, Vaishnava, Woman, Culture.

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I. Introduction:

“A Woman is the full circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture and transform.”

- Diane Marechild, Author

A person with some particular characteristics (that are decided by the society mostly) along with their biological differences from ‘man’, is simply called as ‘woman’. Women are an integral part of every society. We are living in the modern globalized society of 21st century, but the status of women in every society has been a topic of debate and discussion for many years. Women are still facing various challenges despite of all the progress we made in recent years.

Religion has always been a way of life for human being. People follow numerous norms, values and beliefs in the name of religion. In the religious realm, both women and men have different activities and experiences. It is really sad to see the women as the ‘victim’ in almost every sphere of society including the religious sector.

Religion and Indian Women:

Religion is one of the greatest identity markers of human being. Simply, religion can be called as the link to connect with the divine power i.e. God. It is a collection of various socio-cultural systems, behaviors, beliefs and practices, morals, ethics, worldviews, texts and many more. Religion is an all encompassing way of life. India is a diverse nation, it is home to almost all the major religion of the world such as Hinduism, Islam, Catholic etc. and India is also regarded as the birth place of some other religion including Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. India is also home to Judaism and Zoroastrianism. The Indian family is meant to fulfill their religious obligation from birth to death. A family is incomplete without a woman, they are also bound to do their religious activities as like the men. In every religion, Indian women have the secondary position. Indian women have been trapped in the boundaries set by the patriarchal Indian society. Religion also becomes a patriarchal instrument to control over the women. Women are even forbidden to retain their fundamental rights to participate in religious activities and rituals during menstruation.

Women's position in the society was not as same as now. In the ancient time, women are celebrated as the most powerful and empowering force. They were treated as equal to men and there was no discrimination on the basis of gender. Some Hindu texts manifested women as ‘Devis’ or Goddess, Indian society also considered them as ‘Janani’ which means mother. But, the medieval period was extremely disappointing for Indian women. The patriarchal society assigned the public sphere to men and the private sphere to women. In the

religious sphere, especially the Muslim women were largely restricted to household duties. In the early modern period, women in some cases did hold some important and influential jobs. Women are participating in both public and private sphere in this modern era. But, they are still lacking behind the men in every sphere of their life.

The Sattra Culture of Majuli:

The institution of Sattra is a resourceful outcome and an unique feature of Vaishnava faith, founded by Srimanta Sankardeva. Sankardeva tried to bring about a renaissance which later on gave the Assamese community their own identity and culture. Therefore, he is known as the father of Assamese culture. The Sattra is the physical place of spiritual and cultural beliefs of Neo-Vaishnavism.

Majuli, the magnificent island district of Assam is famous for its natural beauty and for its own unique culture. The world's largest river island, Majuli, is the hub of art, culture, and Neo-vaishnavite faith. Within the sixteenth century Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva and his chief disciple, Madhabdeva ordered the muse of the Sattra within the Majuli island. Majuli is additionally known as '*Etoka Mahantar Sthan*'. The art, dance, music and other cultural activities are an integral part of Sattra. The Sattra can connect the common people of Majuli island through their culture, religious practices and other socio-cultural teachings. The *Belguri Sattra* was the first Sattra that established in Majuli. It was named after the place where the two great saints Sankardeva and Madhabdeva met for the first time. This is known as the '*Monikanchan Sanjog*'. There are about 20-30 Sattras are present in Majuli at present time and four of them are considered as the main Sattras.

List of Sattra in Majuli:

1. Auniati Sattra
2. Ahaotaguri Sattra
3. Dhakanpat Sattra
4. Goromur Sattra
5. Utar Kamalabari Sattra
6. Natun Kamalbari Sattra
7. Begenaati Sattra
8. Bhogpur Sattra
9. Natun Chamoguri Sattra
10. Elegi Narsigha Sattra
11. Bihimpur Sattra
12. Bor Elegi Sattra
13. Dikhoulukhiya Bor Elengi Sattra
14. Ouba Satra
15. Elegi Bahjegoni Sattra
16. Prachin Chamoguri Sattra
17. Elegi Tokubari Sattra
18. Belesandhia Sattra
19. Majuli Bor Elengi Sattra
20. Aadi Bihimpur Sattra
21. Adhar Mahora Sattra
22. Sakupara Sattra
23. Dhakanpat Achomi Sattra
24. Madhya Majuli Kamalabari Sattra
25. Elegi Madharguri Sattra
26. Shokola sattra
27. Doloni Samaguri Sattra
28. Ananta Kalsila Sattra
29. Garamur Saru Sattra
30. Kahar Jan Na Sattra
31. Natun Chokla Sattra

Source: Goswami, Kesavananda Dev, Sattra Sanskritir Rup-Rekha p.18

Women's Role in Sattriya Culture:

The neo-vaishnavite movement is a glorious part of religious history of Assam. The movement was initiated by the greatest saint Sankardeva in the last decade of fifteen century. Sattras are the neo-vaishnavite monasteries of Assam. These Sattras were established as a part of medieval Bhakti movement in Assam. Sattras play an important role in both religious and socio-cultural sphere. Sattras are intimately connected to the

Assamese society, it become a part of their life. The institution of Sattra is one of the great contributors in spreading Vaishnavism in Assam and the cultural development of Assam.

Religious institutions are always hierarchical and patriarchal. The institution of Sattra is also the same. While imagining the figure of this institution, it always portrayed a place where all the men folks are living together and performing all the spiritual and cultural activities. Women are regarded as subordinate to men. Both women and men have different experiences and duties in Sattras. To understand the role of women folks in Sattra, we must look into every aspect of their life including biological, socio-political, and cultural.

- The word patriarchy means the dominance of male, it distributes the power unevenly between men and women. Patriarchy is considered as the root cause of the degrading status of women. Patriarchal rule regulations are followed in the institution of Sattra. Women are considered as secondary to men, therefore till now we don't see any women who have had the priestly role in Sattras. Women are not allowed to be the *Satradhikara* (The head of the institution of Sattra). Only male folks can live in the monasteries as *Bhakats* or monk, they are considered as sacred devotees. Sattras are considered as the cultural hub of Majuli, but, most of the cultural activities in Sattras are performed by the male especially in the *Udasin Sattras* (Here, the *Satradhikaras* and the monks never want to marry or enter into the second stage of life or second *Asrama – Grhastha*).

- Women are biologically different from men, one such example is menstruation. In India, menstruation becomes a taboo for women which lead a pile of prohibitions for them. A young menstruating woman is given isolated accommodation while they are in their cycle. In Hinduism, the ancient text *Vedas*, never regarded menstruation as impure. But, the extra-vedic articles regarded menstruation as sinful. In the menstruating period women are not allowed in these religious institutions i.e. Sattras because they are considered as impure.

- Due to patriarchal structure, women can't participate in the governing body of Sattras. Their role remains negligible in the management and administrative sector. The management committees of Sattras are still male dominated and have male stereotypes. But, there was one instance of women's involvement in managing administrative affairs of Sattras in the history. Sankardeva's own grand-daughter in law Kanakalata alias Laxmi Ai is a good example as she became the religious head for the first time in the history of Vaishnavism in Assam.

- Some Sattras in Assam follows liberal ethos but some of them are still very orthodox in nature. Especially, in the lower part of Assam, some Sattras not even allowed women in entering the main prayer hall. As for example, the debate of *Barpeta Sattra* is still going on. But in reality, women are more spiritual and dedicated in compare to the men. In Majuli, there is no such rigid rule for the entrance of women; but, in some Sattras both men and women can enter in the main prayer hall only after wearing traditional cloths.

- Though it is seen that almost all kind of activities in Sattras are done by men. But, women also hold their own position and are allowed to participate in religious proceedings. Women have played a significant role in preserving the traditional doctrines and day by day practices. The participation of women in the *Namghar* (prayer hall) is noteworthy.

- For larger benefit of women folk of a particular village, they generally form a small collective group which is known as *Got*. There are also *Mahila Samitis* for the upliftment of women in general. The *Satradhikara* (head of the Sattra) of the particular Sattra under which they are affiliated to, often becomes the beneficiary and they help them to earn profit for their socio-economic development.

Sattras are an integral part of Assamese Vaishnavite culture. The relation between women and the institution of Sattra is quite interesting. As a patriarchal institution, the role of women in Sattras is always considered as secondary and their position still remain after men.

II. Conclusion:

If we look into the history of Vaishnava faith in Assam, then it will reveal the fact that women's role in the religious sphere is always passive. But, nowadays this notion is changing due to the consciousness of women. Education and other important platforms make them more aware of their conditions. They are not portraying themselves as the sole carrier of religious traditions at present time. In the modern globalized era, women are more conscious about their empowerment. Women's participation in socio-religious affairs are mainly determined by gender discrimination. Though as women, their role and position in those religious institution continues to be the same; yet, with the changing nature of time more liberal and flexible ideas are coming and gradually the status of women is uplifting with time. Moreover, to reduce such kind of discrimination against women and for their development, both men and women should work together along with the help of government and other organizations (NGOs). Women must come out of their stereotypical domain. They have to engage themselves in everything so that they can develop their socio-political, cultural, economic and spiritual self.

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