



THE EVOLUTION AND MODERN CHALLENGES OF MONASTIC SATTRAS IN ASSAM

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Abstract: The monastic Sattras of Assam, established as part of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva in the late 15th century, have played a significant role in shaping the religious, socio-cultural, and economic landscape of Assamese society. These institutions, founded to propagate Bhakti Dharma and foster social cohesion through egalitarian principles, have influenced various aspects of Assamese culture, including music, dance, drama, literature, art, and craft. Despite their historical importance, the monastic Sattras face numerous contemporary challenges such as land encroachment, economic constraints, and the impacts of modernization and natural disasters. This paper explores the historical evolution of the monastic Sattras, their contributions to Assamese society, and the multifaceted challenges they encounter in the modern era.

Keywords: Sattras, Monastic, Evolution, Challenges, Assam

I. INTRODUCTION

The Sattras, established during the Neo-Vaishnavite movement by Sankardeva in the late fifteenth century, are crucial socio-religious institutions in Assam. These centers of the Bhakti movement aimed to deeply integrate Vaishnavism into Assamese society, promoting values like equality, non-violence, and devotion. Over the centuries, Sattras have shaped Assam's cultural, educational, and spiritual landscape through music, dance, literature, and art.

Despite facing challenges such as modernization and socio-economic pressures, Sattras remain significant in Assamese life. They are categorized based on the celibacy of their leaders and followers into monastic, grihasthi, semi-monastic, and mixed types. Their activities have enriched Assamese culture and fostered community bonds.

Economic stability, primarily derived from agriculture, is vital for Sattras, but they face challenges like erosion, land encroachment, natural disasters, poor transport, and inadequate government compensation. These issues, along with theft and land pressure from population growth, threaten their sustainability. Despite these obstacles, Sattras continue to preserve and propagate Assamese cultural heritage and traditional values.

II. METHODOLOGY

For the completion of this paper, a number of secondary sources have been used to gain a better understanding of the subject. Besides, field observations were done to acquire information.

III. EVOLUTION OF SATTRA

The evolution of the Sattra institution in Assam showcases its transformative journey and significant influence over time. Initially conceived during Sankardeva's era, Sattras were in their formative stages, focused on specific religious and socio-cultural activities. It was through the systematic efforts of later religious leaders, particularly Damodaradeva, that Sattras were given a more structured and enduring form.

Sattras are classified based on the marital status of their leaders (Sattradhikaras) and followers (Bhakats) into four categories:

1. **Monastic:** Both the Adhikaras and Bhakats live celibate lives.
2. **Grihasthi:** Both the Adhikaras and Bhakats lead household lives with families.
3. **Semi Monastic:** The Adhikara and Deka Adhikara remain celibate, while the Bhakats are married (e.g., Garmur Sattra of Majuli).
4. **Admixture:** A combination of the first two types where the Adhikara and Deka Adhikara are married, and the Bhakats include both celibates and non-celibates.

The monastic Sattras, governed by specific rules, are the most developed form of these institutions and have significantly uplifted the socio-cultural and economic conditions of rural communities in the Brahmaputra valley. They have enriched Assamese life through contributions in morality, social structure, education, literature, music, dance, drama, and art, rooted in the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

Sankaradeva's monotheistic philosophy, *EKA SARONA NAM DHARMA*, emphasized religious unity and cultural reformation through common language and culture. His works, including Namakirtana, Ankiya plays, and texts like "Kirtana Ghosa" and "Bhakti Ratnakar," laid the foundation of Sankri culture.

Monastic and grihasthi Sattras have both contributed to cultural activities. Monastic Sattras influenced dance, Ankia-bhaona, Gayon-bayon, and Ojapali, while grihasthi Sattras excelled in Naam Prasanga, mask making, Borgeet, and Bhaona, despite familial responsibilities.

IV. STRUCTURE AND TRADITIONAL PLAN OF MONASTIC SATTRAS

The monastic Sattras in Assam have a distinct structure and traditional plan that have been maintained over the centuries. Each Sattra comprises a compound, which can vary in size, and within this compound are several essential houses that serve various purposes. These structures are crucial for the functioning of the Sattra and include the Namghar or Kirtonghar, Manikut, Korapat or Batchora, Hati, Boha, Bharalghor, and other specialized buildings. Below are descriptions of these key structures:

1. **Hati**
A Hati is a row of houses or huts aligned with the Namghar and Manikut at the front. These individual houses, known as Boha, are where the Bhakats (devotees) reside. The alignment of these houses forms what is known as a Hati.
2. **Boha**
The term Boha refers to small cottages within the Hati where the Bhakats live. According to the Hemkosh dictionary, Boha means "temporary living." These houses provide shelter for the Bhakats and are considered temporary residences reflecting the transient nature of life.
3. **Namghar and Manikut**
The Namghar, or Kirtonghar, is the central prayer hall within a Sattra. At its eastern end, perpendicular to it, is a smaller hall known as the Manikut, which is often referred to as the "house of the jewel".
4. **Korapat or Batchora**
Korapat, also known as Batchora, is a small open house marking the entrance to the interior of the Sattra. It serves as the gatehouse of the Sattra.

V. SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MONASTIC SATTRAS

Monastic Sattras are distinctive institutions with unique characteristics that set them apart. Each Sattra has a distinct compound with one to four Hati (enclosures) and special structural elements such as korapat, kirtanghar or namghor (prayer halls), monikut (sanctum sanctorum), mahaprabhu griha (main deity house), bhoral ghor (storage house), and occasionally special houses like padosila griha. Both Adhikaras (authorities) and Bhakats (devotees) remain unmarried. Bhakats live in small cottages called Boha within the Hati, while Adhikaras reside in either the east or north Hati, except for Auniati Sattra, where they live centrally near the Namghara. Bhakats wear white Kurta and Dhoti, must remain clean-shaven, and perform all kinds of household work. They follow a fixed timetable for agricultural work and learning Sattriya music, using dhari and koth for sitting instead of tables and chairs. Their lives are devoted to promoting Sattriya culture, renouncing material pleasures and domestic or family life. Additionally,

wearing shoes and riding bicycles or vehicles inside the Sattrra compound is strictly prohibited. Bhakats are also experts in music, craft, and painting, and they have the freedom to leave the Sattrra if they wish. The monastic Sattras have made significant contributions to Assamese society, enriching social and moral values, literature, music, dance, drama, and craftsmanship. These multifaceted contributions highlight the important role that monastic Sattras play in the cultural and social fabric of Assamese society.

VI. COMPONENTS OF MONASTIC SATTRA: ADHIKARA, DEKA ADHIKARA, AND BHAKATS

1. Adhikara

The head of a Sattrra is known as the Adhikara or Sattradhikara. This position is akin to the Mohunt of medieval maths. The Adhikara serves as the religious head and spiritual guide, overseeing initiation ceremonies and guiding the spiritual life of the Sattrra community. The role of Adhikara can be compared to that of an abbot in Christianity.

2. Deka Adhikara

The Deka Adhikara is second in command and usually succeeds the Adhikara. In the absence of the Adhikara, the Deka Adhikara performs the duties of the head. This role is similar to that of a tutor abbot in Tibetan Buddhism.

3. Bhakat

Bhakats are celibate devotees within the monastic Sattras, known as Udasin Bhakat in Upper Assam and Kewalia Bhakat in Lower Assam. They are typically recruited at a young age and trained under the guidance of elder Bhakats. The relationship between the head of the Boha (Burhabhakat) and the young Bhakats is nurturing, akin to a father-son relationship. These Bhakats often come from the families of the Sattrra's disciples.

VII. CONTRIBUTION OF MONASTIC SATTRAS TO ASSAMESE SOCIETY

The monastic Sattras have made significant contributions to Assamese society in various fields:

1. Moral and Social Values

Sattras have enriched social and moral values, influencing the daily lives and decisions of the Assamese people. Their guidance continues to be respected in many villages.

2. Educational Contributions

Before the establishment of formal education systems, Sattras played a crucial role in education. They provided a place for learning and physical training through activities and customs practiced daily.

3. Literary Contributions

Sattras have also made substantial contributions to Assamese literature. For example, the second news magazine, "The Assam Bilasini," was published from Auniati Sattrra in 1871, significantly impacting Sattriya music and dance.

VIII. CONTRIBUTION TO INDIA'S FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Sattras played a role in India's freedom movement, leveraging their influence to inspire and mobilize people.

The structure and traditional plan of monastic Sattras, along with their various components, have enabled them to make profound and multifaceted contributions to Assamese society. Their influence spans social, educational, literary, and cultural domains, showcasing the enduring legacy of these institutions.

The impact of modernization on the monastic Sattras of Assam represents a complex interplay between preserving centuries-old traditions and adapting to the rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape of contemporary times. Rooted in the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva in the 15th century, Sattras have historically served as centers of spiritual, cultural, and social life in Assam. These institutions, characterized by their communal living and strict adherence to Vaishnavite principles, have played a crucial role in shaping Assamese identity and religious practices.

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X. MONASTIC SATTRA'S ROLE IN CULTURAL ASSIMILATION:

Monastic Sattras have played a significant role in cultural assimilation and have had a profound impact on various spheres of Assamese society. Over the last few centuries, Sattras have enriched Assamese society socially, literarily, and educationally. One of their most notable contributions is the upliftment of the backward classes. The so-called untouchable and backward classes were freely embraced into the fold of Vaisnavism, fostering a sense of spiritual bond and fellow feeling that helped to reduce caste distinctions, even though inter-dining and inter-marriage between different castes were not prescribed (Sarma, 2001). Sattras have been a powerful social force, significantly strengthened by the acceptance of the Vaisnava faith by the Ahom kings and nobles.

Furthermore, Sattras have made notable contributions to the social life of various tribes in Assam. Non-Aryan tribes like the Koch, Moran, Chutiya, and Kachari were brought into the fold of Vaisnavism. Vaisnavite missionary activities were also conducted among tribes like the Mising, Naga, and Aitoniya. Sattras affiliated with the Kala Samhati, a branch of Assamese Vaisnavism, such as Dihing, Cecha, Budbari, Bareghar, Gharmora, and Katanipar, deserve special mention for their missionary activities among the backward and tribal people.

In Assam, tolerance became the norm rather than the exception. Within Vaisnava congregations, all members were considered equal. Prayer services and the reading of sacred texts could be conducted by anyone capable, regardless of their social standing. Offerings to the deity could be distributed in the assembly by individuals of any caste within the circle of Bhakats. Despite persecution from orthodox factions, people flocked to Sankaradeva's side to listen to his message of love, meeting as equal sons of God. Through these efforts, Sattras have greatly contributed to the cultural assimilation and social cohesion of Assamese society.

XI. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND TRADITIONAL ROLE OF SATTRAS

The term "Sattra" itself denotes a place of assembly or association, and over the centuries, these institutions have evolved into multifaceted entities encompassing religious rituals, cultural practices, and educational activities. Initially established to propagate the teachings of Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavdeva, Sattras have been instrumental in preserving and transmitting Sattriya culture, encompassing music, dance, drama, literature, and various art forms.

Traditionally, Sattras have been classified based on their adherence to celibacy among their members. Monastic Sattras, where both the adhikaras (leaders) and bhakats (devotees) maintain celibacy, have been at the core of this classification. Other types include grihasthi Sattras, where celibacy is not strictly followed, semi-monastic Sattras, and those with an admixture of celibate and non-celibate members. Each type has its own set of customs and practices, deeply intertwined with the socio-religious fabric of Assamese society.

Modernization and Its Impact

The onset of modernization, particularly from the late 19th century onwards, has brought profound changes to all aspects of life in Assam, including its traditional institutions like the Sattras. Modernization is not merely a process of adopting new technologies; it entails a broader transformation of societal values, beliefs, and norms. In the context of Sattras, this transformation has manifested in various ways, posing both challenges and opportunities for their continuity and relevance.

Cultural and Social Changes

One of the most visible impacts of modernization on monastic Sattras has been in the realm of cultural practices and recreational habits. Traditionally, bhakats adhered strictly to customs such as celibacy and the wearing of traditional attire. However, the advent of electronic media—television, mobile phones, and cable TV—has exposed them to external influences, challenging these traditional norms. Many bhakats

have embraced modern recreational activities, raising concerns about the erosion of celibacy and the preservation of traditional cultural practices.

Moreover, modernization has introduced changes in educational practices within Sattras. Initially resistant to modern education, which was seen as conflicting with traditional values, Sattras eventually adapted to incorporate formal education. Leaders like Dr. Pitambor Deva Goswami of Auniati Sattra have played pivotal roles in promoting higher education among bhakats, thereby balancing traditional religious teachings with modern academic pursuits.

Economic and Technological Influences

Economically, modernization has impacted Sattras by introducing new sources of income and livelihoods. Some Sattras have diversified into tourism, offering visitors insights into Assamese culture and Sattriya traditions. Others have embraced agricultural modernization, replacing traditional practices with more efficient methods. Technologically, the introduction of machinery like mini rice mills and communication tools such as the internet has facilitated both economic growth and cultural exchange within Sattras.

Challenges and Responses

Monastic Sattras in Assam have faced significant challenges due to modernization, leading to conflicts between traditional values and contemporary influences. Issues such as declining respect for customs, material temptations, and diluted spiritual practices threaten their continuity. Leaders have responded with varying degrees of conservatism and adaptation, balancing heritage preservation with societal changes.

The impact of modernization has been profound, introducing new technologies and changing values, influencing how Sattras operate. The challenge lies in preserving rich traditions while embracing modern opportunities. The evolution of these institutions reflects a dynamic adaptation process, ensuring Sankardeva's legacy and the Sattriya tradition thrive. Thoughtfully navigating these challenges, monastic Sattras can continue to shape Assam's cultural landscape, bridging past traditions and future possibilities.

XII. CONCLUSION

The monastic Sattras of Assam, rooted in the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, have been pivotal in enriching Assamese culture and upholding moral and social values. Over centuries, these institutions have significantly contributed to the development of Assamese literature, music, art, and education. However, the Sattras are now grappling with modern challenges, including land encroachment, economic difficulties, and the influence of modernization. The erosion of traditional values due to modern amenities, such as electronic media, poses a threat to their cultural and religious ethos. To sustain their relevance and continue their contributions, it is crucial for the Sattras to adapt to contemporary changes while preserving their core values and traditions. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that integrates modern advancements with the preservation of cultural heritage, ensuring the Sattras remain a vital part of Assamese society.

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