

Management Practices in the Monastic Satras of Majuli: Problems and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Satras are a unique product of the neo-vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva which was introduced to propagate the ideals of neo-vaishnavism around 500 years ago. These socio-cultural institutions were widely propagated by his disciple Madhabdeva and Damodardeva after the demise of Sankardeva in and around the state of Assam. The Satra institutions contributed immensely to the socio-cultural and spiritual development of the Assamese people. The religious and cultural preachings endorsed by the Satras have been upholding communal integration and harmony amongst the Assamese people since ages. These institutions engrossed themselves to a large extent towards the spread of intellectual and cultural traditions of the people. The formal education of the residing (in-house) disciples of the Satra is also considered a part and parcel of the Satra institution amongst various other activities. These institutions have sustained various changes brought along with time and continue to perform various activities maintaining its glorious feature within a unique set of infrastructure.

As such, the management practices followed in the Satra institutions are of great importance more so in the light of the fact that they contain antiques, artifacts and manuscripts of immense historical importance and if we are to uphold this unique concept called 'Satra' which has been a source of identity to the Assamese community for ages now. This paper aims to study the management practices prevalent in the monastic Satras of Assam together with suggesting measures to make these institutions of immense socio-cultural importance economically viable in the long run.

Keywords: Management, Neo-Vaishnavism, Sankardeva, Satra.

INTRODUCTION:

In order to preach and propagate the cult of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, Sankardeva adopted the attractive method of holding 'kirtana' and dramatic performances to connect with the common masses without discrimination of any sort. Sankardeva had the vision of a society where all men would be treated equal, but realized that this would necessitate a radical change in the entire socio-economic structure. Therefore, it is said that he emulated Buddha and took a pragmatic approach. He tried to establish some safe havens where the conditions of peace and equality would be fulfilled. Therefore, he led to the foundation of an institution known as 'Satra'. His cousin brother Ramaraya constructed a prayer hall for that purpose at his native place Bardowa. This institution went on to become the nucleus of the Vaisnava organization, which later on spread through the entire state of Assam in the form of regional establishments called 'SATRA', and numerous village temples known as namghar. Over the years, Satra Institutions have become intimately connected with Assamese life and Culture, and the entire state is integrated into one religious whole by the widespread network of Satras spread across Majuli to Cooch Behar. These socio-cultural institutions dominate a majority of the landscape in the beautiful state of Assam. Today, the number of Satras in Assam is well over 500 with numerous Vaisnava households affiliated to one Satra or the other.

The concept of Monastic Satras under the Neo-Vaisnavite cult is very much unique to the state of Assam in general and to the neighbouring state of West Bengal in particular. The Satra culture although professes the cult of Vaisnavism founded by Mahapurush Sankardeva, yet a host of such Satras were established by his followers mainly after the departure of the "Mahaprabhu" viz. The Lord Sankardeva. Although, the Satras established outside the present Majuli district were founded with a view to cherishing the Vaisnavite culture, the establishment of Satras in Majuli had a different context which was mainly the opposition shown by the royal kingdom together with a few religious sycophants of that age.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Bezbarua, D : BarCharit, 1st publication, 1987, Jorhat:

This book covers the life sketches of Sankardev, Madhavdev and other famous disciples including Badula Padma Ata. The book includes a portion of Adi Charit where, the life of Badula Padma Ata, his fore- fathers and the establishment of the Kamalabari satra are mentioned.

Lekharu, U.C. (Ed.), Katha-gurucharitra, Reprint, 1995, Guwahati:

This book deals mainly with the life and teachings of Sankardev, Madhavdev and some famous disciples including Badala Padma Ata. The book also mentions how Padma Ata met Madhavdev, received initiation, and how he was sent to preach the religion in Upper Assam on behalf of his Guru Madhavdev.

Neog, M. (Ed), Guwahati:-Guru-carita-katha, 2nd edition, 2003:

This work has described the origin of the satra institution, division of satras, life and works of Sankardev, Madhavdev, Purusottam Thakur, Chaturbhuj Thakur and other vaishnava saints.

Das, B.P. Sankaradeva as an Educator, a dissertation submitted in lieu of the laboratory practical for M.A. Final examination in Education. G.U. 1981:

This work reflects the role played by Sankardeva in bringing about a positive change in the mental, spiritual and moral life of the people of Assam under the umbrella of the Vaisnavite movement launched by him. It also throws light on the various unification drives initiated by the Mahapurusha on the backdrop of severe opposition faced by few religious sycophants of that time.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

The Management Practices of Satras are found not in any separate inscription or in a well documented script but, the majority of the practices are to be derived from books of religious discourses in which, these are mixed with religious descriptions. As such, the materials have been derived from the land and revenue documents, historical manuscripts, books on religious practices of the Satras, critical review of the Vaisnavite philosophy, and personal interviews with functionaries of Satra Management Committee and elderly persons some of whom are disciples and non-disciples.

The universe of the study comprises of the monastic satras, within the district of Majuli. Government recognition entitles a Satra to receive recurring and non-recurring grants, which have an established credentiality. Thus, monastic satras not coming within government concurrence are excluded from the study. Satras not receiving government credential are in fact very small, and many of them are fresh initiative of a single person or two. Although, government funding requires observance of certain rules and regulations, yet the Government action is not penetrative into the areas of domain which are primarily governed by privacy rules.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- 1) To study the management practices of Satras of Majuli in Assam.
- 2) To study the economic viability of the Satras in modern time.

Management Practices in the Satras:

In the management of Satras, it is important to study the nature and structure of administrative as well as the operative management. As the Satras are structured with different ideologies, consistent with its hierarchy of administration, therefore, the first exercise should be to identify the status of its administrators mainly from the viewpoint of their marital status. On the whole, those administrators who strictly adhere to the principle of celibacy, i.e.: - celibates, get immense power owing to their sacrificial nature and there remains a few assisting

persons to the task of administrator who are mainly chosen by the chief administrator, i.e.:- the 'Satradhikar'. On the other hand, the non celibates who get in touch with family life on enjoying marital status are also assisted in their administration by the Deka- Satradhikar with or without the help of 'Keolias'.

Apart from these two types mentioned above; 'Grihasthi' Satras and the 'Admixture' principle is also there in the classification of Satra administration. In the Grihasthi Satras, the resident holders get equal powers as no different sacrificial status can be claimed by anyone among the administrators. In the admixture type, the celibates enjoy superior respect over the non-celibates for the same reason of dedication and sacrifice. The Management Structure of each of the satra constitutes with the 'Satradhikar' as the chairman of the Management Committee. The hierarchical structure descends with two 'Deka Satradhikars' remaining as a second-in-command. Besides, a host of other members are also covered within the Management Committee's of the Satras. The actual number of members in the Management Committee varies across Satras and this is usually left to the discretion of the Top level management. The male biased discriminatory practice of not allowing women folk into the Namghar premises namely "sanctum and sanctorum" was by and large followed by the Satras of Assam. However, with the acceptance of liberalism principles in all walks of life, this dogmatic principle has been discarded and growing participation of women is conspicuous in many Satras of Assam.

Classification of the Satras:

Satras are classified on the basis of 'celibacy' of the 'SATRADHIKARA' and 'BHAKATS'. It has been classified into the following types:-

Monastic:

In these Satras, the Adhikara and the devotees lead the life of a celibate. Women are not allowed to enter the Satra campus except on religious grounds. The inmates lead a strict celibate life in the Monastic Satras. Although, there are more than 500 Satras in Assam, only 12 Satras amongst them are Monastic at present.

Grihasthi:

In Grihasthi Satras, the Adhikara and devotees lead a householder's life with wife and children. No such restriction for women has been laid out in these Satras as yet.

Semi Monastic:

In these types of Satra, the Adhikara and the devotees lead a celibate life but they do not stay separate from their family. Despite following the life of a celibate, they are free from living the strict celibate life of a Monastic Satra.

Admixture:

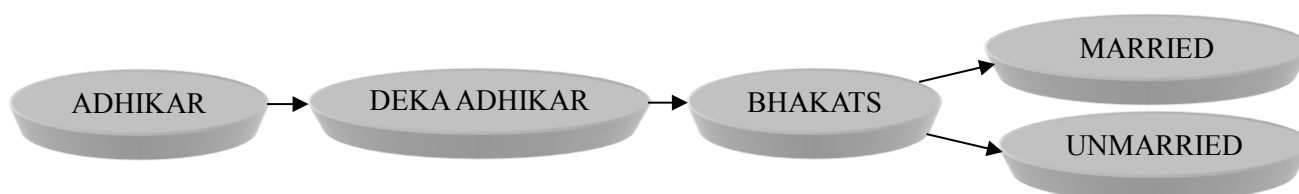
An admixture of the first and second type of Satras prevails in these types of Satra. Here, the Adhikara and Deka Adhikara are married. The devotees are of two types- celibates and non celibates. The celibate devotees normally reside within the four walls of the Satra premises.

Administrative Hierarchy in a Satra:

The administration of a Satra is run by the Satradhikar assisted by his Deputy and a host of other office bearers. A Satra includes the following members:-

- 1) 'Adhikar' - The head of a Satra.
- 2) 'Deka-Adhikar' - Deputy Head.
- 3) 'Bhakats' - Devotees staying inside the Satra premises.
 - a) Married and
 - b) Unmarried (Keoliya/Udaxin Bhakats)

Figure 1: Chart depicting the residential member hierarchy in a Satra



Royal Patronage and Commencement of Economic Activities:

Initially, the persons establishing the Satras tried to get rid of the apathy and rages perpetuated by the group of opponents who were mainly the anti-changers and worshippers of God and Goddesses. However, in course of time, the Satras succeeded in partly winning the patronage of a few royal kings of the Ahom kingdom and were graced with the favour of getting allotment of lands against the payment of revenues and in some cases, with fully exempted (devottar) land. As a matter of fact, the classification of land mainly consisted of three classes in Assam, namely; Kheraj, Nisfi-Kheraj and La-Kheraj, meaning full revenue paying land, half revenue paying land and no revenue paying land respectively.

The Satradhikars who were never engaged with cultivation lent the lands to tenants who in turn produced crops and shared 50% of the output with the Satra Management. Another purpose for which lands were let out was for using the land as grazing and tea plantation, which is a landmark business activity in today's Assam, also found its place in land leased out to them by the Satras in some cases. The land of the district is also fertile for cultivation of mustard seed, sugarcane and various other plants bearing pulses and other crops. The Satras have always been given a share of the part of the output generated on Satra Land. However, this system of letting out land to tenants laid the early foundation of "**Feudalism**" in the Satra Institutions.

Early Instance of Feudalism in Satra Institutions:

There are varying conclusions as regards the evolution of the Satra Institutions. Many ancient Satras came into existence owing to the religious disclosures conducted by some Saint or devotee who resided in that place in order to do so and in due course of time, such establishments came to be known as Satra. Various forms of help and aid offered by the local population from time to time helped these places of worship gain economic prosperity on account of which they attained permanency and withstood economic challenges brought along with changes in time. Some other Satras on the other hand, were born as a result of the royal patronage received from the then Ahom Kingdom. For instance, it is said that Auniati Satra was established when Nariya King aka Siu-ting-pha (1644-1648) invited Niranjan Adhikar and offered him with a place for establishment. It is said that Jayadhwaj Singha (1648-1663) and Siva Singha (1714-1744) also played a major role in bringing about the existence of Satras by offering patronage under the banner of the royal kingdom. Keeping aside the differences in evolutionary viewpoint regarding the Satras, history has it that a formidable number of Satras got established during the reign of Ahom kingdom thus taking into possession enormous holdings of land donated by the Ahom kings.

The first residential Bhakats residing in the Satras were actually the labourers who were intended to be engaged in cultivating the land donated to these Satras. Some of them entered into marital life while others maintained celibacy. However, both categories of Bhakats worked and took part in all religious discourses of the Satras. They cultivated the land donated to the Satras, sustained themselves and also contributed in the form of 'surplus' to the exchequer of the Satradhikars. In some cases, acquaintances and close friends of the Satra Adhikars also farmed the land to feed themselves with the produces, in return of which they had to pay taxes and cess to the Satra Adhikars. It was therefore, observed that, in most of the Satras established under the royal banner; the Bhakats, Satradhikars and the Satra were bound together by a special socio-economic relationship which was characteristically feudal in nature. With the onset of British administration after the Yandaboo Treaty (1826), status-quo was maintained in the case of land holdings of the Satra. The main motive behind sustaining the existing state of affairs was the fact that the British wanted to attract a section of affluent, influential and honourable people as their supporters and associates. Under the British Raj, the land allotments under the Satras were specifically demarcated, on the basis of the copper plates given by the Ahom rulers. Therefore, it was seen that there eventually brew a more lucid and stronger relationship between the Satras and their land holdings under the British colonial rule.

Multi-Culturalism and its Impact Upon the Satras:

The Monastic Satras of Assam, which also included Satras of the district of Majuli enjoyed unflinching support from its devotees until the middle of the 20th century. In the post independence period, the Assamese society gradually transformed to modernism and the impact of multi-culturalism swept away many habits and traditions of the traditional Assamese society. Meanwhile, socio-economic conflict between top brass of the hierarchial administration led to separation and finally fragmentation of Satras into smaller units. This has led to the establishment of many more Satra units inside the district of Majuli. Thus, we find that there are '65' large and small Satras in Majuli today of which, around 30-35 Satras can be classified as Monastic Satras.

The de-annexation of new Satras from the parental unit has led to the growth of many smaller units which were setup in the same landholding of the original Satra. Such act of separation has not only lowered the faith on the

cult; but also seriously affected revenue earning capacity of the Satra Management. To add fuel to the fire, the followers and the devotees of Satras were gripped by the multi cultural philosophy mainly because of their touch with outside countrymen of the state who migrated in connection of their job or trade opportunities. This has been accentuated due to high mobility of people from and to the river island owing to educational, cultural, social and business requirement. The lack of propagation together with transportation difficulty to the island and lack of infrastructure have greatly obstructed to the spread of Satra messages among new generation of Assamese as well as Indian society.

Gradaation of Satra Functionaries:

For the efficient management of the Satra and for conducting religious services regularly, several officers or functionaries are appointed to hold different branches of the institution. The number of these functionaries varies in number according to the size of the Satra. They are listed as following:-

- 1) Bar Bhagati, the chief recitor of the Bhagavata.
- 2) Bar Sravani, the chief listener
- 3) Bar Pathak, the chief recitor of the vernacular scriptures.
- 4) Bar Nam Loguwa, the leader of Nama Kirtana.
- 5) Bar Gayan, the chief Singer.
- 6) Bar Bayan, the chief player of instruments.
- 7) Bar Bhandari, the chief treasury Officer.
- 8) Saul Bharali, the granary keeper.
- 9) Bar Aldhara, the head attendant.
- 10) Bar kakoty, the chief clerical officer
- 11) Bar Medhi, represents the Satra in the village.
- 12) Bar Khataniyar, representative in a local court or abroad

There are few more functionaries like Oja, Satola and Bahuwa etc. and no salary system was prevalent for their services. Persons were selected for the above posts from any caste or community on the basis of their religious accomplishment and distinctive aptitude. Sankardeva himself was a non-Brahmin and therefore, he selected persons irrespective of any caste or community to be in charge of the above offices. This was followed by his immediate successor and others who also maintained the phenomenon whereby succession to the Headship and other offices of the Satra are to be regulated by merit and not by birth alone. (Goswami, 2013)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

A Satra is a socio-religious institution and it receives finance from many devotees including the Government. Many a Satras get regular annual contributions from their devotees. Some of these devotees even reside outside the country but still owe their respect to their spiritual mentor who has had large impact upon their life. Besides, the Government time and again provides a small grant to each of the Satras for promoting the cultural activities of these institutions. As the personnel engaged in Satra Management are supposed to get a small remuneration for their subsistence, a large part of the inadequate earnings are spent for their meager salaries. This has led to the feeling of distrust among a section of devotees that the Satra Management Committees are not transparent with disclosure of accounts.

As the existence of Satras are largely recorded in the books of revenue administration and no separate registration procedure was available for formation of Satras; the maintenance of books and record remains obviously poor. The only records maintained with regularity are the books of disciples, their contribution, expenditure and the days on which important events are celebrated within the premises of the Satra. The disciples gathered in meetings periodically accepted whatever pronouncement was made by the Satradhikar as regards to annual accounts and creation or annulling of lease agreements. Thus, it is found that the administrative setting of the Satras is mostly shared with its disciples due to obvious reasons that the main strength and honour of a Satra is judged by the number and socio-economic status of its devotees.

An enquiry into the books and accounts maintained by the Satra Management Committee of a leading monastic Satra, revealed that the Satras have been maintaining certain books of accounts as are maintained by the Not-for-Profit organizations; viz Receipts and Payments A/C as well Income and Expenditure A/C. As per the information obtained from the interview with the members of Satra Management Committee, it was found that these books of accounts are also audited by certified Chartered Accountants from time to time. However, the accounting information provided by these books is informative only to the extent of describing the cash in and cash out position of the

business firms and doesn't provide an in-depth analysis about the accounting scenario of the Satra institutions.

Going by the administrative hierarchy of a Satra; it can be said that the Satradhikar is the management head or the C.E.O of the Satra, while its administration is constituted with devotees and lay disciples with the main objective of sharing of information.

Any organization be it profit driven or not, requires economic stability to perform the various functions for which it was formed. As such, the deteriorating economic condition of the Satras triggered by various factors such as decreasing bhakat population, floods, erosion and lack of government intervention is a matter of great concern amongst the various stakeholders of the Satra institutions.

There exists a gap between the Satradhikars and the lay disciples in terms of communication between them and establishment of the line of command. This is on account of the 'distinctive' and superior status maintained by the Satradhikars. Surprisingly, this has been a major reason due to which the lay disciples feel disconnected from the major state of affairs in a Monastic Satra. Considering their point of view, it can be said that many a times, the sacrifice made by the lay disciples are more than that of the Satradhikars, and it also lacks the recognition as against the status which is being enjoyed by the head of the institution. This phenomenon tends to create problems in the flow of communication from the top level, i.e.: - The Satradhikars to the lay disciples in a Monastic Satra. Thus, the lay disciples are always agog with the hope of witnessing major socio economic changes which would bring relief to their woes and miseries.

SUGGESTIONS:

Satras have been rightly classified as the epitome of Assamese cultural identity. These institutions have played a pivotal role in introducing Assamese culture at the national forefront. However, enrichment of culture is a two way process which also requires involvement of the people residing throughout the state. Due to insufficiency of funds and lack of adequate government attention at times, Satras have been facing difficulty in performing various functions which would have otherwise had a great impact upon the cultural heritage of the state. These functions may include conducting of workshops both at national and international levels, and propagating amongst the common masses the importance of the Satras in upholding the cultural identity of the Assamese society.

As such, it is of utmost importance for the Satra Management Committees to design a mechanism which will ensure that the Government allocation of funds for a Satra is not limited only to the maintenance budget. Timely availability of funds is a necessity if the impact of various cultural activities is to be carried on a fruitful manner. Keeping in mind the mindset of the modern Assamese society, where the impact of multi culturalism has already marked its presence; it is important for the Satra institutions to come up with modern educational establishments based on the ideals and values followed in a Satra. This will largely help to propagate the Satra ideals amongst the citizens and what better way there is than to acquaint the young minds with the values and ideals of the Mahapurusha.

However, such establishments will again necessitate the flow of a need based budget from the appropriate authority, for which the Satra Management Committee and all the stakeholders will have to coordinate effectively and gain appropriate attention from the concerned authority.

In the recent years there has been unexpectedly large number of researchers who visited this holy island including researchers from far-flung countries like Germany, Austria, UK and USA in connection with their research work. As such, it is imperative for the Satra Management Committees to create a research friendly environment which will in turn, help to establish significant findings and put forward effective suggestions for the better functioning of the Satras. Establishment of museums for showcasing the rich cultural heritage in each of the Satra, proper accommodation facilities for the researchers, allotment of a fixed timeslot for interaction between the researchers and the Satra Management Committee etc. are some important aspects which will boost up the quality of research being undertaken in the Satras.

Based on the already existing local industries in the island of Majuli such as boat making, pottery etc combined with the various activities undertaken in a Satra, the Satras have the potential to develop a handful of local industries under their belt. A spirit of ethical work conduct and cooperation have already been infused amongst the disciples residing in a Satra which may be availed off as a moral boost for the development of local industries. Many disciples are well acquainted in various forms of art such as handicrafts, mask making (Chamaguri Satra) etc and as such promotion of these activities through collaboration with the local industries will cater to the livelihood and economic security of the disciples to a large extent. This in turn, holds enormous potential for strengthening the economic dimensions of the Monastic Satras.

Considering the state of maintenance of books of accounts by the Satra Management Committee, it can be said there lacks transparency and the flow of accounting information to the disciples and other stakeholders is also

governed largely by privacy rules. As such, there is scope for the development of a Accounting Information System whereby, audited statements of income and expenditure are updated timely and can be accessed by the interested parties which will in turn positively impact the trustworthiness, transparency and reliability quotient of the Satra Management Committee.

CONCLUSION:

Monastic Satras and its infrastructural setup are quite unique amongst the state of Assam and have contributed immensely towards the cultural heritage of this land. Though confronted with numerous challenges, they still continue to be the epicenter of the Neo-Vaisnavism movement as propagated by Mahapurush Sankardeva, and has widespread implications as far their functions are concerned. A well planned management system in any organization is characterized by the effective and real time flow of communication from top to lower levels and seeking the help of respective authorities as and when required keeping itself in track with the organizational objectives. As such, ensuring financial stability with the appropriate authorities, promotion of research oriented activities so that pragmatic and sustainable solutions are established, and an up gradation in the process of maintaining books and records of the Satras are important aspects which the Satra Management Committees should consider taking into their immediate action plan. The need of the hour is to identify various manners through which this unique concept called 'Satra' becomes sustainable from a long term perspective. This however necessitates some changes in the management practices followed in a Satra keeping the ideal roots intact, particularly so in the maintenance of books of accounts and better transparency in terms of disclosure of accounting information. This in turn will help the concerned authorities to be in closer terms with the real financial issues faced by the Satras and address their issues.

In the present day society where degradation of values is affecting every sphere of life and people have become very much self-centered and individualistic, the Monastic Satras still provide training to the inmates to be socially responsible and to be kind to people. Hence, the methods of teaching and spiritual mentorship prevalent in the Monastic Satras can be the catalyst or model for the development of education and Human Resource of the modern time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to my research supervisor Prof. Nayan Barua Sir for his unconditional help and academic support in undertaking this research work. I also owe my gratefulness to all the respondents who have provided me with sufficient knowledge and new findings which immensely contributed towards the timely completion of the manuscript. Last but not the least; I would like to convey my heartfelt thanks to the International Journal of Management Studies for publishing my manuscript.

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