

A study on the Relationships between the Colonial Government of Assam and the Satras of Majuli

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Abstract

The satras are one of the most influential product of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Assam, led by Sankardeva in the later part of the 15th century. Since its inception, the Satras have been maintaining a cordial relationship with the state. The Satras were granted huge extent of revenue free land by the medieval Ahom rulers of Assam which was one of the primary matter of interest for the Satras of Assam. The most influential Satras of Assam are still located in the Majuli island of Assam. These Satras also always tried to maintain an effective relation with the medieval Ahom rulers as well as British colonial government, later on. Hence, in this paper the author tries to highlight the nature of relationship between the Colonial government of Assam and the Satras of Majuli.

Key-words: Neo- Vaishnavism, Satra institutions, Majuli island Colonial government

Introduction

The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam led by Srimanta Sankardeva in the last decades of the 15th century has tremendous influence on the socio-religious history of Assam. The movement found its full expression through the establishment *Satra* institutions which are itself a product of the Movement. The Satras have been playing a significant role in the socio-religious and cultural life of the people of Assam since its inception. However, it is not known exactly to when the word *Satra* was used for the religious institutions of Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam. According to S.N Sarma the use of the term *Satra* in the sense of a Vaishnavite institution or establishment appears altogether to be new one in the religious history of India.¹ Moheswar Neog writes that the word *sattra* occurs in numerous places in the *Bhagawata-Purana*.² The *Satra* institutions got its structural form during the time of its two chief preachers Damodardeva and Madhavdeva in the 16th century. Since then a large number of Satras were established in different parts of Assam under the royal patronization of the Ahom rulers along with granting huge amount of revenue free lands and sufficient numbers of men and servitors. Some of these influential Satras are Auniati, Garamur, Dakhinpat *Satra* etc, established in the Majuli island. These Satras, established under the royal patronization played significant role in the socio-cultural life the people of Assam as well as contemporary politics. This kind of arrangements created a mutual inter-dependency between the Satras and the State, which is being continued with the British colonial Government, later on.

Methodology

The methodology used in preparing this paper is based on secondary sources, collected from published works. E-resources are also consulted in completion of the work.

Objective

In this paper, an attempt has been made to study the nature of relationship between the Satras of Majuli island and the British colonial government of Assam. This paper also highlights the reasons behind the inter-dependency between the two parties in various aspects.

Description

During the rule of Ahom king Jaydhvaj Simha(1648-1663), there established a few Satras in Majuli, which are basically belonging to the Brahma samhati sect of the Neo-Vaishnavism. Subsequently, different Ahom rulers had granted huge amount of tax free land with servitors in different times to the Satras, which contributed to strengthen the economy of the Satras. For instances, Jayadhvaj Simha granted 300 *puras* of land and his successor Chakradhvaj Simha also donated 800 *puras* revenue free land to the Satra³. During the time of its *Satradhikar* Kamadeva Goswami, Ahom King Rajeswar Simha donated 1040 *puras* tax free land to the Dakhinpat Satra.⁴ Likewise, other two principal satras Auniati and Garamur had also received huge amount of land and properties from the medieval Ahom rulers which not only enhanced the power and prestige of the Satras and made them in the line of affluent Satras.

However, the Treaty of *Yandaboo* in 1826 paved the way for the Britishers to rule in Assam by making it a part of British Indian Empire. Accordingly, Majuli was merged into the British Indian Empire by forming the island into two *maujas* called Ahataguri and Salmora⁵ and the Dakhinpat Satra fell under the jurisdiction of Salmora Mauja. However, it is to note that the colonial government encouraged the consumption of opium in Assam in order to enhance their revenue although the cultivation and supply of opium is controlled by the colonial Government since the late 18th century.⁶ At that time, the cultivation of opium is very popular in Majuli and a large number of people used to consume opium who believed that opium can cure the disease diarrhea. It is mentioned by Benudhar Sharma in his book “*Dakhinpat Satra*” that Basudeva Goswami, the 10th *Satradhikar* of the Dakhinpat Satra was fined 500 rupees by Encrunch, the then Commissioner of Sivasagar District due to the conviction of permitting some peasants to cultivate opium in the *devottar* lands of the Satra in Salmora Mauja.⁷ The same amount of money was also fined to Dattadeva Goswami, the *Satradhikar* of Auniati Satra, due to the same conviction by the colonial Government⁸. Though, there were not adequate proofs to justify the conviction made by colonial government yet the *Satradhikars* had to pay the penalty. It is important to note that, in spite of it, the *Satradhikar* of Majuli did not protest against the consumption of opium, rather, Naradeva Goswami (1895 -1926 A.D), the 12th *Satradhikar* of the Dakhinpat Satra wrote a letter to the government, mentioning -

“It is true that opium consumption should be stopped but slowly, if stopped immediately the diarrhea patient will die”.⁹

This statement refers to the assumption that the *Satradhikar* of the Dakhinpat Satra didn't want an instant shut down of the opium consumption till the initial decades of the 20th century.

The Satras always maintained a cordial relation with the colonial government so that the former could retain their rights over the revenue free lands, earlier granted by the Ahom kings. It is to note that during the British rule, Jenkins the commissioner of Assam took a policy that those Satras who claimed the ownership of the landed properties they had to submit the original documents i.e. the copper plates grants earlier granted by the Ahom rulers.¹⁰ But many Satras had lost a few records of the granted lands during the time of Moamariya rebellion and the Burmese invasion; hence the Satras had to lose its certain extent of revenue free land. But, when Lord Chelmsford (1916-1921) the then viceroy of India, visited Majuli in 1920, he met the *Satradhikars* of all principal Satras and revived the lands grants of the Satras permanently earlier granted by Ahom rulers. In lieu of this kindness of colonial government, the Satras had to provide essential assistance to the government in war against the frontier tribes.¹¹ During the Non-Cooperation movement of India, Naradeva Goswami, *Satradhikar* of the Dakhinpat Satra insisted that sedition is not the ideal of the Satra¹² and he didn't join the movement and even refused to donate in non-cooperation fund¹³. Hence the relation between the British Government and the Satra was based on mutual interdependency and self interest from both sides. Thus, the Satra retained its right over the lands during colonial period.

The supportive measures of the Satras to the colonial government can also be delineated from the British Government decision of introduction of Bengali as official language of Assam, in place of Assamese language in 1836 A.D. This act of colonial government was criticized by many leading Assamese person whereas the Satra institutions never put forward any discontent against it. Rather, they supported the Government decision and followed it accordingly. The influence of Bengali language can be noticed in the dramas composed in the Satras in that particular period. It is to note that Dattadeva Goswami the Satradhikar of Auniati Satra published a newspaper called *Assam Bilasinee* in 1872 A.D, which is undoubtedly a remarkable event in the history of Assamese literature. But, the interesting fact is that the script of the *Assam Bilasinee* was printed in Bengali language.¹⁴ Tirthanath Sarma writes in his book “*Auniati satrar buranji*” that Dattadeva Goswami once stayed in Guwahati for the purpose of learning Bengali music and culture.

It is significant to note that among the *Satradhikars* of Majuli, Pitambardeva Goswami was exceptional. He was not only a social reformer who stood for the eradication of untouchability, but also a freedom fighter who was imprisoned by the colonial government at times. Pitambardeva Goswami appealed the people of Assam to avoid opium consumption and to boycott foreign goods during the time of *Swadeshi* movement. Besides, he visited to several remote villages in Majuli and spread the messages of anti-partition movement. Pitambardeva Goswami also advocated for a self dependent village economy and therefore he started the *cooperative movement* in Majuli in 1918 A.D.¹⁵ Hence, he stood against the colonial government and participated in the freedom struggle movement of India. He met Mahatma Gandhi in 1926 when Gandhiji came to Guwahati on the occasion of Indian national congress session. The impacts of civil disobedience movement also touched Majuli and Pitambardeva Goswami was one of the veteran activists of the movement whereas most of the influential Satras of Majuli remained aloof from the freedom struggle movement. Simultaneously, he along with his followers moved from villages to villages in Majuli in order to explain the concept of *swaraj*. Organizing various public meetings at different places he explained the meaning of *swaraj* and appealed them to be self-dependent. In fact, this way he tried to form the social background for obtaining *swaraj*, which, as perceived by him, was certainly the precondition for a nation to be independent.¹⁶ When Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Garamur Satra in 1938, then Pitambardeva Goswami held a conference in the Satra, where prominent leaders of Assam like Gopinath Bpordoloi, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and many others attended there. He founded a *santi sena bahini* in majuli in 1940 with an aim to achieve the goal of the freedom struggle movement.

During the quit India movement in 1942, he performed *individual satyagraha* that had already adopted by Gandhi. Pitambardeva Goswami himself visited many remote villages of Majuli including those of the Mishing inhabited areas and spread the messages of non-cooperation among the masses wherein he also enrolled many congress volunteers. Thus, Majuli has become one of the chief grounds of the Congress activists. But, Pitambardeva Goswami's activities were being monitored by the colonial government which finally resulted the arrest of the *Satradhikar* in 1943 along with his deputy Krishnachandra Deva. However, they were released from the jail after two years of imprisonment. Thus, there could be seen two divisions within the Satra institution of Majuli; one party supported the colonial government in order to achieve their material benefits whereas another party struggled for the independence of the country.

Conclusion

Being a medieval socio-religious institution, the Satras played significant impact among the people of Assam. But in due course of time, when material aspects entered within the Satras along with the political involvement of the *Satradhikars*, the Satras are to lose its uniqueness. The nature of relation between the colonial government and the Satra institutions was based on mutual interdependency. Both parties had to depend on each other for their respective interests, which benefited both parties. Although, as discussed, there were a few exceptions in regards of the Garamur Satra under its *Satradhikar*

Pitambardeva Goswami. Thus, the Satras retained its right over land, earlier granted by the Ahom kings. Although on certain occasions, a major portion of lands were taken over by the Central Government of India after independence yet the Satras have still been enjoying a huge amount of land.

Key-Notes

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- ¹ Sarma, S. N., *The Neo- Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati, Assam, 1996, p. 143
- ² Neog, Maheswar, *Sankaradeva and his times, Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahat, 1998, p. 311
- ³ Sharma, Benudhar, *Dakhinpat Sattra*, Saraighat Photo Types Ptv.Ltd , Extended Edition, 2019, p.139
- ⁴ *ibid.*, p.57
- ⁵ Nath, D., *The Majuli Island, Society, Economy and Culture*, Anshah Publishing House, Delhi, 2009, p. 278
- ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 269
- ⁷ Sarmah, Benudhar, *op.cit.* p.70
- ⁸ Nath, Dambarudhar, *Adhunikatar Unmeshanat Auniati Satra*, Sonta Somaroh, Auniati Satra, 2004. p.22
- ⁹ Sarmah, Benudhar, *op.cit.* p.84
- ¹⁰ Nath, D., *op.cit.* p. 65
- ¹¹ *ibid*, p.83
- ¹² *ibid*, p.84
- ¹³ *ibid*
- ¹⁴ Nath, Dambarudhar, *Satra Society and Culture, Pitambardeva Goswami and History of Garamur Satra*, DVS Publishers, p.160
- ¹⁵ *ibid*
- ¹⁶ *ibid*, p.77

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