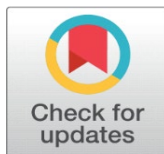


SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RELATION BETWEEN THE HILL TRIBES AND THE GHAMARA SATRA OF LAKHIMPUR DISTRICT OF ASSAM –A CASE STUDY OF PRE-INDEPENDENT PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The Present Ghamara Satra is located about 5k.M. from North Lakhimpur town According to the Charit Puthi of the Ghamara was established by Shankarisan, a Brahman of Kanouj in 1216 at Sadiya under the patronize of the Chutia King. After the fall Chutia kingdom the Satra was transferred to Present Dhenukhana, Machkhowa of Dhemaji district of Assam. During the Burmese invasion the Satra again shifted to the present location. At that time the neighbor hill tribes of the Satras were such as Nyishi (Daphalas), Hill-Miris, Abors, Galos and the Apatanis. It was one and only Satras benefitted from the offerings of the Ahom and the Chutia king. At first phase the Satra was followed Vedas but later on the Satra was inspired by Neo-Vaishnavism propagated by Srimanta Sankardev. During the Ahom reign period there was not seen more relation between the hill tribes and the Ghamara Satra. But during the colonial period especially from the early 19th century, Ghamara Satra propagated not only ritual of Vaisnavism but also propagate education, awareness against the superstition among the hill tribes inhabited at Kimin, Johing, Sijuli, Passighat and Dollungmukh of Arunachal Pradesh.

The present paper has attempted to highlight the role of Ghamara Satra to propagate the Neo- Vaishnavism and social reforms among the hill tribes like Nyishi, Hill-Miris, Apatanis and the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Ghamara Satra, Neo-Vaishnavism, Nyishi, Hill-Miris, Social Reforms

1. INTRODUCTION

In Assam, the Bhakti or Neo- Vaisnavite movement was launched by Sankardeva and his disciple Madhabdev in the 15th-16th century. Sankardeva introduced a creed, adhering to the main principles of Bhakti, which could revolutionize the entire face of the life of the people and lead to the formation of a broader civil society. It had united the diverse tribal communities of the region and gave it a culture to identify later as the Assamese culture.¹ The Satra is the most important organ of the Vaishnavite organization. The first Satra was set- up by Sankardeva at Bardua in about 1494A.D.

Madhabdeva and Damodardeva, both disciples of Sankardeva, who gave definite, shape to the structural and organizational aspects of the Satra Institutions.² In course of time, numerous Satras were established in different parts of the entire the country. Among the Satras of the 16th century, Ghamara Satra of the north of Subansiri Valley had prominent role to propagate vaishnavism among the hill tribes and the people of the plains. During the colonial period

¹ Baruah S.L. A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munshi Monoharlal, New Delhi1997, p.447

² Baruah S.L. A Comprehensive History of Assam, Munshi Monoharlal, New Delhi1997, p. 449

especially from the early 19th century, the Stradhikar of Ghamara Satra like Basukrishnadev Goswami, Lilakrishna Goswami and Dayakrishna Goswami were made cordial relation with the neighboring hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

However, in most of empirical studies the Satras of Lakhimpur District of Assam are not clearly highlight the socio-religious relation with the Nyishi and the hill Miris of the Lakhimpur duars.. The present study endeavors to enquire the relation of Ghamara Satra with the Nyishi and the Hill- Miris.

1.2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the present paper are as follows:

- 1) To study about the propagation of the Vaisnavism among the Nyishi people of the eastern part of the Chaiduar especially in Lakhimpur duars.
- 2) To study about the propagation of Vaisnavism among the Nyishi, Hill-Miris and the plain Missing.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

From the above discussion it is clear that to analyses and understand the socio-religious and cultural aspects of the study areas we must conceptualize the Vaisnavism and the tribalism. Large number books have already been published in this line. A good number of books have also been published on Neo Vaisnavism among the tribes. Obviously our focus will be the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, the Ahom and the British's administrative policies towards them and so on. Here, an attempt has been made to give an overview of such available literature.

One of the important literature is E.A.Gait's *A History of Assam*.The book not only mentions about the Ahom administrative but also highlight about the propagation of Neo-Vaisnavism towards the Brahmaputra Valley under Sankardeva and his disciples. But the book does not mention about relation between the Satras of the Subansiri Valley.

S.N. Sharma's *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and Satra Institution of Assam*. The book highlight about the expansion of Visnavism in entire the Assam but not details mention about the Satras of Ghamara.

Prof .Dambarudhar Nath's *Satra, Society and Culture* gives details description about the formation of the Satras and its impact on Assamese society as well as on culture. But the book does not narrate widely about the Ghamara Satra and its role on society.

Another important book *Rhitqyan* edited by Rupali Goswami and Bipul Sarma Baruah gives details information about the Ghamara Satra and also highlights the role of Satradhikars to propagate Neo-Vaisnavism among the Nyishi, Hill-Miris and the other tribes of Present Arunachal Pradesh.

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In Assam Bhakti or Neo-Vaisnavite movement was launched by Sankardeva and his disciple Madhabdeva in the 16th century. Spending twelve years outside of Assam and visited different holy places of India, where he entered into religious trends of the period, Sankardeva introduced a creed, adhering to the main principle of Bhakti. Propagation of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement by Sankardeva and his disciple brought a revolutionize the entire society and it lead to the formation of a broader civil society. It had united the diverse tribal communities of the region and gave it a culture, to be identified later as the Assamese culture.³

The religion of Sankardeva devoted to only one supreme God, Vishnu. His teachings were mainly based on Bhagawata Gita and Bhagawata Purana. Nama-Kirtana is the main services in the form of prayer. The main four features are important in neo-Vaisnavite religion such as Guru, Deva, Bhakata and Nama. This is the first time that Mahapurush Sankardeva has tried to unite the mountainous and plains with the dole of religion. Sankardeva taught equality of all human beings and accepted disciples from amongst the tribesmen and the Muslims, kaivatras etc.

The Satra institution is the most organ of the Vaishnavite organization. Sankardeva first setup Satra near at Bardua and later on full-fledged Satra established by his disciple Madhabdeva, Damodardeva and their disciples. The Satras were

³ Baruah S.L .Comprehensive history of Assam, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt.Ltd p.448.

centres of learning and education and guardians of religion and morality. Patbausi, Auanati, Kamalabaria, Garmur and Mayamara etc. are still propagated the ideology of neo-Vaisnavism.

Among the Satras of 16th century of Assam, Ghamara Satra is one of the oldest Satra of Subansiri Valley. According to the Charit Puthi of Ghamara Satra that Shankarishan, a Brahman of Kanouj established a Satra at Ghamara of Sadiya in 1216 A.D. Chutia King SatyaNarayan patronized to establish the Satras. Jaykrishna was the last descendent of Shankarishan. After the fall of the Chutia kingdom, Jaykrishna brought the Satra from Sadiya to present Dhenukhana of Dhemaji district. The name of Satra was not changed. He had no successor and so he invited his mitra Jadumoni to take the responsibility of the Satra. Jadumoni accepted his invitation and sent his son Jagatananda to take the charge of the Satra. Ghamara Satra became the Vaisnavite Cult instead of Vedic cult. From the 1510 Sakas the Ghamara Satra has propagated the ideals of Neo-Vaisnavism entire the hill-plains of the Subansiri region.⁴

Here we have to discuss the role of Ghamara Satra to propagate the neo-Vaisnavism among the Nyishi and the hill miris and the plain missing of the Lakhimpur duars.

Nyishi, one of the major tribal communities, are concentrated in the central-western part of Arunachal Pradesh. The Nyishi concentration area comprises of the East Kameng, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri and Kurung Kumey District. During the reign period of Ahom King Pratap Singha introduced Posa System. This system made close to the hill tribes and also growth the economic relation between the hill tribes and Ahom administration. By the terms of this system people of the plains of particular region offered the commodities as well as the needs of the hill tribes. Ahom king formed the duars like Naduar, Charduar and Chaiduar as the entry and exist for the hills to plains. The Nyishi are inhabitant of Naduar, Charduar, and Chaiduar and up to the Dollungmukh duar of Lakhimpur. During the British reign period, the Kimin, Dijoo, Bandardewa, Ouhat Johing, Siajuli etc. became the passes to communicate between the hill tribes and the people of the Lakhimpur. The Nyishi are originally follower of animism.

But lot of the Nyishi people of the duar regions like Kimin, Siajuli, and Dirgha became the follower of Vaisnavism from the early 19th century. The letters between Basukrishna Goswami, Stradhikar of Ghamara Satra and the Chief Commissioner of Assam P.R.Gordon highlight about the Nyishi and the Hill-Miris relation with the Ghamara Satra. It can be said that as punishment British authority closed the duars and forbade them entering the plains. As a result, the plains dependent hill tribes were dying of starvation and their two chiefs, Madh Gam ad Tad Gam, sought the help of the Stradhikar Basukrishna Goswami obtain permission from the British Government to descend to the plains. Satradhikars had given an application to the authority in favor of the Gams. It is not known whether the British Government accepted the application. The successor of Basukrishna Goswami was Stradhikar Lilakanta Goswami. He had much contributed to expand not only Vaisnavism but also propagate education among the Nyishi people of Kimin and Siajuli. Lilakanta Goswami established two model Satras at Siajuli, where devotees would have hostels as well as schools. Culture training center, weaving training centres and ashrams. Branches of the Satras were also established Kimin, Dirgha, Passighat, Tezu and Likabali. These are attempts to awaken education and religious consciousness among the people of Arunchal and other people.

Dayakrishna Goswami, son and successor of Lilakanta Goswami made more cordial relation with the hill tribes. He formed Pahar-Bhaiyam Cultural Development Centre at Siajuli, Kimin Marginal Social Welfare Ashram, Ghamara Adrash Pahar-Bhaiyam Cultural Development Centre and the branches of Satras at Dirgha Naharbari etc. The branches Satras are located in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. The Satras provided free education to the orphan tribal and the tribal children and also provides spiritual culture of the Satra. Late Dayakrishna Goswami was known as Parbotia or Dafala Gossain among the people of Arunachal Pradesh. With the inspiration of Neo-Vaisnavism the people of hills especially the people Kimin, Siajuli, Dirgha, Passighat and Itanagar etc, are performed Bhaona, Satriya dance and singing Satriya songs in many occasions. The post like Bormedhi, Sarumedhi and the Pasoni were given to the Nyishi people of Lakhimpur duars.

Ghamara Satra had established in 1829 at the bank of Dhal River of present Lakhimpur District. It can be said that it was transferred from Dhenukahana, Machkhowa of Dhemaji district due to the invasion of the Burmese. The inhabitants of the Dhal area were plain Missing known as Panibotia and most of the Missing people became disciple of the Ghamara Satras during the time of the Stradhikar Basukrishna Goswami. Even the Toibotia and the Ghasi clans of the hills had also influenced by the ideologies of Neo-Vaisnavism and they had cordial relation with the Satradhikar Basukrishna Goswami. It can be cleared from a letter of British Government on 7-10-1910, that Commissioner of Assam

⁴ Goswami Rupali and Sharma Bipul Boruah, Rhitayan, Alibat Prakashan, Guwahati, 2015, p.147.

Valley P.R.Gordon requested the Ghamara Satradhikar to stop the bloody war between the Ghasi Miris living between Gosam and Dollung in the hilly areas of South of the Subansiri river. The letter during the British rule reveals influence of the Ghamara Satradhikar on the people of the northern hills (present-day Arunachal) of undivided Lakhimpur district. One of the historical documents of the Ghamara Satra was a copy of letter which wrote by Satradhikar to King Jogeswar Singha. The letter mentions the prevention of terror among the people by the hill Miris in the form Burmese Doania during Burmese Invasion. It is mainly about the crisis situation that arose in the eastern part of the Swarnashree (Subansiri). However Ghamara Satra has been planting and spreading the seeds of Neo-Vaisnavism among the Torbotia, Ghasi and Panibotia Missing. Basukrishna Goswami himself visited the foothills region and propagated the Eksaran Bhagawati dharma. His successor Lilakanta Goswami and later Dayakrishna Goswami influenced the hill Miris and Plain Missing through the Ghamara Adarsh Satra Pahar-Plain Cultural Development Centre. Bhaona, Satria Dances, Kirtan Path, etc were organized among the areas of the hill Miris by the Pahar-Bhoiyam Development Centre under the guidance of Satradhikar Dayakrishna Goswami.

It is important to note that although a very humble beginning of the Christian Missionary works in to the hills inhabited areas of Nyishi, Adi, Hill-Miris, Apatanis, and Nagas etc. They were started with the prime motive of spreading Christianity among them. In upper Assam the Missonaries work was spreading among the people of Missing of Sadiya in 1836⁵ subsequently at North Lakhimpur in 1894⁶ and at Pathalipam (presently near at NHPC) in 1895⁷. But the Missing people did not cooperate with them. It can be said that Ghamara Satra, Sessa Satra, Namati Satra had influenced them. But they had maintained their traditional cultural pattern including their language.

4. CONCLUSION

Ghamara Satra was established in the pre-Sankari era under the patronized of the Chutia king. Still a JaiGhanta (bell inscription) weighting about 15Kg preserved at Ghamara Satra was dedicated by a Chutia King Satya Narayan. Chutia King also offered Bansi Badan (idol of lord Krishna). On the other hand Ahom king Rudra Singha offered Bhaban Mohan image, idol of Lord Bhishnu. Moreover valuable Puthis and things were preserved by the Satras which indicates about new information about the Ahom and Chutia's reign over this region and their relation with the Satras.

However to analyze the unity of the country and the harmony between the hills and plains , the name of the Ghamara Satra of Lakhimpur district of Assam must be mentioned. The main pioneer of this programmer, which entered the tribal people since the time of British colonialism, was Basukrishna Goswami, Lilakanta Goswami and Dayakrishna Goswami. Satradhikar Dayakrishna Goswami had much contributed to propagate Satria culture among the Nyishi, Apatanis, Adis, Hill Miris, plain Missing etc during the pre-independent and the post independent period. So, Ghamara Satra has called the pioneer in the east spreading Neo-Vaishnism among the Nyishi, Missing, Hill-Miris, Apatanis, Adis and Mishimis etc of Arunachal Pardesh. Ghamara Satra had fulfilled the aims of Sankardeva to unite the hills and plains with dole of religion. Last but not least, Ghamara Satra is not only an ordinary Satra, it is rare and unique library where available lot of old Sanskrit books, Khasipatar Puthi, Dravian Puran (Itanagar Buranji) etc. The Satra has also known as museum and archive of old Assam.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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