



Cover Page



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HISTORY OF BAHARI SATRA, IT'S INFLUENCE ON THE LIFE OF ITS LOCALITIES

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Abstract

The paper is a result of the field study of Bahari Satra which was established by Mahapurusha Sri Sri Harideva who was the one among the pioneers of Neo-Vaisnava movement in medieval Assam. The satra is located in the village Bahari in Barpeta District, Assam. The Bahari Satra is claimed as the first satra of Assam by the people of the village Bahari. Therefore, it is known as 'Aadi-Satra'. However, there are various satras in Assam and as Sankaradeva, the vaisnava saint is regarded as the first pioneer of satra institution in Assam, it is very difficult to say the Harideva's established Bahari Satra is the first satra of Assam without having most authentic source materials.

In this paper study has done on the history of the Bahari Satra and its influence on the people's life of the village.

Keywords: Satra, Harideva, Mahapurusha, Structure, Bahari, Influence, People, Namghar, Manikut.

INTRODUCTION

The village Bahari is a large village which is situated at the south-east part of district Barpeta, Assam. The mighty Brahmaputra River is in the most side of the village. The village is bounded by Bongaon Tahsil on the north, Rampur Tahsil on the east, Barpeta Tahsil on the west and the Nagrijuli Tahsil on the south. It consists of twelve numbers of paras or chuburies. According to census report 2011, the total population of village is 3352 of which 1672 are males while 1680 are females and it comprised of 780 families.

There lived the people of various castes and communities in and around the village Bahari. The people of each community have maintained their own harmony in the village.

The village Bahari is known for its famous Jute cultivation in Barpeta district. It is the centre of jute production.

The most important religious institution of Bahari village is its 'Satra' institution which was established by Mahapurush Shri Sri Harideva. There is a very interesting history behind the establishment of the satra in Bahari village and coming of Harideva to the village Bahari. While discussion has gone to the establishment of the Bahari satra, the study must have put focus on the life story of Harideva.

Harideva was the one among the pioneers of Neo-vaisnava movement in medieval Assam. Though there is not much of books published on the life stories of Harideva, yet some of the charit- puthis have been published from which one can learn about the life story of Harideva.

In order to know the ancestor of Harideva, the study must go forward to 7th century B.C. It was the time of Kumar Bhaskaravarma of Kamarupa {594-650} who was an ally of king Harshavardhana of Kanauj. Once Harshavardhana invited king Bhaskaravarmana to his court in order to attend a Mahavishnu Yagna organized by king Harsha himself. In the yagna, Bhaskaravarma was very much impressed by a very brilliant Scholar named "Pandit Dwij Narattama". Bhaskara was influence by his knowledge and wisdom and therefore he brought him to Kamarupa in his kingdom in order to enrich the education system of his kingdom.

According to the information from charitputhis, Harideva's ancestry can be trace to "Pandit Dwij Narattama".

Harideva was the son of Pandit Ajanava and his mother's name was Parijati. His father died in his childhood and his mother took "Sati" with the death of her husband.

Harideva was born in Narayanpur which is in present Uttar Lakhimpur in Assam. There is a controversy regarding the year of Harideva's birthday. In many a articles it is mentioned that Harideva was born in 1348 saka era in the "Bhadar" month of Assamese calendar in suklapanchami Tithi and he is regarded elder among the three others Mahapurusha- Sankaradeva{1371 saka},



Cover Page



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Damodardeva{1410 saka} and Madhavadeva{1411 saka} of Assam.Till now the scholars have accepted the birth year of these three Mahapurusha. But the controversy has arisen regarding the birth year of Mahapurush shri shri Harideva while HarinarayanadevaGoswami and KarunakantaBaruah in their published book ‘Haridevacharita’ mentioned the birth year of Harideva is 1415 saka and from then the controversy arises regarding the birth year of Harideva. In many articles, writers in their writings say that this Harideva’s birth year is not correct and it comes to light from various other information in the same book. But Maheswar Neog in his book “Sankaradeva and His Times” also mentioned the birth of Harideva in 1415 saka/1493 A.D.

As in the earlier charitpathies, years were mentioned according to the saka era, but in present time these years are counted according to Christian era (C.E) by adding 78 years with the earlier saka year. However, it is very difficult to believe the mentioned saka years in charitpathies are accurate or not.

Regarding the year of Harideva’s birth, the year which is mentioned by Bongayagiri in his ‘HaridevaCharita’ is accepted by scholars and its 1348 saka era {1426C.E}. Bongayagiri was the stepbrother of Sankaradeva which is not deny in the charitpathis of sankaradeva too. In many articles on Harideva it is mentioned that Bongayagiri became the disciple of Harideva in 1403 saka and he stayed with Harideva till the death of Harideva. Therefore, what Banagayagiri mentioned in his charitputhi of Harideva is accepted by all.

But there still raises the question whether the mentioned year of Harideva’s birth is correct or not and if it corrects then how he comes to know it is the exact year of Harideva’s birth as he joined as disciple of Harideva in 1403 saka era. However, many a scholars accepted the year of Harideva’s birth is 1348 saka era or 1426 C.E.

From his childhood Harideva was very much attracted towards Vishnu Bhakti with the influence of his father Ajanava. While he had grown up his mind flew towards the social reform. He was strongly against the “sati” system which prevailed in society at that time.

Objectives

Through the study an attempt has done to present the historical background of the satra and its influence on the life of the people in its remote past. The study also put focus on the life of Mahapurush Shri Shri Harideva and how His teaching influences the people of the village. The study also presents the class distinguishes under the influence of the satra and it has also presented status of women in the Namghar of the satra. The study has discussed about the structure of Bahari Satra and the management system of the satra which Harideva had introduced in the time of its establishment.

Scope: There are not much more works have done on the Bahari Satra. Therefore, it will be helpful for the further research work.

Methodology: The data of the research paper is basically collected from the books, souvenirs, magazines and articles. Interviews have also taken from the people of the village.

ESTABLISHMENT OF BAHARI SATRA

In the available articles of Harideva the establishing year of the Bahari Satra is mentioned as 1375 saka era, even this year is mentioned in the main gate of the satra too. It means the establishing year of this satra is 1453 Christian era. If this date is correct then it will be a great challenge to Sankaradeva as Sankaradeva is regarded as the founder of satra institution in Assam. But there arises a criticism regarding this year of the establishment of Bahari satra by Harideva whether this year is correct or not as there is no such reliable primary source material available on it. Hence, it is very difficult to say it is the exact year on the basis of information from available charitputhis and articles. As it is still a matter of controversy regarding the year of Harideva’s birth so it will be wrong to say the year of his establishment of first satra in Bahari with a surety. However, this time of establishing satra in the village Bahari is regarded the golden age of the village by its people because it is believed that the society of Bahari was gradually civilized with that time onwards.

According to folklore, Bahari grama or Bahari village was at that time known as “Dantapur”. This village was full of jungles and there lived twelve very cruel persons and with them a woman who was prostitute in her profession was stayed with the twelve demons like persons. This is also mentioned in various articles and even on charitputhis of Harideva too. While Harideva had come to the village ‘Dantapur’ the twelve cruel persons behaved very roughly to him. But Harideva with his calm nature treated them well and enlightened them with his knowledge. He freed them from their all sins and gave them the knowledge of BhagavataVaisnavism. Thus, Harideva by his religious teachings brought these twelve demons like persons in the way of Bhakti. After enlightened them, Harideva



Cover Page



intended to establish a “Satra” there and ultimately, he established a ‘Satasangi satra’ there. The term ‘Satansangi’ means the society of honest people. According to the people after establishing of satra by Harideva the place ‘Dantapur’ was known as ‘Bahari’ and the satra was called ‘Bahari Satra’.

INFLUENCE OF BAHARI SATRA ON THE LIFE OF PEOPLE OF BAHARI

Every satra institution put influence on the life of its locality. ‘Bahari satra’ also has its influence in its people’s life from its establishment. It is very difficult to write on the influence of Bahari Satra in its people’s life as there are no such materials have been written on the Bahari Satra’s influence in its people’s life. However, on the basis of the available articles on Harideva’s life and from interview with the people of the village, an idea can be taken regarding the influence of the satra and the teaching of Harideva in its localities.

It was the influence of Harideva, people of the village became civilized and engaged themselves towards religious philosophy of Bhagavata Vaisnavism.

Another one influence of Harideva was that while falling under his influence the twelve cruel persons became the honest in their nature as well as their mind flew towards marriage and family planning and as result each of them got married.

Thus, the family life of Bahari had extended and the village Bahari got a organize society as earlier there was no organize society there in. Thus, from this information it can be said that the people of the village were the ancestry of those twelve cruel persons.

People after establishment of Satra engaged themselves in various religious discussion, engaged themselves in reading “Bhagavata”, doing naam- prasang etc. Even today the tradition of reading “Bhagata” by Bhakatas and doing Naam-prasang by gopinis(women devotees) still running on in the Namghar of the satra. After establishment of satra people from nearby village began to come to the Bahari village without any fear in order to join religious discussion in the Satra.

Thus, under the influence of the satra, Bhagavatavaisnavism had extended not only in village Bahari but also other places too. As Harideva was against caste system in society, after the establishment of satra while, he suggested the twelve persons to run the society without caste distinction.

It was the influence of Harideva as well as the satra that people of the village are strongly against caste system. Even today the people of various caste and community lives in and around the village but they maintain harmony and social equality. Although it is said that the people of each and every caste and community are treated equally under the satra-samiti of the village but in realistic it can’t be said it’s true. As the people of the muslim community are not allowed to enter the satra. Even today it is visible that entering of muslim people in satra is a great sin in the eyes of the people of village, not only in village Bahari but also in the other places its visible that muslims are not allowed to enter even in the campus of satra. It is the sign of communalism which still very much crept in the mind of the people as well as in society.

As Harideva had the respect for women, he was against the domination of women by men in the society. He even intended to give women in high position in the society. Therefore, he had appointed his daughter Bhubaneswaridevi in the post of Satradhikar in Maneri Satra, another satra established by Harideva in nearby place of Bahari satra.

Though under the influence of Harideva, women got special position in the satra as well as in Namghar, yet distinguish has been visible between men and women in the Namghar. In the Namghar it is not visible of gopinies(women devotee) and bhakatas(men devotee) sitting together and doing naam-prasanga, bhagavat path etc. Although they sit in the floor of the same Namghar but both the male and female devotees have their different places. From this it can be said that though both male and female are equal in the Namghar of the satra but it is theoretically equal, in practical they don’t have equal status.

Importance of Bahari Satra

The Bahari satra has its importance in Barpeta district as well as in Assam. It is also regarded the one of the centers to promote Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam. While discussing the importance of Bahari satra, the study must put focus on its most important festival “JETH-SABHA”. It is the most important festival of the Bahari satra as well as the village Bahari which is observed by the people of the village in the month of “JETH” according to assamese calendar every year on the occasion of the death anniversary of Harideva as the death of Harideva is regarded in 1488 saka of assamese jeth month on the tithi of Aamavaisya. On that auspicious day



Cover Page



people pay their homage and respect to the guru Harideva by lighting the collection of earth lamps on the floor of the Namghar of the satra and the floor of namghar becomes the garden of lighting earth lamps from evening to whole night on that day. The people of different places come to the village Bahari on that auspicious day to pay homage to Guru Harideva by lighting of earthlamps. This sabha of Harideva's death anniversary makes the Bahari satra special in the Barpeta district as well as in Assam.

STRUCTURES OF BAHARI SATRA

While discussing the structure of Bahari satra, study must put focus on its Namghar. Namghar is the most essential structure of a Satra. It is the place where all the major activities situated in the centre of the Satra. The residents of the Satra, devotees and visitors sit in the open space of the Namghar. Actually, the Namghars of the satras have wide, open space for sitting arrangement. While describing about Namghars, B.C Allen talked about the Namghar of Garamur Satra in the following way, "The Namghar is a huge structure, the roof of which is supported on huge wooden pillars and the great floor space is entirely bare save for one or two lecterns on which sacred writings are reposing. Here everything is fresh, neat and well to do" (Allen,1905).

It is the centre of the main activities of a satra which faces the east. It is a large open hall with gabled roof having an apsidal facade in the western side and over which is a top or the dome on the roof.

Namghar is the place where the daily religious activities of the Satra are performed. The Prashanga is the major activity which is performed every day in Namghar. In this process, certain chapters from holy texts and devotional rhythmic compositions about God are chanted by the followers by sitting in the central open space of the Namghar. In the past, roof of the Namghars were made of haystack and walls which were made of Bamboo or wood. Now-a-days there are concrete walls and tin roofs are commonly used in the Namghars of the satra. Sometimes the walls of the Namghar are decorated with local decorative motifs, paintings of mythological characters, projections of dance steps etc.

While describing the Namghar of Bahari Satra, it has two in numbers. One is known as the Purona Namghar (old one) which was established by Harideva himself during the time of establishment of the Satra. It covers a small length of area for which reason people built another Namghar near the old one which covers a large area. This new one is known as Notun Namghar (new one) by its villagers. According to the villagers, the reason behind the establishment of New Namghar was due to the vastness of followers of Harideva, there need of a large area in the Namghar for doing religious activities. No other specific reason of establishing the other Namghar has come to light except this. The new Namghar has been built in the model of the old one. Though both the Namghar run under one satriya samaj but in present days all the major religious activities have done in the New Namghar. Therefore, the old one lost its previous glory.

Some of the salient features which are visible in the both Namghars are- Manikut, Daulmandir, Moth, Guru Aasana, Padashila (Harideva's foot print), Akshay Banti (an earth lamp which must lightening of twenty-four hours in a day).

Though the new Namghar was constructed in the model of old one which include the same structure features, yet some dissimilarities visible in both Namghars. Whether the walls of the New Namghar is painted with the mythological figure of the dashavatara of LORD Vishnu, the walls of the old Namghar are inscribed with the names of some local persons who or whose family donated money to build those parts of the walls.

While describing the Manikut of the Namghar, it is a small room situated in the front portion of the Namghar. It is regarded as the most sacred space, attached to the east of the Namghar. Manikuta is where the GURU ASANA (sacred throne) is located. Bhagawat the main holy text and the idols of the worshiping deities are placed with the special arrangement in the Manikut. Manikut is actually a sacred area and beyond a certain boundary lay masses are not allowed to enter. In the Manikut of the new Namghar of Bahari Satra, it is visible the idol of LORD VISHNU with his four arms holding sankha, chakra, gada, padma and sitting in the lap of sheshnaga(king of serpent) which is not visible inside the Manikut of old Namghar. On the other hand, in the Manikut of old Namghar it is visible of "BASUDEV BIGRAHA". Basudev Bigraha is actually like a pillar, small in size where it is visible the symbol of LORD VISHNU with his four arms in the middle and in the right and the left side of this symbol, there visible the symbol of two "duori" (gatekeeper) known as JAI-VIJAY.

Whether the "AKSHAY BANTI" (a lighting earth lamp which is bigger in size) is another important thing of the Namghar of Bahari Satra, it is only visible in the "MOTH" of the New Namghar along with the PADSHILA (footstep) of Harideva. While in the Moth of old Namghar it is only visible the Padashila of Harideva.



Cover Page



The ‘Moth’ of the Namghar of Bahari Satra is a small room where the Padashila of Harideva is situated. As in the Moth of both Namghar Padashila is visible, it is hard to believe the Padashila of New Namghar is original one because the people of village had rebuilt it later so it is possible to bring this Padashila from somewhere else. (Interview with Dimbeswar Medhi, 22nd august,2020).

Another important structure of both Namghar is its “Daulmandir”. Harideva established the daulmandir inside the Namghar where people organized doulutsav(holi festival) every year and it’s still running on. But at present time the doulutsav has been organized in the New Namghar where people also gathered. Even the festival of “JETH-SABHA” which discussed in earlier chapter also observe mainly in New Namghar though a little number of earth-lamps lighten in the old Namghar too on that auspicious day but it is done only for formality.

MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF BAHARI SATRA

The Bahari Satra is well known for its management system in Barpeta district. The system of management of the satra is most important one of the satra. After Harideva establish the satra, he advised to manage the works of the satra by elected satra samiti. From that time, even today management of Bahari satra is run by an elected satra samiti under the supervision of a Majumdar and a President. The majumdar is the head of satra samiti. Moreover, there is a secretary for social meetings etc. The satra-samiti also supervised the functions and the social activities of the satra.

The satra-samiti of Bahari satra is also well known for dominating anti-social activities. Earlier Gohain family, the most powerful family of the village headed the satra-samiti and the society. They wanted to keep all the powers of the satra in their own hand. But the common masses of the village refused to obey them in course of time.

The judicial system of Bahari satra has also its importance in the satra-samiti as well as in the society of the village. All the unsocial activities under the jurisdiction of Bahari satra are discussed in a systematic way in the satra melchara . The Satra-samiti has the power to impose punishment according to the guilty and the accused must obey the judgement of the satra-samiti like a court in the village.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing study an attempt has been done to present a comprehensive historical study on Bahari satra. Through the study an attempt has been done to present the establishment of the Bahari satra by Harideva and evolution of Satra Samaj as well as the religious philosophy of Vaisnavism in its localities. Though it is very difficult to make a complete historical study on Bahari satra of Barpeta district as there no such original materials available on the topic yet, an attempt is to do historical study on the basis of the remaining articles by its local writers which published in souvenirs and the charitputhis on Harideva and also the own vision and oral interview with the people of the village.

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