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Institutional Reforms and Cultural Transformations: A Sociological Study of the Satras of Assam

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Abstract

This paper explores the institutional and cultural transitions of the Satras of Assam, historically rooted in the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition. It examines how modernity, political shifts, and socio-economic pressures have reshaped these spiritual institutions. The study highlights transformations in leadership, gender dynamics, caste-based discrimination, and the adaptation of monastic norms. Qualitative methods, including field interviews and observations from Majuli's five villages and Satras, inform this analysis. The findings suggest that despite visible modernization, entrenched social hierarchies and traditional customs continue to challenge inclusivity and reform.

Keywords: Satras, Neo-Vaishnavism, Institutional Reform, Assam, Gender Equality, Caste Hierarchy, Social Change

Introduction:

Every community or Institution has different ideologies and beliefs where it bound up with different ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of society. The concept of culture has been accepted as a different meanings or definition that has a diverse-roots or distinct features of society. Culture has uprooted in institutional sphere as an instrumental force or societal relation towards society. **According to Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002)** believed that "Culture is a key site of social reproduction and symbolic power". The study of culture has placed a certain input where material or non-material aspect of society has a wider relation through symbolic and non-symbolic relation of society. The various forms where culture has articulated our religion has been given special place that has a specific shape or relativity of society. **According to Talcott Parson**, "Culture is an ordered symbolic system that acts as a primary force binding together the elements of a social system, essentially consisting of shared values, norms, and beliefs that guide individual actions and shape social interactions within a society". Thus, the process of interaction that convey meaning with society and individual had provide a different framework, that has formed several actions with various function or role which has been transformed as a special place towards our social landscape. The present study has brought a multiple thought or landscape where Institution has shape as a cultural horizon that reflect the origin of the state of Assam. The reform of Vaisnavite and Neo-Vaisnavite tradition of Assam, a period

of centuries played an important role in shaping cultural history from 12th century A.D. After a period of history, Sankardeva as a greatest socio-religious reformer of Assam started the transformation of Neo-Vaisnavite tradition in Assam in the later part of 15th century. The socio-economic and cultural dynamics brought divine power through customary laws, cultural belief and class struggle towards hindrance of upper- and lower-class society as well as through colonial rules of society. (**Akhil Chandra Borah (2020)**). According to "**Jayanta Bora**" of **Garmur Satra** "Culture became a assets of material," which became a complex political economy of every particular groups of the society". As well as British rule continued through their rule of the state mostly in North-Eastern frontier countries, where from Ahom to Government rule compiled through rule of law as well as through modern equip of knowledge. (**S.N Sarma 2016**) According to **Debajit Kalita of Dakhinpaat Satra**

"Earlier we have a believe and to exist through God help in Satra, but everything now has been controlled by Government order of Satra premises".

Political, social and cultural division of society had brought chaos towards gender disparity, discrimination of diverse cultures, caste and class as well as for one community to another. (**S. N Sarma 2016**). According to **Biju Das of Kamalabari Satra** of Moritong Village "Caste discrimination has led us to hold in old tradition, no change has been brought". Reforms of Hindu society that played a major role during the cultural trends and movement in Vedic period, has become a limited period of its history. Great reform of **Vaisnava** movement had form an inspiration towards the religious trends of different parts of India and spread all over the Brahmaputra valley and adjacent areas. Whereas Satras as a most influential socio-cultural organizations of the land as well as members from non -Hindus and tribal families were given livelihood life through cultivated form of Vaisnavite or Neo-Vaisnavite monasteries of Assam. The root -of social transformation and cultural heritage of Satra, has been marked by social importance and various chronicles of devotional practices. The closing decades of 15th century and range from 16th century to the beginning of 19th century of Christian era, the word "Satra" has been derived or it has been corrupted from Sanskrit word "Satra" that lead to two dimensions as a uniform order of religious policy and religious cult of ancient times. From different decades of thirteenth century to sixteenth century which revolve as a path of medieval period to modern period, took a change in the whole revolution in the end of seventeenth century. The word "Satra" that has been revolve has been scripted as a part of several dimension that led to described as revival of various religious affairs of Assam. The whole privileged form of Satra culture has been derived from Bhagawata Purana and assembled as a different part of sages, and it took a long way to gathered in Nimisa kshetra (in the forest of Nimisa). The charitable alms and scarified of human beings have been flourished towards the movement of Vaisnavism to later part of Neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam. The origin of Satriya culture has been derived as a sense of sankrit word which has been defined as:

"ekanta vaisnava yot nibasakarai"

"Jibako saran diye,taksatrarakarai"

It means where the single minded Vaisnavas reside, where they offer (shelter) to the souls, that place is called Satra. (www//blogsot.com/srisri-iswarhatiSatrasualkutchi.html).

The Satras are the place of education and hub of learning, where it is headed by the Satradhikar as well as devotees who hold some post in the Satra or lead their life as a celibate within the Satra are called Bhakat or Disciples. The life as a monk that they maintain distance from other norms and values of society, continue to have an important role in the religious life and live like a Sannyasa that they follow mostly the prayers of Madhavdeva, who is a guru of Udasin Bhakat. As well as they live their life without any liberty and freedom to their soul. In purely monastic Satras where celibacy is strictly observed the number of such Bhakats or celibate are more numerous than of the semi-monastic or non-monastic Satras. The formation of celibacy (unmarried life) who live their life as a devotee are popularly known as *Kevaliya Bhakat*. (where the word Kevaliya is derived from Sanskrit word *Kevala*, (i.e alone or unattached from other religious sects of the cult...) These lay devotees of a Satra are called sisyas. The function of the monastic Satras is divided into two fractions they are: primary functions and secondary functions have been defined through articulation of Satra culture which is defined as:

In primary function the propagation of Vaisnavism is always based on monotheistic principle to initiate disciples of the Satra and to provide ethico-devotional codes and rules to conduct for the neophytes, and to hold religious festivals and different functions or festivals as well as occasions. The secondary functions is to bring faith in good relationship between the villagers and to develop and maintain the spirit of co-operation to dispense justice which is notion of discrimination of ancient learning on all social and religious controversies. (by **Sarma Nath Satyendra 2016**).

During Vaisnava faith role of women have been influenced as an individual and spiritual formation of society where they were regarded as "*Bhogi*" (sacrifice of God as a savism) in early history of India. Sankardeva has brought equal status towards the role of women and status of the society. The whole section of society has been divided into devotion of "*Girhastha Satra*" and Ashrami Satra that it led to transform as a pure and impure form of society, that has been divided into three types of devotional society which is named as: monastic, semi-monastic and non-monastic Satras of society. The firm footing of Vaisnavism has been influenced by doctrine of mantra and yantra in the form of magic in all forms and innumerable spells and rites of Tantric practices. Eminent scholar **Dr. S. N. Sharmā** has mentioned

"We find that a religious setting or association where the Bhāgavata-purāna was recited or explained was designated as a satra, at the initial stage of the vaishnavite movement."

The Satra resemble to a certain extent of Vaisnavite mathas and akharas of the other parts of India. Each Satra consists of the three principal parties or categories of persons intimately connected with the welfare and management of the Satra as well as the connotation of Satra has been named through Satraadhikar, Bhakats and Sisyas that led to reside within four walls of Satra campus, while the last party live in scattered villages leading the ordinary life of a householder. **According to Dr. B. Kakati**,

"Vaisnavism of Assam preached by Sankardeva and that of the South speak adequately of the influences imbibed during his pilgrimage".

The head of the Satra is popularly known as Adhikar, where his position is similar to that of the mohunt of the matha institution or about of the Christian monasteries. In purely monastic Satras where celibacy is strictly observed the number of such Bhakats or

Celibates are more numerous than of the semi-monastic or non-monastic Satras. Such celibate devotees are popularly called as Kevaliya Bhakat. The word "Kevaliya" is derived from Sanskrit word Kevela i.e "alone or unattached". Thus, the predominance of Satra Institution has led a rift to various religious affairs in Assam that led to various doctrine as a holy place of dominant cult that led to change from one period to another period in the transition of years. The tremendous revolution as Sankari or pilgrimage of religious rites of Assam as well as it gave another scripture of culture that choose another path of revolution during Momaria Rebellion. The link with magical skill of Mahanta people that they take both division Satra culture and make one as an illusion to diverse people towards their religion.

Thus, the whole movement became a battle during the revolt of class-struggle of paik system, that take place during Ahom Monarchy and gave a birth to a new revolution. Gradually the revolution change their mind and thought which became a "blind in culture and tradition of Vaisnavite and Neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam. Where it propagated an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenouselements of the region present at those times in history, when the society in Assam was in turmoil, fragmented into many small parts, always at horns with each other. The Satras have evolved over longer period of time and re-divine over the period that bring political stability and chaotic condition in whole sphere of change, where it became a friction of diverse shades and grades of culture and has become a complexity of centuries. The begin of traditional sphere of various inscription of worship, adherence of Sankardeva faith and beliefs have brought unity of religion in one field, but due to acceptability of global form the change in every cult and section of gaining material benefits has become a way forward in resisting exploitative force of political order of recent times. Thus it led to conflict in the battle of public and diverse the whole culture in various parts of equality and inequality of society. The formation whole acknowledge has been gain through several happenings, incidents and complex web of relationship, that it mundane with vernacular voices and marks a unique of composed structure of religiosity. **According to Louis Dumont (1966) in his book 'Homo Hierarchicus'**

"Purity is responsible for inherent quality of traditional Indian society which is ideological rule behind the caste system where it develops a change during the development of the State in the whole era of higher caste authority in India which shares an organic relationship with gender identity that develop a legitimate system in India that have been control by gender violation in India that develop a tradition in exploitative nature of society."

Thus, the rise of Vaisnavite and Neo-Vaisnavite tradition in Assam has been demarcates the same line where it includes a complete logic of interdependence between spiritual and material existence that hold in one key although it creates several diverse waves in social and religious reformation of society. **According to Neog (2011)**

"Sankardeva's appraisal to establish a strand of thought, as a structure of tradition that combines the diverse religious and material existence of inhabitants in region reflects the substantial organic linkage in the existential reality of the world."

Which it led to change in its whole vernacular tradition and increased its change in whole global arena of society. The whole process turns down where it led to bring light of

Sankardeva where he never questions about social justice, participation, equality and egalitarianism. This goes beyond about the rigidity of this political arena that holds symbolic power and explore a historical as well as socio-cultural surroundings of society. However the whole tragic of Sankardeva popularized the cult of Krishna form of Vishnu worship in a different form with the simplest way of devotion called Bhakti, as well as NeoVaishnavite movement reformed the religious life of the people and it worked as an instrument in building the socio, economic, cultural and political life of the people. In this way a change in whole development could be seen where teaching of vaishnavite and neo-vaishnavite culture has led to change as a depict of various tradition, and it change its spirituality which goes beyond in its societal rules of society.

Methodology:

- This research follows a qualitative approach, integrating both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through unstructured interviews and in-depth observation using convenient sampling across four Satras—Bengana Ati, Natun Kamalabari, Dakhinpaat, and Garmur and Auniati—in the Majuli district. Secondary sources include books, journal articles, newspapers, government reports, and academic theses, offering a contextual and historical framework to assess institutional changes.

Legacy Of Social Change and Diverse Cultures:

The impact of British period and changes in its development have become one of the obstacles in religious tradition, which has witnessed a shift in various dimension of society. It has become most significant in the whole era of transition during transitional period and legacy of phases. Where it led to diverse segment between tradition and religion, and as a process of socio-cultural formation of Institution, which it derives through power play of caste and class hierarchy of society emphasized a complex understanding of diverse culture that evolve through a control of political and economic elements. Moral traditions and foundations which reframe our medieval society has lost in its soul, where they have undergone with the contradiction of spiritual and material assets of society that they have shared each and every resource about the changes that could be seen and observe in every possibility of their views and queries about their social problems as they faced off from the Institution and management. Change in democratic rules and regulation, social change in leadership as well as the dictatorship rules around the corner of their present society, one of them is Bengana Ati Satra and Natun Kamalabari Satra and Dakhinpaat Satra and Garmur Satra, where the whole unity as well as divine of complexity of present structure of culture has been run through one spokesmen as well as all the villagers has reform their views, although the head of leadership has been changed with modern application but the tactics of conflict could be seen within the boundary of Institution. The equality and inequality have touched the feet of Institution where we are allowed to enter inside the Satra, but still the untouchability and indigenouse practice could be seen regarding food habits, support from Satra and domination from the caste-based hierarchy of the society. Thus, it brought a diverse formation in the whole era for the present tradition where it emphasized a rational outlook for all caste and class dimension of society where one of them is Sumaimari village (A Missing village) which indicates that many people are below poverty line, and state that “We are living our life under misery”. The whole transition has been still prevailed through caste hierarchy, even if there is social change but they were

treated as marginalized people of society, which refined as a part of “**you are from another caste you cannot hold your position here**”, state that to live a social life they have to follow the instruction where they were given a position in the land of Satras, but the legacy they want to continue within one caste which they spoke about We all believe in God existence where our deeds to give our prayers and salvation for God. We are not control to give our blessings by Satraadhikar (head of the Institution) but with our own soul, as well as they state that when they speak something within their language or give their own views, they have been told to keep a margin within the institution. Thus, the glory of heterogeneity which welcomes and adheres to wide range of space in faiths and worship within itself. Whereas the people of that villages always look themselves through resilience of separation as well as exclusion took place to build a separate provision of worship that they began to preach Christianity by building churches.

“We want to live with one religion that we never one to bring another religion as a part of society, but we are forced by one-self to have a separate community which is by society and institutional forms”.

According to Emile Durkheim(2001) Religion is something eminently social, providing social cohesion, control and purpose for people as well as allowing individual to interact and reaffirm social norms”, where it brought light one of the view of Garmur Satra that; “Jugal Bhuyan” (a principal of Garmur High school states that: The equality and inequality has touch the feet of Institution where we are allowed to enter inside the Satra but still the untouchability and indigenious practice could be seen regarding food habits, support from Satra and domination from the caste based hierarchy of the society.(Jugal Bhuyan 20 october, 2024) **According to E.A Blunt** “No relation between a caste’s social position and the severity of its cooking taboo”. The interplay of caste, class, creates a complex web of interactions that influence individual experiences within the Satra institutions has brought a resilience of separation as well as exclusion from whole society. Thus, the whole idea has been changed with the critique of change in whole tradition that left us a mark of questions which has not been utilized as a proper sect of belief or freedom in religion among gender equivalence of society. Exclusion could be seen where it led to local dispute that have been played through break down of peace and unity among people where it takes advantages of diverse religion and it couldn’t brought empirical light and wisdom through the ladder of stratified society, which it has become a barrier in every legs or they want to make own way of alienation or revolve through cultural and structural renaissance in Assam.

According to M.N Srinivas (1971)

“Social Change in Modern India, defined Sanskritization as a process where a lower caste or tribe emulates the customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life of a higher, often twice-born, caste.”

Thus, the abstract of leading position has been changed to bring light for tribal caste and other lower caste by giving “saran” and give them an opportunity to take a leading role in the customs and manners of higher caste authority of the society. Where a binary opposite of the caste of Hindu society and their identity has become a challenging position of cultural and religious practices that has been dominated towards the new change which they couldn’t have a look or they unable to express their feelings, that it became a complex understanding of alienated society or as a product of society. Concept of Alienation is historically a specific concept that has been subjugated through the product of labor

(subject) and means of production (object) (object of labor and instrument of labor) (by, **Karl Marx 1844-1978**). Thus, the consequent and subsequent position has led to change in various moral and spiritual formation that it began to process as a part of elites and the question of social and economic disparities in their subjugation of rationality and reason of conversion has become an orthodox of Vedic rituals and guidance of morality.

Gender Equity and Patriarchal Structures:

The whole phrase of equality and inequality has brought a drastic change in the context of every rationality, where not only it stands for classification of individualism or secularism of religion. Every form of corrupted society that left a significant mark in our body language, which our ideology doesn't want to bring comfort of social change in some part of era and still have a legacy to make a judgment with the corner of respective forms of society. Margins of social, cultural, political as well as economic field has affected through gender disparity of society, that looks like an empty pot which couldn't feel the pore of heavy water. Gradually it led us towards the hegemony of segmental society, in which it couldn't maintain the trace of rigorous caste-based societal inequalities of society that based on human rights violation and protest against the provision of gender equality concept. The violation of human rights and discrimination against women which is not actually mandated by religion, but by culture practice of social views against women that mitigate a clash between human rights and violation of cultural practice of religion.

According to Kalpana Kannabiran "Religion is not a given, it is a negotiated reality," Kalpana Kannabiran, a Hindu woman and director of the Council for Social Development in Hyderabad, said in her keynote address. (Sal Danha Virginia (2016). Thus the report which has been carried out in Majuli, where it brought a transition of phrase in several incidents or a part of several views in some hegemonic relationship under the frame of patriarchy. One of the incident took place in Kumar village of Majuli nearby Dakhinpaat Satra, whose name is Shuva Kalita (A school teacher) she state that under several social problems she has lived here and never get any help from Satra or from any organization. Whereas she state about his son who has got a job in a school that is in the year 2016 and that job has been given by Satraadhikar of Dakhinpat Satra of which the Satraadhikar has taken Rs 50,000 as a donation and that person has been assured to give a job, but that particular job has been given to another person from their village. When the lady asks to return the money with hue and cry the satraadhikar doesn't even return. So, she states that "We think and believe Satra of Adhikar as God but they led us in a miserable, as we are from another caste or they are taking more money from another person."

The social problem or legacy of those power of caste tactics has been going on as a corrupted society in which they were pay off. According to **Transparency International** "Without strong watchdog institutions impunity becomes the very foundation upon which system of corruption are built" (**Rigoberta Menchu Tum Nobel prize Laureate**). In this way the system of liability has began to form a backdrop of tradition that became a complex web of Interdependence. The orthodox of religion has led to conflict through colonial administration of the society that the turning point of every society had to face several problems that couldn't show but they were influence with modern applicability as well as new politics, which built a rappo within their boundaries. Although change of new rules has been hang out in some Institution, that led every society to bring socio-economic

differences. In which the inequality had led to bring chaos in every form of whistle blow, which it break down all forms of liability and gave us a discriminated rules. Throughout the report of Majuli one of the lady who is a entrepreneur Juri Kalita who lives in Majuli along with her family near by Bengana Ati Satra, that she has taken a small initiative to make (mask or idols of God) in which she has been ask by some villagers or basically from society and from different Satras ask to stop her work and state that” **You are women why you need to do this work stay at home.** “Through the statement she replied that she will still work and make an ignorance towards a particular behaviour or arrogance of society. Thus, the whole platform has some social indulgence or even as a corrupted politics could be seen where they think they could rule the society, but in name of religion they have brought fragmented rules towards the society. As women activist and **Executive Director of North East Network, Dr. Monisha Behal** puts it, “The entry of women into a Satra never entered any kind of discourse or debate during Sankardeb or Madhabdeb’s times. As far as my research work in the late 70’s on this subject goes, Sankardev laid down the principles of heterodoxy and acceptability of all caste/creed/gender groups in reciting the Dharma and karma of deeds.” Thus, after the incident of **Sabrimala temple case** the whole judgement has led to new diary, that it had made a statement by supreme court that all Hindu pilgrims regardless of gender could enter into the temple, where the constitution bench of supreme court held that “any exception placed on women because of biological differences violates the Constitution.” Specifically, the court held that the ban violated the right to equality under article 14 and the right to freedom of religion under article 25, which it enforces to bring change in whole equity that one should hold the position in accordance of changing rules or it could have an empowerment which is used as gendered process”. The fight against the culture of tradition that has been organize with the caste ridden society of one’s position which bring destruction to our individual life, families and communities of society. Thus, the whole termination of caste-based termination of general to Satra life and culture of its own has been held by Assamese novelist” **Mamoni Raisom Goswami** “who talks about the women’s role in the Sattra culture and state that s
“Satras of Assam is a plight of widow whose spirit is humiliated by the patriarchal world views who embrace to death because of feudal economic order that prevalent society that life of house holder system of societal life that brings well-being of Satra life.”

Through the purpose of economic growth, the whole Institution as well as the present society has brought a drastic change in the form of religious life as a notion of Assamese Vaisnavite community. The indulgence of social order that bring division in the notion of egalitarian and social order of society, has spread lot of change in tradition itself but it couldn’t acknowledge the form of stereotype that has been preserve in the Satra society. Socio-cultural role of patriarchy and equity of discrimination has led to change in irrespective of caste, creed and influence of gender poverty of society, that brought light in the marginalized section of the society as well as through various taboos and indigeneous practice of communities.

Conclusion:

The history of tradition of religion, culture, social and political change always play a role in our society, but due to rise of Bhakti tradition in Assam as well as the growth of neo-Vaisnavite movement many aspects have change. Where it led to question that how caste

has led to change as a part of religion and gender formation of society? According to 'Edward Gait' "The persecution of Gurus and destruction of Satras was done primarily at the instigation of Brahmins" (Gait, 2008: 121); Saharia 2021) which means the Brahmins try to raise the destruction of Vaisnava movement where separation took place when it instigates by Tantricism and Saivism of society. In which academic community still try to continue the minorities that it led to shed as a distinction of democratic leadership who will become supreme in their own position. Thus we can observe the every cockfight begins with one honor, where killings take place with all power play of tactics which couldn't stop to bring one as a lie down process, that the history repeats who is a bread winner as a corrupted part of society. The overall perception want to bring their legacy where they begin to blame one another that lead towards a colonial rule or invasion of various movement, which took place before independence. Although it has been years where Caste identity has become an important determinant of life where it stand for its opportunity as a fifth of the world's population, which is not given the same significance in global development policy debates as gender, race, age, religion or other identity characteristics while the addressing caste-based inequality and discrimination feature in intergovernmental commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as it has been define through socio-economic outfits. Taking India as its focus, it finds that caste has been treated as an archaic system and source of historical disadvantage due compensation through affirmative action in ways that overlook its continuing importance as a structure of advantage and of discrimination in the modern economy, especially post-liberalization from the 1990s. A body of recent literature from anthropology, economics, history and political science is used to explore the modern life of caste in society, economy and development. Questions are asked about caste as social hierarchy, the role of caste in post-liberalization rural inequality, and threat to untouchability, that effect of policies of affirmative action in public-sector education, employment, social and religious field that brought a revolution and lost its earlier meaning though the process of equality. Genealogy of religion and culture has lost its formation where they want to change the past and present society with Neo-Vaisnavite but still they are holding the patriarchy, which originally referred to rule of the father or a male dominated household and it bring social indulgence where tactics of politics has been kept hidden through the surroundings of Vaisnavite culture in centuries as a role of "never change development " as pure and impure of region" where it influenced the components of culture that reflect in their identity as a leading role of society.

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