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### Manuscripts in Religio-cultural Context: Puthis of Assam

Abstract: Scribing/ scripting marks a significant phase in the history of mankind. With the coming of writing through signs, pictures and characters (letters) human beings became more and more expressive. This change from the oral/ gestural/ postural to writing with hand using chisel, reeds, quill, stylus etc. on different surfaces like rock, metal (copper), clay tablet, wafer of wood, leaf is a paradigmatic shift. Sankaradeva (1449 -1568 A.D) appears towards the close of this phase, and gives a significant push to the script culture. The neo-Vaishnavism he propagated in medieval Assam facilitated the spread of script culture through a network in which the village naamghars played a crucial role. The practice of such Vaishnavism required the chanting of Vishnu naam (as Hari/Krishna) without the elaborate ritualism of Brahmanical Hinduism. This makes the practice of Vaisnavism seem simpler and easier to the masses. At

the same time the masses, the common villagers needed something concrete, in addition to the name-chanting, to clutch and be convinced of their own faith. Bhagavata Purana, hand-written on sacipat or tulapat, called puthi, fills the vaccum when put on the thapona in monikut of the naamghar. This led to the proliferation of manuscripts and script culture of which miniature illustration became an important element/aspect. This paper is a modest attempt at pointing at this aspect of naamghars that was conceptualised and executed by Sankaradeva in 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries Assam.



Thapona (multi-stepped throne) for the sacred texts covered by traditional hand-woven gamosa (towel) and a colourful canopy (courtesy Srimanta Sankaradeva Vaishnava Saint of Assam by Dr. Bimal Phukan page 116

### Introduction

Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449–1568 A.D) pioneered the neo-Vaishnavite movement in the present day north-east part of India in the 15<sup>th</sup>- 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his time this region comprised three states – Asam, Kamrupa and Behar (Cooch Behar) (Kamata). He was influenced by the pan-Indian sway of the Bhakti movement that saw the emergence of such preacher-reformers as Ramanujacharyya, Anandagiri, Jnanadeva, Namdev, Ramananda, Kabir, Dadu, Ballavacharyya, Surdas, Tukaram and Nanak. This Vaisnavite or Bhakti movement is referred

to as neo-Vaishnavism because its original or first wave came in the 7<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> centuries with the Alwar saints of the Tamil land. <sup>1</sup>

But there are others who cite different sources to trace the antiquity of Bhakti and Vaishnavism to many centuries earlier. According to them “a state of intense attachment with God is termed as bhakti by ancient Indian thinkers. Bhakti, the unflinching and intense love towards a personal deity found expression in the forms of song, praise, eulogy, prayer etc. in the Vedic literature.” <sup>2</sup>

On the path of this long antiquity, they cite the Upanishads like Chandogya, Katha, Svetasvatara, the Mahabharata and the Puranas. In Assam the prevalence of Vaishnavism is traced to 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. because mention of Vishnu and reference to Bhagavata-cult are found in the royal charters issued by the kings of Varmana, Pala and Salastambha dynasties who ruled here from 4<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. Sankaradeva and his followers only paved the way for its re-efflorescence in 15<sup>th</sup>- 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. <sup>3</sup>

When Sankaradeva appears on the scene, Bhakti (Devotion) centric Vaishnavism holds sway in the rest of India. His visits outside, especially to Puri, Mathura, Dwaraka, Vrindavana, Gaya, Rameshwaram and Ayodhya bring him in contact with this raging faith and practice. His attraction towards the path is facilitated by his repugnance towards religious practices of the time in Assam, Kamarupa and Behar. This combination of repulsion and attraction leads him to preach his brand of Vaishnavism or Bhakti in his unique way. A few centuries before and till the time of Sankaradeva, it is Saivism, Saktism and Tantrism (Both Buddhist and Hindu) that hold sway in Kamarupa, Assam and Behar. Such religious practices are esoteric, ritual centric and priest brokered and hence complex and exploitative. Though Dr. S.N.Sarma has not ruled out exaggerated claims against such faiths, practices and cults, he is firm in his conviction that neo-Vaishnavism of the medieval period in Assam was relatively easy and people friendly. As he says: “In spite of the royal patronage, saktism never attained the status

of a mass religion like neo-vaishnavism, the surging waves of which rolled over the entire valley in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries A.D. Dr H. Sarma Doloi has rightly said that saktism being a ritual dominated religion and somewhat esoteric in nature could be hardly practiced by the unlettered and the ignorant masses.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Sankaradeva and Eksaran Naam Dharma

Sankaradeva takes advantage of this condition and preaches his faith known as Eksaran Naam Dharma or Mahapurusha Dharma. Devotion or submission to one God, Vishnu, hence the name is Eksaran. Mahapurusha because Sankaradeva and his disciples like Madhavadeva were Mahapurusha or Great men. And the way of worship was recitation or repetition of the name Krishna or Hari as Vishnu or God. So it became a ‘naam’ centric, not ritual centric, religious practice. For the ‘unlettered and the ignorant’ such a practice became simple to understand and easy to follow. The essentially people-oriented and democratic drive of Sankaradeva’s faith is evident here. For this his brand of Vaishnavism has been found to have affinity with European Protestantism-Reformation- Humanism. As Sisir Kumar Das says: “His idea of bhakti was to unify people whom the Hindu elite had denied all privileges for centuries. His verse anticipated, as it were, a programme of national integration.”<sup>5</sup>

#### Satras and Naamghars

How to persuade the people to leave their age-old paths of worship mediated by priests? Sankaradeva rendered the verses of Hindu scriptures like the Bhagavata in the language of the masses, Brajabali. Preaching was done through this language, recitation, kirtan, jap – was done in this language. For such naam-kirtan he brought in the concept of community prayer hall or naamghar where the people of the area or hamlet could sit together and chant the name of Krishna or Hari in total submission to Vishnu.

There are slight differences among writers regarding the origin and influence of the concept of naamghar. Similar differences are also there as to whether that grew into a satra

which had naamghar as a community prayer hall or the other way round. Some see in the word ‘satra’ a pan-Indian origin and use, and try to refute the claim that Sankaradeva originated the idea. They also claim that Damodaradeva established a full-fledged ‘satra’ at Patbausi, and this made Sankaradeva happy. But there are others like Lila Gogoi who are convinced that ‘satra’ is the creation of Sankaradeva.<sup>6</sup> Whatever these claims and counter claims, one thing is certain: the centrality of the satra/ naamghar institution(s) to the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam which has gifted such crucial elements as language, literature, music, dance, performance (drama) and painting so integral to the Assamese identity.

According to Borkakoti, “all major components of Satra were included in the Bordowa than founded by the saint in 1509. The main component, Kirtanghar, was set up there way back in 1468 itself. Later the nomenclature was changed from Than to Satra; moreover some more minor components like Rangali-ghar etc. came to be added. But the major components of Satras are very much those of the Thans. So the achievements of the Satras are ultimately attributable to Srimanta Sankaradeva”<sup>7</sup> Hence, considering the uniqueness and impact of this satra/naamghar idea and institution in Assam, it is better not to attribute their origin to the temples of Alwars, Nayanars and Barkaris, Sivanubhava Mandapa of Virasaivas, nagar sankirtana of Chaitanya, bhagavata tungi of Jagannath Das or mosques. Here it is pertinent to provide a brief description of the satra / naamghar complex.

The Satra is a monastery where the satradhikar (guru/monk) and the disciples (bhaktas) dwell practicing Vaishnavism through naam kirtan and other activities. The architectural structure of the naamghar has four parts: korapat (gate), (porch), naamghar (prayer hall) and monikut (jewel house).

**Korapat (gate):** It is at the entrance of the satra or naamghar, and generally designed with lotus peacock, elephant and lion.

Rongali sora: It is a colourful shed in the space between the naamghar and the gate (korapat)

Namghar: It is a large prayer hall built in traditional style and placed in the east-west direction. Open to all people irrespective of their diverse social and economic backgrounds, it is the main arena of activity.

Monikut: It is an independent room with a separate roof next to the naamghar. Being the Sanctum-sanctorum of the naamghar, it houses the guru-asana, sacred scriptures and other valuables.<sup>8</sup>

The people oriented message and method of Sankaradeva is obvious in the design of naamghar or kirtanghar. “The kirtanghar was designed in such a manner that songs and Ankiya plays rendered there could be enjoyed by all people. There was no closed wall in kirtanghar. This was a good model of mass communication. Srimanta Sankaradeva communicated with the masses with ease. He conveyed his teaching directly to the masses from the floor of the kirtanghar.”<sup>9</sup>

These satras or naamghars (mini satras) play multifarious roles: a place of congregation, praying, reading, listening, performance, meeting, and discussion, discourse etc. “Rather Sankaradeva introduced the religion in such a lucid manner that people can follow the spirituality in a simple but logical way. To perform all these, naamghar is the only religious institution which is not in other Hindu monastery. In this way, naamghar becomes an educational institution with religious flavour for building up a progressive society. The devotees get an opportunity to know many things mainly relating to Hindu scriptures. Because for praying one has to read the religious books and memorise the hymns and sometimes one has to explain the same also.”<sup>10</sup>

Scribes and Manuscripts

The pathak or naamloguwa (one who reads or recites name/naam) needed texts of scriptures to read and recite from. So there was a scribe likhak or kakoti to prepare and write manuscripts. And there was a need to decorate and illustrate these texts and hence the appearance of the khanikar (artist / painter who also prepared masks for Bhaona). At the same time 'naamghar also acts as an archive centre' for religious manuscripts like Kirtan, Bhagawat, Gunamala, Nam ghosa, Chorit Puthi, Nat etc. Hundreds of satras as regional monasteries, and thousands of naamghars or kirtanghars dotting the villages created a huge demand for manuscript (puthi) making (writing and copying) from generation to generation. This accounts for thousands of manuscripts (catalogued or not.) coming into being in the cultural space of Assam. Written on sacipat (*Aquilaria agallocha*) and tulapat (prepared mainly from cotton pulp) hundreds of these manuscripts are beautifully illustrated. These illustrated manuscripts are exquisite artefacts, unique in their materiality and process of production. Dr. Naren Kalita, in *An Alphabetical Index of Illustrated Manuscripts of Assam*, has described such manuscripts starting with *Adhyatma Ramayana (Sundarakanda)* and ending with *Yantra-Citra*. Through scholarly studies of these manuscripts and their illustrations by such people as Rajatananda Dasgupta, Maheshwar Neog, Pratap Chandra Choudhury, Robin Dev Choudhury, Naren Kalita, Kapila Vatsayana the uniqueness of these illustrated manuscripts has been established in the sphere of Indian miniatures. This is clear in the words of Kapila Vatsyayan as quoted by Neog: 'Judging the pictorial achievements of this order it is clear that critics have unjustifiably neglected this important school of miniature painting which cannot be dismissed as a stereotyped, sub-school, derivative and unoriginal in character' <sup>11</sup>

It is clear that puthis (manuscripts) and chitraputhis (illustrated manuscripts) on sancipat and tulapat are significant cultural products contributing to the formation and consciousness of Assamese identity. And the fountain head of this product lies in Sankaradeva's ekasaran naamdharma, and satra/ naamghar institutions.

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