



## *Satras Through The Eyes of an Udasin Bhakat*

**Ruksbana Zaman**

Faculty of Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, Indira Gandhi National Open University,  
New Delhi. E-mail: [rukshee@gmail.com](mailto:rukshee@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Around the early sixteenth century Srimanta Sankardeva, a vaishnava saint started preaching Neo-Vaisnavism in Assam. Popularly known as *ekasarana nama-dharma* the preaching's of Srimanta Sankardev reached out to the masses through the *kirtangbars* or *namghars* (prayer halls). Thereafter, for many centuries the *satras* (monasteries) as the seat of learning has been preserving and practicing the ways taught by Srimanta Sankardev. The *satras* became the sanctum sanctorum for many *bhakats* (disciples) who gave up the worldly pleasures. These *bhakats* in the *satras* take up the path of *brahmachari* (celibacy) and through dance and music express their love for the ultimate being.

The present paper expounding on the anthropological research tool of life history, documents the life of Bhabananda Barbayan an *udasin bhakat* (celibate) from the Uttar Kamalabari *satra* of Majuli in Assam. Through his life history the paper seeks to reflect on the origin of the *satras* in Assam. This paper is a humble attempt to understand the functioning of the *satra* and the life of the *udasin bhakats* who spend their lives in the search of the ultimate being through songs and dance.

**Keywords:** *satra*, life history, Sankardeva, Neo-vaisnavism, *bhakat*

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## **Introduction**

Assam around the early fifteenth century was gripped by political unrest. Political turbulence led to a degradation of social and economic lives of the people giving rise to social evils in the name of religion. Saktism bordering on Tantricism gained momentum and people were falling prey to evil practices like animal and human sacrifices, black magic, witchcrafts, sorcery etc. At such a time the need was felt for a religious guidance devoid of all the strict religious practices. It was at this juncture Srimanta Sankardeva showed the path of *Bhakti*, a religious movement that was

also gaining grounds in the rest of India. People were attracted to this form of faith as it did not have any superfluities attached to it. Neither rigorous rites to be followed nor any sacrifices to be made, *Bhakti* as a means of reaching out to the ultimate being through songs, music and dance came as a saviour in the times of all the religious turmoil in Assam. This movement gained momentum even after the death of Srimanta Sankardev and flourished through the *satras* (monasteries) that were created to preserve and take forward the *ekasarana nama-dharma* the preaching's of Srimanta Sankardev to the masses through the *Bhakats* (disciples).

### *Life History as an Anthropological Research Tool*

Life history in anthropological studies have been used to reveal the extensive account of a person's life, whether written or narrated by the person, or by others, or by both (Langness 1965). Pedro Martinez's life history by Oscar Lewis is one of the most celebrated life histories in the anthropological arena. The work describes the life of a Mexican man Pedro and his family in great detail. The detailed account of the everyday mundane life made the narrative come alive within the anthropological context of understanding the ordinary. Life history makes the ordinary meaningful. Life history within the anthropological parlance need not be of a celebrity. Within the American tradition, life histories were a source of recording the vanishing tribes. Some of the earlier works on life history were by Radin (1926) who used it as a supplementary source to substantiate data, Kardiner (1945) had worked with life histories to understand the basic personality structure, Charlotte Buehler (1968) has used life history to understand overall course and structure of human life (Watson 1976). Channa (nd) had worked on the life history of a Jad woman to understand the life and identity of a Jad woman. Zaman (2016) in her doctoral work on the creation of the Odissi Dance had worked closely with Sashimani *Mahari* (temple dancer of the Jagannath Temple, popularly known as *Devadasi*, in other parts of India) to understand her life history as a temple dancer.

This paper seeks to explore the origin and functioning of the *satras* in Assam, through the narratives of an *udasin Bhakat*. The paper is divided into two sections. In the first section the origin of the *satras* as the seat of learning that has been preserving and practicing the ways taught by Srimanta Sankardev has been examined. The question whether Sankardeva created the *satras* has been taken into account. It also focused on the creation of the four distinct *sambhatas* (schisms) after the death of Madhavadeva. The second section deals with the understanding of the *satras*, their organization and functioning with inputs from the Kamalabari *satra*

of Majuli (once the largest river island in the world, Majuli has been the seat of the *satras* for centuries) that has been home to Bhabananda Barbayan, whose life history is being reflected herein.

My fieldwork began in Delhi in the year 2015 while I was learning the Sattriya dance (the dance form from Assam that has been recognized as one of the Indian Classical Dances) at Srimanta Sankardeva Bhawan under guru Bhabananda Barbayan. An acclaimed dancer Bhabananda Barbayan is a recipient of the ‘Sangeet Natak Akademi Ustad Bishmillah Khan Yuva Award- 2012, conferred by Sangeet Natak Akademi, for Sattriya dance. It was while I was learning the art form that the researcher in me felt the urge to record his life history. This work is the outcome of my association and interactions with Bhabananda Barbayan as a student and a researcher that has spanned over a period of five years. During the initial days, I was basically observing Bhabananda Barbayan as a teacher and a *bhakat*. Slowly, with time, as I established rapport with him, we started interacting after our classes and finally, our conversations culminated into his life history. Most times we would interact while having lunch at the Bhawan or over a cup of tea. Bhabananda Barbayan was not too keen on being recorded using a tape recorder, thus, mostly it was conversations and discussions through which the life history was finally penned. In this account I have used the local *Axomiya* terms and explained the meaning in English, so as to retain the flavour of the conversations that we had in Assamese language while I was working on the life history.

### ***UNFURLING A MYTH: Origin of the Satra***

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“Sankardeva did not create *satras*” was Bhabananda Barbayan’s opening remark during one of our early conversations. Barbayan incited that Sankardeva created *than* popularly known as *kirtanghar* (prayer hall) and the concept of *satra* as an institution came up much later during the times of Damodardeva and Madhavadeva disciples of Sankardeva. The statement at the first instance seems controversial as the *satras* are closely associated with Neo-Vaisnavism and Sankardeva in Assam. In order to understand this statement one has to delve into the life and history of Srimanta Sankardeva.

### ***Srimanta Sankardeva***

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Srimanta Sankardeva was born in 1449 A.D (1371 saka) in a Bhuyan<sup>1</sup> family at Alipukhuri, some sixteen miles away from the town of Nowgong (Murthy, 1973:46) currently known as Nagaon in Assam. However, other historical accounts are not

clear on the exact year of Srimanta Sankardeva's birth. Two years 1449 A.D (1371 Saka) and 1463 A.D (1385 Saka) have prominently come up in the writings of historians and biographers, with majority of the biographers supporting the former date. Regarding the year of his death, one of the earliest biographers Dityari<sup>2</sup> Thakur had established 1568 A.D as the year when Srimanta Sankardeva had passed away (Sarma, 1966) and it has been unanimously accepted by all.

Citing the works of historians and biographers Bhabananda commenting on the early life of Sankardeva stated that at a very young age Sankardeva showed his intellectual ability and imaginative powers. He composed his first poem<sup>3</sup> after learning the alphabets. Sankardeva was married at the age of twenty three. Four years later he was blessed with a baby girl but lost his wife a few months after that. Though heartbroken he did not renounce the world but actively involved himself in providing parental care to the motherless child. It was only after marrying off his daughter, at the age of thirty three, Sankardeva set out on his first religious pilgrimage. He spent twelve years visiting the religious places across India. His journey took him to Hastinapur, Kuruksetra, Badrikasrama, Puri and many such places. During this period he came in contact with Vaisnavism and it is believed that in Puri, Sankardeva received illumination. According to Sarma, (1966:10), it was in the later part of the seventeenth century that the fifth canto of the *Bhagavata-purana* was translated by Aniruddha Kayastha wherein he had remarked that Sankardeva had received *Jnana-bhakti* and *ajna* (orders) at Puri to propagate Vaisnavism.

After returning from his pilgrimage Sankardeva established the first '*than*' (place of religious gathering) in Bardowa with a Vinshu idol in the main prayer hall. This was followed by the establishment of the second *than* in Barpeta, in Western Assam. The aim of creating these *thans* was to propagate the preaching's of *bhakti* the reverence to the ultimate being through music, dance, songs and theatre. The open prayer hall served as the space for the open theatre wherein dramas based on bhakti themes popularly known as *ankiyanat* (one act play) were being performed for the villagers. In the writings of Sarma, (1966: 11) the same is being reflected when he states that Sankardeva's brother Ramaraya helped him to construct a spacious *deva-grha* for conducting regular prayers and pantomimic dance dramas known as *Cihnayatras*. The *cihnayatras* depicted scenes from the seven *Vaikunthas* (Heavens). Mahanta (2013:27) has stated that Sankardeva had created the *kirtangarb* at the beginning of his missionary journey in 1468. The *kirtangars* were the hub of Assam's *bhakti* movement as it provided the space for cultural activities like dance and drama for the masses. Theatre, music and dance were the medium to spread the message of *bhakti*. This phase is regarded as the first phase of the *bhakti* movement

in Assam wherein Sankardeva used the *kirtangarhs* for the spread of knowledge among the people. Thus, it can be reflected here that the nomenclature *satra* had not been used nor were there any organized institutions during this period.

### *From 'Than' to Satra*

Reflecting on the use of the term *satra*, Sarma (1966: 103) observes that in the opening chapter of the *Bhagavata-purana* the word '*sattra*' refers to a long session of sacrifices spanning almost a thousand years, performed by sages in the forest of Nimisa. During the sacrificial process Suta-Ugrasrava had recited and explained the *Bhagavata-purana* to the assembled sages. Sarma is of the opinion that as Sankardeva had also initiated the process of reciting and explaining the *Bhagavata-purana* to a group of listeners, this must have reminded the listeners of the role played by Suta-Ugrasrava in the *Bhagavata-purana* and thus, probably gave rise to the use of the word *satra* in Assam. In Assamese the term used is '*satra*' and not '*sattra*' as used in the *Bhagavata-purana* though now in many academic writings '*sattra*' is also used. Mahanta (2013:26) had stated that in the *Bhagavata-purana* the term *sattra* occurs many a times with a wide range of context. Sankardeva had elucidated this concept as *Karma Sattra* and *Brahma Sattra*: in the first the officiating priest and the host participate jointly, whereas in the second the preceptor and disciple are equal participants. Bhabananda noted that it was Damodaradeva one of the prominent disciples of Sankardeva, after his split with Madhavadeva and Sankardeva established the first institution with concrete structures and named it as a *satra*, taking cue from Sankardeva's reference to *Brahma Sattra*.

Sarma, (1966:105) referring to the *Gurulila*, the biography of Damodaradeva by Ramaraya stated that it consisted of a detailed graphical account of the Bhitaruadhap *satra* established in Cooch-Bihar by Damodaradeva. The *satra* later came to be known as Vaikunthapura, that consisted of a shrine, a large prayer hall, well decorated with various designs and carvings, surrounded by four rows of systematically constructed *cari-hati* (huts). Madhavadeva later borrowed the structural design and the nomenclature, from the Patbausi *satra* built by Damodaradeva, when he started preaching Sankardeva's *ekasarana nama-dharma* in an institutionalized manner in Barpeta. This was recorded by Ramacarana, Daityari the author of *Katha-gurucarita* which is based on Madhavadeva (Sarma, 1966:106). Thus, as the interview progressed on the institution of the *satras* the initial statement by Bhabananda Barbayan that, "*Sankardeva did not create the satras*" started to become meaningful in the context of the nomenclature of the present institution. The concept of *satra*

with a *namghar* (prayer hall), *manikuta* (house of jewels the sacred space where the idols or the sacred scripture is kept), *pada-sila-ghar* (the space where the relics of the earlier reformers and the *satra adhikaris* is preserved) and the *hati* (the four rows of residential houses centering around the *namghar* and the *manikuta* for the *bhakats*) came up much later and after Sankardeva. During the time of Sankardeva only the *kirtanghars* or *namghars* in the villages were present. The followers of Sankardeva met at the *kirtanghar* for prayers and their was no residential space for the disciples built around the *kirtanghars*. Moreover, the presence of *pada-sila-ghar* in a *satra* gives weightage to the statement by Bhabananda that these are later additions. The *bhakti* movement in Assam entered its second phase after the death of Srimanta Sankardeva. This phase was reckoned by the growth of the *satras* as an establishment for the spread of the *ekasarana nama-dharma* in an institutionalized manner.

The present *satras* are divided into four *sambhatis* (sects/schisms). Mahanta, (2013: 13) has stated that after the death of Madhavadeva in 1596, the third phase in the history of *satra* had started with the Vaishnava order being divided into four *sambhati*. Bhabananda stated that Madhavadeva was designated as the spiritual head to carry forward the legacy of Srimanta Sankardeva after his demise. This marked a new phase in the development of the *satras* in Assam. Though Madhavadeva was Srimanta Sankardeva's choice for the spiritual leadership, some of his prominent disciples were not in consent of the same. The rift which started between the followers of Sankardeva after Madhavadeva was proclaimed the successor of Srimanta Sankardeva became complete after the dead of Madhavadeva when he did not proclaim any successor. Madhavadeva insisted that the followers need to follow the writings of Srimanta Sankardeva and his own which were complete in itself and thus, a spiritual leader was not required. Sarma, 1966 writes that the above decision of Madhavadeva paved the way for internal disagreement amongst his followers which ultimately resulted in the creation of different sects.

Bhabananda elaborating on the formation of the different Samhati's further notes that the followers of Damodaradeva continued with the Brahma Samhati which had taken shape soon after Madhavadeva was designated as the spiritual successor of Sankardeva's. Damodaradeva a Brahmin by birth and a prominent disciple of Sankardeva believed that the succession should have gone to the priestly class. He thus, moved away from Madhavadeva and started preaching on his own. He was the first one to design and start the *satra* tradition. With brahmanical influence the significance of Damodaradeva's *satra* was *bighroh*, idol worship of lord Krishna one of the avatars of Vishnu and came to be known as Brahma Samhati.

While the followers of Purushottama and Chaturbhuja (grandsons of Sankardeva) formed the *Purusha Sambhati*. Purushottama Thankur, Sankardeva's grandson, believed in the hierarchical order of selection of the spiritual head. Like his father Ramanada, Purushottama was also a disciple of Madhavadeva but soon after Madhavadeva's death moved away and started *Purusha Sambhati*. There are two versions to the nomenclature of *Purusha Sambhati*, one version states that it is named after Purushottama while the other version states that it derives from the word Purusha which means heredity. *Purusha Sambhati* followed the path as shown by Sankardeva but included in its fold marriage for the *bhakats*.

The third *Sambhati* was formed by Gopala *ata* (grandfather) named *Kala Sambhati*. Madhavadeva had twelve disciples and one was Gopal *ata*. Speaking about the split between Madhavadeva and Gopal *ata*, Bhabananda narrated the following story. Gopal *ata* was sent to spread the message of Sankardeva among the *janajati* (scheduled tribes and caste) of Assam. Gopal *ata* was living among the Koiborto (fishing community) of Assam near the Kaljara river. Once when Madhavadeva and Gopal *ata* were crossing a river by boat, they were caught in a thunderstorm. Gopal *ata* fearing that Madhavadeva would get drenched from the rains raised his hands and appeased the thunder God to stop the rains. Praying to the rain God is an *animistic* form of worship which Gopal *ata* had learned from the Koiborto community. Madhavadeva conceded this act as *Guru Bidhru* (defying the guru) as it went against the essence of Sankardeva's preaching. *Dharma dand*, punishment was meted out to Gopal *ata* and Madhavadeva refused to travel in the same boat as Gopal *ata*. Gopal *ata* offered to walk back to the river bank while Madhavadeva continued with the journey. On the banks of the Kaljara river with the Koiborto community as his disciples Gopal *ata* started the Kala Samhati. This sect had the traces of *animistic* form of worship as was practiced by the Koiborto community.

The followers of Madhavadeva like Mathuradasa, Badula Padma *ata*, Bishnu *ata*, Narayana Thakur *ata* continued with the path shown by Madhavadeva and came to be known as *Nika Sambhati* i.e. without any change. They continued on the path as shown by Sankardeva and Madhavadeva. They follow the path as shown by the two gurus without any living spiritual leaders. Kamalabari *satra* established by Badula Padma *ata* is a part of *nika Sambhati* sect where the *udasin bhakats* live and practice life as the path shown by Madhavadeva. Bhabananda Barbayan is an *udasin bhakat* originally from the Kamalabari *satra* of Majuli. As this *satra* was initially started in an orange garden (*kamala*- orange) and (*bari*-garden) of one of the followers by Badula Padma *ata* it came to be known as Kamalabari *satra*. Due to erosions of the Majuli river much of the *satra* was destroyed and later shifted to Jorhat and came to

be known as Uttar Kamalabari *satra*. Though traces of the original *satra* still exists in Majuli most of the *bhakats* have shifted to Jorhat.

### Understanding the Satra Organisation

Speaking about the organisational structure at the Kamalabari *satra*, Bhabananda stated that at the helm of the *satra* is the *satra* *adhikari* followed by the *deka* *adhikari*. The *deka* *adhikari* takes up the responsibility of the *satra* in the absence of the *satra* *adhikari*. He usually inherits the *satra* *adhikari* seat when the *satra* *adhikari* passes away. The next important position in the *satra* is that of the *somuhiya bura bhakat*. This *bhakat* is the oldest *bhakat* of the *satra*, who is also the most knowledgeable, experienced and is well versed in the *adhayatmik* (spiritual, religious knowledge) and *paramarthik* (rules and regulations) affairs of the *satra*. There are four *bhakats* under him namely:-*dokhin puliaya atoi burabhakat*, *auo dhora burabhakat*, *bhagawati atoi burabhakat* and the *hori atoi burabhakat*. These four *burabhakats* in turn are responsible for the adoption of new *bhakats* into the *satra* and their well being. Bhabananda reflected that usually the *burabhakat* having the largest number of *bhakats* under him is believed to be the strongest and the most influential in the *satra*, in terms of strength, in regards to issues that needs to be settled by voting etc.

The post of the *satra* *adhikari* Bhabananda stated is hereditary. The *satra* *adhikari* is the tutelary head and is responsible for the functioning of the *satra*, but the *somuhiya burabhakat* has the overall say and power in the *satra*. He is even vested with the power of removing the *satra* *adhikari* if the said works against the *satra* in any matter. Bhabananda narrated a story related to the selection of the *satra* *adhikari* in Uttar Kamalabari Satra a few years back. As he had stated earlier the post is hereditary in terms of the caste from which the *satra* *adhikari* is to be selected. The Uttar Kamalabari Satra during the millennium era had to struggle to appoint a *satra* *adhikari*. In the *satra* for seven years there was no *satra* *adhikari*, as there were no members in the *satra* from the said caste. To manage the crisis situation a general body meeting which also included representatives from people of Majuli was held to find a solution. A proposal was forwarded by the residing *bhakats* in the *satra* for the *somuhiya burabhakat* to be accepted as the *satra* *adhikari*. But the people of Majuli did not accept the proposal as they stated it went against the custom of the *satra*. Finally, it was resolved that a young boy from the said caste would be adopted and made the *satra* *adhikari*. Herein, the influence of the local people is vividly seen though they are not a part of the *satra* functionaries. Bhabananda feels that the system of appointing the *satra* *adhikari* from a particular caste is a custom that



must have started after Srimanta Sankardeva. One of the reasons could have been to pledge support from the local people for the *satras* and harmonious co-existence between the caste Hindus and the Mishing people of Majuli and the *satras* opines Bhabananda. The ideology of Srimanta Sankardeva was based on a casteless society. The very system of appointing a *satra adbhikari* from a particular caste reflects the influence of the local people and is an addition to the *satra* code of conduct.

### *Initiation of a bhakat*

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Every institution follows a process of initiation and the *satras* were not exceptional to this rule. Describing the initiation process Bhabananda reflected on his own experience as a *bhakat*. Born on 1 March, 1976, Bhabananda was the youngest son of Rampad Hazarika and Late Lahari Hazarika. Bhabananda stated that it had been a family tradition for the male members in his family to join the *satra*. His grandfather, father and brothers had all been a part of the *satra*. They had stayed in the *satra* during the formative years of their lives and later returned to the village life. The *satras* encouraged the young boys to be a part of the tradition but were free to leave the *satra* fold anytime. Bhabananda contemplated that in the earlier days and even today, economically the villages of Majuli are weak, as for most part of the year it is cut off from the rest of Assam due to floods. At such times the *satras* came as a saviour. The villagers allowed their children to join the *satras* wherein their daily needs were looked after and they were also trained in the *adhyatmik* and *paramarthik* ways of life. Bhabananda the youngest male child became the eighth generation in the family to be dedicated to the *satra*. Being adopted by his paternal uncle Balaram Barbayan of the Uttar Kamalabari Satra Bhabananda became a member of the *satra* at the age of three and a half years.

The initiation process has many stages which the bhakats have to go through. The first process for Bhabananda started with *aparadh mata* (formal gathering or meeting of all the occupants of the *satra*) and the *lundaan* (offering of salt) ceremony. In the formal gathering the introduction of the new entrant is made to the *satra adbhikari* (head) with a *harai* (brass plate with a stand) consisting of betel nuts, salt and a token amount in cash by the *satra bhakat* who desires to adopt a child and make him a member of the *satra*. The *satra adbhikari* accepting the *harai* blesses the child and gives sanctity for his stay in the *satra*. The significance of the *lundaan* Bhabananda feels lies in the history of the river island where salt has been scarce. In such a place the offering of salt is regarded as the highest respect that could be accorded to a person. Bhabananda stated that *aparadh mata* process acknowledges

the stay of the *bhakat* in the *satra*. Till the initiation, the young *bhakat* is allowed to stay and learn the ways of the *satra*. The *bhakat* during this time is taught the *bhotimas* (prayer songs), *matiakharas*<sup>4</sup> (exercises). The young *bhakat* is not assigned any responsibilities nor allowed to carry out any of the regular *satra* activities during this period.

For Bhabananda *haran diya*, the second stage in the initiation process took place at the age of twelve years. During this ceremony the *satra adbhikari* as the representative of Srimanta Sankardeva is entrusted with the responsibility of explaining the importance of the *satra* and how to dedicate life to this path to the new *bhakat*. The various *satra* functionaries are assigned responsibility of grooming the new *bhakat* in the arts of dance, music, playing the *khol* (drum), drama, recitation of the *Bhagarwata* etc. Knowledge dissemination is of two types *adhyatmik* related to literature written by Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavadeva, recitation of the *Bhagarwata* and the other is *paramarthik* the unwritten rules and regulations of the *satra* which every *bhakat* has to follow and understand in detail. It is only after a *bhakat* takes *haran* that his training begins. The meanings of the music, songs and dance are taught to him. He has to not only learn the lessons but also understand the deep inner meanings of the prayers and the songs. Bhabananda explained that recitation of the prayers songs is not enough, a *bhakat* has to truly feel the meanings and once he can relate himself and feel closer to the lord that the next stage in the life of a *bhakat* comes.

The *bhajan diya* stage is the final initiation of a *Bhakat* into the *satra* fold. This stage is crucial as the *bhakat*'s ability in dance, music and recitation of the *Bhagarwata* is evaluated by the *satra adbhikari*, *samuhiya bura bhakat* and the four other *bura bhakats*. A formal meeting is held wherein after the evaluation process the *bhajan diya* ceremony takes place and concludes with the blessings of the *satra adbhikari*. After the *bhajan diya* ceremony the *bhakat* is eligible to perform the activities in the *satra* that are considered sacred like cooking and serving food for the elders in the *satra*. Bhabananda though stated that during his time the elders were very rigid and would not partake food from them even after they have acquired the *bhajan diya* status. At the age of 15 years Bhabananda was bestowed with the *bhajan diya* status. He was made an *adhyapak* (teacher) at the age of 17 years and till date retains his position in the *satra*.

### Daily routine of a bhakat in a satra

The day for a *bhakat* starts with the *fesa*'s (owl's) last cry at the time of daybreak. Early morning by the light of the *saki* (earthen lamps) the *bhakats* study their school

course. In the earlier times the *bhakats* did not attend school. But with the changing times and the realisation for the need of formal education the young *bhakats* are enrolled and encouraged to attend the government run school in Majuli. As the sun rises the *matiakharas* are practiced and performed. Thereafter it's time to take the cows to the grazing field. The older *bhakats* are entrusted with the milking of the cows. After returning from the fields the *bhakats* take bath and then go to the *namghar* for *herwa* (bowing on all four and touching the forehead to the floor in front of the *puthi*, i.e., the sacred *Bhagawata*). This is followed by *jalpaan* (breakfast) and then off to school. After returning from school they have to take a bath and then lunch is served. After lunch they go to the fields to keep a watch over the grazing cows. Bhabananda reminiscence, that as young lads they used to look forward to this time in the fields, when he led a carefree life. This was the time when they used to play games and also script *bhaunas* (drama) and play them. They used to learn by looking at the older *bhakats* rehearsing for the *bhaunas*. They played in the fields till *gaudhuli* (around sunset) when it was time to bring the herds of cattle home.

On reaching the *satra* they would rush for baths and as soon as the beating of the *dobas* (drums) resonated in the *satra* they would assemble at the *namghar* for the recitation of the *guru bhotima* (prayer songs in praise of Srimanta Sankardev). The *bhakat* thereafter goes to the *bohaghar* (living quarters of the *bhakat*) and eats food left for him at his *sthan* (place). Each *bhakat* has an assigned place in the *bohaghar* and the dining area. He is to partake food only if it is left in his *sthan*. He is not allowed to take anything that is not left in his designated and assigned space. After evening snacks the *bhakat* studies for the school course and then goes to join the various classes in music or dance. *Bhakats* initiation into music and dance starts with *bhatimas*, then *gyan* (songs), *bayan* (playing instruments like the khol, dhol), *kirtan* (songs in praise of Lord Krishna), *sattriya* dance, *bhauna* (drama). The *Jai dhani* by the *Pathak* in the *namghar* marks the end of the ritual activities for the day in the *satra* but it is not the end of the day for a *bhakat*. After the *Jai dhani*, the *bhajan diya bhakats* goes to the dining hall to set the places for the *bhakats*. The *Bura Bhakat* serves the food. The food is served in all the plates, the cooking utensils are cleaned and thereafter dinner starts. It is unique to note that there is no second serving, every *bhakat* has to eat his assigned portion. The *bura bhakat* at times shares his food with the younger *bhakats*. He usually distributes from his portion of fish serving among the *bhakats* attached to him. Bhabananda comprehends that this act strengthens the bonds among the *bhakats* and enforces the feeling of being a part of a family. After dinner rehearsals are held for the *bhaunas* while the younger *bhakats* catch up with their school homeworks. The elder *bhakats*, Bhabananda stated that they indulge

in chewing *tamul paan* (nut) after dinner. It is mandatory for *bhakats* to rinse their mouths before going to bed if they had chewed *taamul paan*. The emphasis was on rinsing of the mouth as it is believed among the *satra* dwellers that one must not touch the beds *bahimukh* (without rinsing mouth). This Bhabananda also feels is the logic behind not having cavities in teeth, though such stuffs are often not explained, only stated that if these things are not done *dukh lagibo* (equivalent to committing a sin).

## Summary

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In this paper I have explored life history as an anthropological research tool to record the origin of the *Satras* through the life of an *udasin bhakat* Bhabananda Barbayan. The aim was to understand his life as an *udasin bhakat* and his relationship with the *satra*. Borrowing from Freeman (1978:86) I would like to submit that I have been able to document the life history as a product of interactions. One of the major concerns of this paper was to understand the origin of the *satras*. The way Bhabananda started off with his statement that “Srimanta Sankardeva did not create *satras*” initially I couldn’t comprehend the context. But as the interactions progressed, over a few sessions of delving into the life and works of Sankardeva the context of Bhabananda’s statement could be critically analysed. Looking at the work of historians who had worked on the *satras*, it became apparent that today, ‘the *satras* as institutionalized spaces with strict code of conduct’ was not part of the original inspiration and preaching’s of Sankardeva. The *thans* were envisaged by Sankardeva as spaces for teaching the common people a way of life through songs, dance and music. The deeper structures and meanings of the religious text were made available to the masses through the *ankiyanat*. These dramas based on *bhakti* themes were easier for the common people to understand and relate, rather than quoting from religious and spiritual text. With the coming up of the different schisms and the rigidity that each one imposed on their *bhakats* over time led to the deterioration of the entire system, as Sankardeva’s sole aim was to promote a life without strict regimes and religious practices. One of the major drawbacks that the *Satras* still has is gender inequality. As till date in most of the *satras* with *udasin bhakats*, women are not allowed inside the *satras*, nor are the *bhakats* allowed to marry. If they marry, they are no longer a part of the *satra*. What started off as a liberation movement from the strict rigors of religious practices today has been shrouded in its own regimes and code of conducts.

The *satras* if explored from the view of the *udasin bhakat* despite its flaws is also a space that gave him a home and taught him the ways of life. Bhabananda still

states Uttar Kamalbari Satra as his home, though he keeps travelling around the world and most of the time does not stay in the *satra*. When Bhadananda described his daily life in the *satra*, it came to light that the regime though strict is also one that taught him the values and the importance of discipline in life. The *burā bhakat* when he shares his portion of fish with his *bhakats* it clearly reflects his love for them, yet again the restrictions like no second serving also instills the value of being content with what one has and the need to share with others.

The *satras* as living traditions have been able to treasure and retain the life ways taught by Sankardev, though with time changes have taken place. One of the greatest contributions of the *satras* today has been the recognition of the Sattriya dance as an Indian Classical Dance. The continuation of the living tradition would rely on the *bhakats* and how they would envisage the future.

## Notes

1. Bhuyan: Sankardeva's father Kusumvar Bhuyan was the *Shiromani* (chief) of the Baro-Bhuyans clans of present day Nagaon district of Assam. The **Baro-Bhuyans** (also known as *Baro-Bhunias* etc.) were warrior chiefs and zamindars (landlords) in medieval Bengal and Assam. They maintained a loosely independent confederacy. In times of aggression by external powers, they generally cooperated in defending and expelling the aggressor. In times of peace, they maintained their respective sovereignty. In the presence of a strong king, they offered their allegiance. *Baro* denotes the number twelve, but in general there were more than twelve chiefs or landlords, and the word *baro* meant many (Neog: 1980).
2. Datyari Thakur's father Ramcaran Thakur has been credited with Sankardeva's first biography however, it is shrouded in controversy. Ramcaran Thakur was Madhavadeva's sister's son.
3. The first poem of Sankardeva when he learnt the alphabets

*karatala kamala kamaladala nayana*  
*bhavadvava dahana gahanavana sayana*  
*napara naparapara satarata gamaya*  
*sabhaya mabhaya bhaya mamahara satataya*  
*khratarā varasara hata dasavadana*  
*khagacara nagadhara phanadhara sayana*  
*jagadagha madahara bhavabhaya tarana*  
*parapada layakara kamalaja nayana*

“Thy palm is like the lotus. Thine eyes are like the lotus petals. Thou art the consumer of worldly afflictions. Thou art the sleeper in deep forests. Thou art omnipresent and inner soul of all. Thou constantly removest my fear and vouch safest my safety. Thou art the wielder of the swift

arrows. Thou art the destroyer of ten-headed demon. Thou art the rider of the bird Garuda and the uplifter of the mountain. Thou art the reposer on the hooded serpent (ananta). Thou art the dispeller of the worldly sins. Thou art the savior from the earthly grief. Thou art the giver of final beatitude. Oh lotus-eyed Lod (I pray Thee)." (Murthy: 47-48).

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