Satras Through The Eyes of an Udasin Bhakat

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Abstract: Around the early sixteenth century Srimanta Sankardeva, a vaisnava 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 kirtanghars 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

Introduction

Assam around the early 15th 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 ekasrama 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 sambhatis (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
Satras Through the Eyes of an Udasin Bhakat

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, award 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

“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

Srimanta Sankardeva was born in 1449 A.D (1371 saka) in a Bhuyan 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 Datyari 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 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 lower 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 Cihnayatra. The cihnayatras depicted scenes from the seven Vaikunthas (Heavens). Mahanta (2013:27) has stated that Sankardeva had created the kirtangarh at the beginning of his missionary journey in 1468. The kirtanghars 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*. 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-Behar 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 Patbauri *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 kirtanghars 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 sambatis (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 sambati. 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 death 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 Madhavdeva 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 higroh, 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 Purusa Samhati. 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 Puru Samhati. There are two versions to the nomenclature of Puru Samhati, one version states that it is named after Purushottama while the other version states that it derives from the word Puru which means heredity. Puru Samhati followed the path as shown by Sankardeva but included in its fold marriage for the bhakats.

The third Samhati was formed by Gopala ata (grandfather) named Kala Samhati. 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 animism 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 Madhavdeva continued with the journey. On the banks of the Kaljara river with the Koiborto community Gopal ata started the Kala Samhati. This sect had the traces of animism form of worship as was practiced by 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 Madhavdeva continued with the journey. On the banks of the Kaljara river with the Koiborto community Gopal ata started the Kala Samhati. This sect had the traces of animism form of worship as was practiced by the Koiborto community.

The followers of Madhavdeva like Mathuradasa, Badulaata, Bishnuata, Narayana Thakur ata continued with the path shown by Madhavadeva and came to be known as Nika Samhati 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 Samhati 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 exist 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 well versed in the adhyatmik (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 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 samuhiya 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 adhikari 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

Every institution follows a process of initiation and the satras were not exptional to this rule. Describing the initiation process Bhabananda reflected on his own experience as a bhakat. Born on 1st 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 adhikari (head) with a harai (brass plate with a stand) consisting of beetle 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 adhikari 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 (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 adhikari 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 Bhagawata etc. Knowledge dissemination is of two types adhyatmik related to literature written by Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavadeva, recitation of the Bhagawata 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 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 Bhagawata is evaluated by the satra adhikari, 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 adhikari. 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 (owls’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 hewa (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 they go 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 homework’s. The elder bhakats Bhabananda stated that they indulge in chewing *tamul paan* (beetle nut) after dinner. It is mandatory for bhakats to rinse their mouths before going to bed if they had chewed *tamul 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**

In this paper I have explored the 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 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 Bhabanada’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 which 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 schism 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. Bhadananda 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 *bura 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*
   *bhavadava dabana gabanavana sayana*
   *napara naparakara sataratagamaya*
   *sabhaya mabhaya bhaya mamahara satataya*
   *kratara varasara hata dasavadana*
   *khagacara nagadbara phanadbara sayana*
   *jagadaga 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).

References


