

Unexplored Tourism Industry of Assam: A Study on Satras and Naamghars

Neelakshi Talukdar

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi

Abstract—Tourism is the biggest economic drivers in present day world. Tourism industry of Assam is expanding. Assam is the home of different religious institutions, spiritualism, ethnicity and most importantly village culture, which has been practiced since time immemorial. Satras and Naamghars are the major parts of the culture of Assam, the back bone of Assamese people, work as a democratic and decentralized institution. This is part and parcel of Neo-Vaishnavite Culture. The entire region is the hotspot of tourism but unfortunately Satras and Naamghars are always remained untouched and unexplored. This is because of lack of awareness among the communities and lack of promotion from both central and the state government. Among them are Batadrava than of Nagaon district of Assam, Barpeta Satra and its Douul Utsab[holi festival] and Majuli and its Rakh Mahotsab. These institutions are the root from which the Assamese culture has grown to its full structure with Neo-Vaishnavite ideology. This paper is an attempt of showcase some of the important tourist places which are being neglected and unexplored, identifying its nature, culture and its significance.

Keywords: Satra, Namghar, Neo- Vaishnavism, Barpeta Satra, Bardowa Than, Majuli, Culture, Tourism.

1. INTRODUCTION

North east India is a land of amalgamation of various cultures and ethnies, tribes, religions etc. A land with full of resources is always important demographically, geo economically and geo strategically. The entire land is consists of 8 states centering Assam, others are Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur Meghalaya Nagaland Mizoram Tripura and Sikkim. These sister states are the home of various natural resources, historical places and it is also called as biodiversity hotspot.

Tourism is a major engine of economic growth of country's economy. It has the capacity to create employment opportunities for the unemployed youths from skilled to unskilled. In tourism industry of Assam, one of the unexplored industries is Satras and

Naamghars. These are not only religious institutions but stepping stone of Assamese identity and culture. Assam is a land of saints and religious gurus. Among them, the one who has paved the way for humanity and brotherhood through "eka soron naam dharma" is Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva. He was not only a religious guru but also a social reformer. If we look back to the roots of the culture of Assam, we will find out that it is the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement which is for universal fraternity and equal respect to all creatures.

Main objective behind taking *Satras* and *Naamghars* as tourist hotspot is that these are the institutions where not only religious practices are performed but other works such as village disputes, social issues are also resolved. Moreover, these institutions have their particular significance. The current study will include 3 important *Satras* and *naamghars* including *Majuli*, the largest riverine island, the *Barpeta Satra* and its *Deul Utsab* and *Batadraua Than* of Nagaon district of Assam.

2. WHY TOURISM IS IMPORTANT FOR ASSAM

Tourism is an industry through which a country's economy can flourish. Assam is the gateway to other North Eastern states. Assam Tourism Department was established in 1958 and since then the state has come a long way to expand its tourism industry.

Economically, the tourism industry will help in generating employment opportunities, foreign exchange and regional development. Recently, the Union Government has declared that it would give priorities to the Tourism industries along with Tradition, Talent, Trade and Technology. These five elements will help in the overall development of the Nation.

At the community level, the tourism industry will benefit the local communities at the grass root level

through minimizing leakages and maximizing linkages of the industry. Assam is endowed with full natural and cultural resources which is the basis of tourism industry of Assam.

Though economic, but politically, investment of foreign industries in the tourism will make a strong bondage among nations. In the language of Ernest Hass it is called as "regional integration".

In the recent past, the reason behind the lack of tourists was its insurgency issues, underdevelopment and its remoteness, sense of insecurity and negativity, and lack of publicity towards the region. Moreover, lack of governmental funds and inefficiency of human resources, hesitation of private sector to invest in tourism along with several rigidities became the important reasons behind the loss of tourist industry in Assam.

Time is ripe to uncover and explore the important indigenous tourism industries of Assam. Because the whole world is becoming a global village through connectivity and tourists get the information through electronic, social and print media. We should strengthen our promoting houses so that they can attract the tourists to visit these historical places.

3. SPIRITUAL TOURISM: SATRAS AND NAMGHARS

Spiritual tourism refers to the devotion and promotion of sacred ideas of god. Spiritualism is an open path to attain "moksha". Spiritual tourism attracts the tourists from different parts of the world. Among them, the Kamakhya Temple and its Ambubasi Mela has been attracting different sects of people. Kamakhya Temple and its significance are known to all. But, Satras and Naamghars or the "Vaishnava Traits" has since long been unnoticed. These institutions are kept only for local and traditional purposes. This is the rare culture of Assam.

Satras and Naamghars are the two essential milestones of Assamese culture. Satra is a socio-religious and cultural organization which developed in medieval Assam. The name "Satra" originates in the Bhagavata Purana. In Sanskrit, it is called as "sattra", which is identified as an assembly of devotees. In Satras, we find out two types of monks: celibate and non-celebrate. The celibate monks are also called as "kewalia bhakat". These "kewalia bhakats" live in Satras and through their body, mind and soul completely surrender to one God; this is also called as "eka saraniya naam dharma" propounded

by Sankardeva. In Satras, Satradhikaras are regarded as social leaders and his consent is needed in each and every issues. The Satra being a centre of religion, learning and cultural activities, it has a *Namghar* or *Kirtanghar* [prayer house] adjoining the *Manikut* [sanctum sanctorum]. There are mainly four hati [rows of huts] in a Satra. The *Bhakaats* live in the rows of huts. The *Satradhikar* live in the main house. Other officials such as *Bhagavat*, *Pathak*, *Namghoriya*, *Gayan Bayan*, *Sutradhar* etc. have different works to do.

Namghar is the permanent feature of every village and towns of Assam. *Namghar* refers to the prayer house or prayer hall. It is also an essential part of *Satras* of Assam. *Namghar* works under the guidance of *Satras*.

These two institutions are unique and play the central role in social and cultural fields of Assam. Socially, these institutions have paved the way for humanity and inclusiveness through spiritualism and altogether they resolve some of the social disputes. Maheswar Neog termed *Namghar* as "village parliaments" run on democratic principles. In that sense, *Namghar* serves as the platform for meeting grounds of *Panchayats*. Here, villagers gather to discuss their issues of importance, to debate on some specific issues which have social, political and economic consequences. Thus, it imparts unity among all and its door is open to all irrespective of caste, class and religion. If we look at the whole process of *Satras* and *Namghars* and analyze it from a very broad mindset, then, it will show that the concept of "decentralized religious structure" was completely present in those days. Community development program and collective decision in the public issues were taken by the *Namghars*. Culturally, *Satras* and *Namghars* are the place for cultivation of art, craft, music, literature, songs and dances. Satriya Nritya, one of the eighth classical dances of India, is created by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam.

The present study will explore and analyze three important unexplored tourists hub, forming the base of *Neo- Vaishnavite* culture of Assam which "*eka deva eka sewa, eka biney nahi kewa*", i.e. there is none but only one God and that is Brahma and he is the destiny to reach ultimate salvation and he is supreme of all power..

4. BATADRAVA THAN OF NAGAON DISTRICT OF ASSAM

Batadrava Than of Bardowa in present Nagaon district of Assam is one of the most influential and foremost *Thans* of Assam founded by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva. "Than" refers to the residential religious institution. For the first time, this great personality has established *Kirtanghar* or *Namghar* in 1468. Another importance of this place is that this influential saint was born in the *Alipukhuri- Bardowa* in 1449. At his twelve years, he wrote a poem, which made everybody amazed for his intelligence. He is also the first poet in Assamese literature. In 1493, he started preaching his *Vaishnavite* religious ideas at *Bardowa* regularly and systematically. His ideas were based on *Bhagavata Purana*. Therefore, he always favored complete cleanliness of one's body mind and soul, which means a way towards fraternity and for human wellbeing. Thus, ignoring the difference between caste, class and creed, he tried to link up each and every living being with the bondage of love and respect towards each other. He wrote, "*kukura shrigala gardavaro atmarama, janiya sabako pori koriba pronama*". This refers that in every living being the god exists and knowing that we should respect every living being.

Among all, one of the important features of this *Satra* is its uniqueness in establishing the *Manikut*, where the *Bhagavata* is kept. It is unique as the concept of this *Manikut* is only found in Assam's *Satras* and *Namghars*.

Another attracting tourists place inside the *Batadrava Than* is its small museum, which has constructed in 1985 in the premises of the *Bardowa* Than. Main objective behind the creation of this Museum is to preserve the traditional heritage of the *Vaishnavite* culture. Till date, it has almost 103 objects and main aim is to showcase the *Neo- Vaishnavite* community and their culture to the modernizing community.

It is believed that people who visits to this Than will make his or her holy journey complete. At *Bardowa* there is an age old *Shlikha* [Myrobalan] tree near the *Kirtanghar*, where Srimanta Sankardeva used to write scriptures, sitting below that tree. Farley Richmond argued, "Vishnavism stresses the right of the individual to communicate directly with god without passing through intermediaries or performing prescribed rituals, much as the mysteries of medieval Europe had claimed was possible".

5. BARPETA SATRA AND ITS DOUL MAHOTSAVA

The Barpeta Satra was established in 1583 by Mahapurusha Madhabdeva, a disciple of Srimanta Sankardeva, and a co-propagator of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* ideology. The *Satra* is situated about 100 kilometers West of Guwahati.

Holi is a festival of colors and through colors it spreads happiness among people. This festival is celebrated during the month of March. This festival was, for the first time, initiated by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva in his great *Ankiya Naat* called "*Chihnajatra*" and wrote some *holigeets* too-

"range phagu khele chaitanya banamali

Duhate phagur gundha sichanta murari"

In *Barpeta Satra*, this festival is being celebrated differently and traditionally. The *Doul* festival of Barpeta is a source of happiness for the people of Assam. It is celebrated with extreme enthusiasm and traditional gaiety. Mathura Das *Bura* Ata first celebrated *Doul* festival in the model of *Vaikuntha* at *Barpeta Satra* because it is believed that *Doul* festival was first celebrated in heaven. Satriya Tradition is followed for the celebration of *Doul Utsava* at *Barpeta*.

At *Barpeta Satra*, *Doul*[*holi*] festival is celebrated from three to five days. It is celebrated three days, when it comes to "*Burha*[old] *Doul*" and it comes during the month of "*Chot*" of Assamese Calendar in a full moon night. *Deka*[young] *Doul* is notable as it sustains for five days and it comes in the month of *Phagun* in a full moon night.

The first day of *Doul* is called "*Gandha*" or "*Banhutsava*". It is an important day on which *Vaishnavas* bring *Nal*, *Khagori* and *Ekora* for *Meji* [bonfire], same as *Holika Dahan* in North India. That evening *Mahaprabhu Kaliya Thakur* is brought out from the *Manikut* of the *Kirtanghar* to "*Moth*'or *Chotal*" [courtyard] with *Bhakats* and *Gayan Bayan*. Then, *Mahaprabhu* is brought near the bonfire and after alighting *the Meji*, *Mahaprabhu* takes seven rounds around it. It is called "*Meji Puaa*" or "*Magh Puaa*". People of *Barpeta* believe that the winter goes out from that particular day and opens up a line for the spring season with color and newness in every aspects of society. After that, *Mahaprabhu* is brought to the "*Jagmohan Ghar*" to do some rituals and in a sacred time of that particular night, The *Mahaprabhu* is established in the "*Doul Ghar*" walking around seven steps.

Importantly, inside the *Kirtanghar* the *Mahaprabhu* is kept towards East direction but in *Doul Ghar*, it is established towards North direction. Reason behind these steps is still unclear.

The second day is called the "*Bhor Doul*" and on that day the *Vaishnavas* practices "*Naam-Prasanga's*" at the "*Jagmohan Ghar*". Apart from *Naam-Prasanga's*, the main attraction is "*Oja Pall*", which is pioneered by Srimanta Sankardeva. "*Dhuliya Nritya*" is also a significant show performed during those days.

Last day is called as "*Sueri*" or "*Phakua*" festival. That day, "*Mahaprabhu*" is brought out from the "*Doul Ghar*" moving seven rounds and placed again in the "*Manikut*". Again, take it out from *Manikut* and take seven rounds around the *Kirtanghar* and placed the "*Kalia Gosal*" in the *Manikut* inside the *Kirtanghar*.

Significance of these seven round steps is that the Lord Krishna was at *Ghunusa's* house for seven days and *Lakshmi* was very angry about it. Therefore, she placed four bamboos so tactfully in front of her house. When Krishna was coming back, *Lakshmi* prevented him to enter in to her house and then they started playing the "*baah bhanga*"[breaking bamboo] festival. They were divided in to two groups, one of *Lakshmi's* and another of Krishna's. At last, the Krishna's team won and entered in to *Lakshmi's* house. Thus, ends the festival of "*Fakua*" at *Barpeta Satra*.

It is very difficult to portray the real scene of the *Holi* festival celebrated at *Barpeta Satra* in a single write up. Without looking it from a practical standpoint, the real essence of that sacred festival will not be measured. One should visit the *Satra* to become a part of that great festival.

6. MAJULI AND ITS RAAS MAHOTSAVA

Majuli, the biggest river island of the world, is a source of tourist destination. It is famous for its natural beauty. The island is an example of amalgamation of different tribes and non-tribal groups including *Deuri* and *Missing*. We don't need to explain its importance in the tourism sector of India and specifically in of Assam. Recently, this island has got the status of a district from the Government of Assam in 2016. *Majuli* is famous not only because of the river island but because of its culture, especially for its "*mukha shilpa*"[musk making]. It is one of those sacred places of Assam where the *Satriya* culture has developed to its full structure. The island is

the home of different *Satras* and *Namghars*. It was at *Majuli*, then called *Dhuahaat*, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva met Madhabdeva and the meeting of these two religious gurus was called as "*Manikanchan Sanjog*". Till then, the *Neo-vaishnavism* Movement has got another chance to reform and reconstruct the Assamese society with humanity and fraternity. *Majuli* is also the centre of indigenous culture of Assam. It was at *Majuli* where Mahapurusha Sankardeva innovatively created the "*Ankiya Naat*" which is called as the pioneering step towards modern theater system. The first "*Ankiya Naat*" was "*Chihna Jatra*". "*Bhaona*" and "*Satriya Nritya*" have taken its root from *Majuli* only.

Raas Mahotsava is a festival which is based on the adult life of Lord Krishna and his flirting with "*Gopis*"[milkmaids] and various plays among them. These plays are performed in art form. Generally, this festival begins during the autumn season and the *Kati-Aghun*[October-November] month of Assamese calendar for 3 days. At *Majuli*, *Raas* festival is celebrated with traditional *Satriya* tradition. *Raas Mahotsava*, for the first time, was introduced in *Dakshinpat Satra* of *Majuli*. All the 22 *Satras* of *Majuli* are dedicated to celebrating the life of Lord Krishna in terms of *Bhaona*, *Bargeet*, *Matiakhora*, *Ankiya Naat* etc are the perfect stage for the grandest *Raas Mahotsav* in India. Celibates and other *bhakats* from various *Satras* participate in the *Raas Mahotsav* with pure heart and soul. *Satriya* Culture is performed to showcase the life of Krishna.

Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority is taking various steps to attract the tourists from different parts of the world. This step is really appreciative as the involvements of local communities are necessary to grow and expand the Tourism industry of Assam.

7. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN TOURISM

Involvement of communities in the local business is extremely important to grow its economy. For that, the local communities must get proper education and in this process the government has to take the initiative. Usually, the district and the local communities often lack wakefulness and admiration of their tourism products and development potential. Communications between communities is extremely needed and for that the State Government of Assam should provide a conducive environment where people can share their creative ideas. There is a large gap between demand and supply of skilled manpower in tourism sector. The Human

Resource Development Ministry of India should highlight the education system in travel and tourism as a career option, which can also provide attractive wage offers for them. There should also be an umbrella organization for each sector of tourism department, which can help in product branding and marketing easier and sustainable. The Government should conduct skill enhancement certificate program for the youths, which not only encourage them to expand their knowledge in tourism but also in hospitality. Through this Central Government's Skill India Program and "*Hunar se Rojgar tak*" shall be leveraged. The Assam Government is talking various policies to educate the youngsters. *Sabke sath sabka vikash* will possible with the help of local people. "*Amar Alohi*" [our guests] is a scheme adopted and enacted by the Assam Government to promote sustainable tourism and to provide employment opportunities in semi-urban and rural areas through home stay schemes. While taking the example of unexplored tourism industry, *digital India* has a vital role to play. Information and Communication Technology has to be used positively to promote our *Satriya* culture.

8. COLLABORATION OF LOCAL TO GLOBAL

In 2008, the Assam Government has inaugurated a tourism policy whereby the main emphasis was put on Public-Private-Partnership [PPP]. To connect the tourism industry with the global market, the Government introduces "Awesome Assam" as Global Brand and takes Priyanka Chopra, a global actress, as its Brand Ambassador. As Assam is regarded as the Gateway to South and South East Asia, therefore, following the rules of Act East Policy, people should work together and communicate with these countries, from where Assam can encourage different sects of tourists. Improvement of highways and local transport system plays an important role to attract tourists in all the season of the year. Tourists always visit those places which are safe and secure for them. Thus, safe, secure and reliable transport services are of utmost importance.

Advantage Assam is the flagship program of the Government of Assam that encourages the various leading industries to invest in Assam both indigenous and foreign companies. In a sentence, Advantage Assam is one of the baselines for the Act East Policy to succeed. It has been trying to link up the local communities with the global and transnational communities going beyond the structural boundary of a country.

9. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Without any doubt, we can say that the *Neo-Vaishnavite* culture and the importance of *Satras* and *Namghars* in Assamese culture are significant. Because, these are the institutions which not only pave the way for a well organized society in Assam but influences the other similar cultures to follow its path. To spread the secular and democratic ideas, the *Neo-Vaishnavite* Movement's leaders established these socio-religious institutions. These institutions have been taking an important role in maintaining solidarity and harmony among individuals and community through engaging in various constructive programs, intellectual arguments and debates and spiritual teachings which are value dependent. Significantly, these institutions have been working as a body of law, justice and peace.

Satras and *Namghars* are too essential to explore as a tourism industry. Because, these institutions have unique features of its culture and tradition and tourists are unaware about the whole thing. In promotion, *Satras* and *Namghars* are sidelined. Reasons for them are many folded- lack of infrastructure facilities, lack of consciousness and awareness among local people, the indigenous people treats it as local business. Assam Tourism Industry will flourish with the promotion of *Satras* and *Namghars*. For example, *Kamakhya* Temple is also a religious and sacred place and it is promoted very well by the government of Assam, therefore, it has witnessed thousands of tourists both Indians and foreigners and it has helped in increasing state's and country's GDP.

10. CONCLUSION

Assam has a rich cultural heritage since time immemorial. *Barpeta-Bardowa-Majuli* is the three important prospects of tourist destinations which can not only contribute something new, if expanded, to county's economy but help in making our culture and tradition a global importance. For that, community involvement and positive step from the government is necessary. The new Tourism Policy of the Assam Government, 2017, is taking positive steps to expand our tourism sector at all the seasons. Public Private Partnership, help of bureaucrats and other officials along with its inhabitants have the similar and equal responsibility to showcase the culture. Advantage Assam is seriously a golden opportunity for the economy of

Assam and if utilized those policies properly will make our tourism industry a grand success.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baruah, B.K., (1986), A Cultural History Of Assam, Early Period, Bina Library: Guwahati
- [2] Baruah, N., A Study on Cultural Tourism with Special Reference to the Satras of Assam, South Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, Vol-2, Issue-6
- [3] Bhattacharya, P., (2004), Tourism in Assam Trend and Potentials, Bani Mandir
- [4] Borah, R., The Neo- Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankardeva: A Great Socio-Cultural Revolution in Assam, MSSV Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol-1, No-1
- [5] Economic Survey, Assam, 2014-2015
- [6] Kharkatary, M., (2015, 23rd September), Majuli Raas Mahotsav: An Ode to the Myriad Moods of Krishna, Retrieved from <https://www.yatrablog.com/majuli-raas-mahotsav-an-ode-to-the-myriad-moods-of-krishna>
- [7] Mallick, A. Ganapathy, P., (2014), Majuli Unmasked: Assam's Rich Sattriya Culture, Retrieved from <https://redscarabtravelandmedia.wordpress.com/tag/majuli-raas-festival/>
- [8] Rao, V.V., (1967), A Hundred Years of Local Self Government, Bani Prakasan Mandir: Guwahati
- [9] Rehman, M.S., (April, 2015), Role of Satra and Namghar in the Evolution of Genesis of Assamese Identity, International Journal of Social Sciences and Management, Vol-2(2), pp- 104-113
- [10] Richmond, F, (1974), The Vaisnava Dharma of Assam, The Educational Theatre Journal, Vol-26, No-2, Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/320663/>, pp-145-163
- [11] Sarma, M.K., (2003), Towards Positioning a Tourist Destination: A Study of North East India
- [12] Tourism Policy of Assam, 2017