



VASUDEV THAN NAROWA SATRA- IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement or bhakti movement of Assam of 15th century had opened a new era in the religious history of Assam. The peculiar character of Assam Vaishnavism was the satra institution. It was based on wide network of satra under the control of a pontiff, generally independent of each other. There are hundreds of satras in Assam. Among these Vasudev Than Narowa Satra, situated

in Lakhimpur district is a notable satra in Assam. As a socio-religious institution it has tremendous influence on society. It is seen that there is not much research work done on this satra. Though a few works have been done but these works can't portrait a fair conclusion about this satra. So in this paper an attempt is made to study critically about the origin and development of Vasudev Than Norowa Satra.

KEYWORDS: *satra, than, bhakti.*

INTRODUCTION

Vasudev Than Narowa Satra is a well-known *satra* of Assam, situated at Subansiri, Dhakuakhana of Lakhimpur district. It was established by Damodar Thakur, the great grandson of Sankardeva with the help of Ahom king Jaydhvaj Singha (1648-1663 A.D.).¹ The *satra* has reached its present condition through the changes of different socio-political situation. At the time of establishment the *satra* was located at Charibhagi (Bank of Subansiri river).² Later it was shifted to present location at Mornoi Bebejia of Dhakuakhana Sub-Division. It

is situated between the river Kadha and Champara river and 11 km. west to Dhakuakhana. The unique feature of this institution is that there is a beautiful ancient quadrilateral Vasudev idol, made from black stone. The height of this idol is about 1 meter. It is said by the common people that Rukmini, daughter of Bhismok had made this cult of Vasudev to find himself as her husband. So it is believed that if any one who prayed, God Vasudev will fulfil all their wishes. There is a controversy among the scholars about the origin of this *satra*. Sarbeswar Baruah mentions that the Vasudev *Than* is an ancient temple in Assam, developed under Chutiya kingdom.³ It is said that Vasudev *Than* was prevalent in this place before Narowa *Satra*, later it was connected with the *Narowa Satra* and known as

Vasudev Than Narowa Satra.

METHODOLOGY:

Methodology is an important part of research. A good research depends on proper methodology. This work depends on the following methodologies.

1. **Field work**
2. **Interview method**
3. **Content analysis**

1. **Field work:** The field work has been undertaken to collect oral sources such as myths, legends, songs related to the *satra*. Observation is also made during the time of major festival of the *satra*.
2. **Interview method:** Both verbal and written

schedule has prepared by interviewing the *Sataradhikar* or pontiff, some elderly person near the area and from the devotees that comes from different places.

3. **Content analysis:** Sources preserve in the *satra* and different libraries and institutions have been consulted. Article, reports have been also analysed.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The objective of the study is to view the origin and evolution of the *satra*.

ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF VASUDEVTHANNAROWASATRA:

Vishnu worship was prevalent in early Assam prior to the spread of *Neo-Vaishnavism*, as evidenced by both archaeological remains and literary accounts. The prevalence of *Vasudevism* in Ancient kumarupa is mainly confined to the eastern region of ancient Kamrupa. The eastern region of Kamrupa where Vasudeva is to be worshipped is called Dikkaravasini⁴, the land of the Goddess *Dikkaravasini*, who manifests herself both as *Tiksnakanta*, accepting human sacrifices, spirituous liquor, flesh etc. and in the milder form of *Lalitakanta*.⁵ The *Yoginitantra* a work written in Kamrupa in the 16th century A.D. includes one Vishnupithain the list of nine *pithas* or sacred regions, called *navayonis*, but no mention is made of its location. Maheswar Neog mentions that the region of Dikkaravasini of the *KalikaPurana* falls within of this *Tantra* lying to the east of river Suvansiri.⁶ In *KalikaPuranait* is mentioned that Sitaganga as *Svarnadi* continuously flowing in the periphery of Dikkaravasini.⁷ Moheswar Neog identified *Svarnadi* as Subansiri, a tributary of the Brahmaputra river.⁸ Scholars mention *Svarnadi* as Subansiri. Also the sequence of rivers mention in *KalikaPurana* from west to east help to identify *Svarnadi* as Subansiri river. Sarbeswar Boruah mentions that Dikkaravasini ends in Dikrang (dikkar) river in North Lakhimpur,⁹ It is clearly mentioned in *KalikaPurana* that the meaning of *dikkar* is Sun and Shiva where *devidikkar* lives.¹⁰

From these given above it is to be concluded that the region from Sadia to Subansiri river was fall under Dikkaravasini⁴. In this region Vasudeva was worshipped before 10th century in *tanticism* way. According to a legend the Vasudev idol was existed in Kundil where Rukmini worshipped to find Krishna as husband. Bedanidhi was the *pujari* of this temple. But after the *svayambora* of Rukmini it was neglected and the *pujari* was directed by God Vishnu in a dream to bring the idol to plain area. In this regard a legend is prevalent among the people,

Ghura aronore pashe dhorise avori

.....
*Apuni loiba sthiti hehi stane.*¹¹

(covered with dense forest troubled every time by crow and fox, don't make me in stay this place, there is no devotees, take me to another place, become very light on shoulder, water became less in river, hills will be plain in the way, where snake will be in the mouth of frog, you position me in that place).

Though it is a legend but there are some historical facts. It can be said that the Vasudev idol was situated in Kundil and later brought to the bank of Subansiri river. Also copperplate inscriptions of Chutiya kings which were discovered in Dhakuakhana prove that the Chutiya kings patronised the Vasudev worship in this place. So it can be concluded that Basudev worshipping was prevalent under the Chutiya dynasty and later it was spread to this region. The Nidhanpur copper plate grant also records that king Bhuti Barman (6th century A.D.) granted special *agrahara* settlements to more than two hundred Brahmans of various *gotras* for promotion of Vedic religion and culture.¹² Banikanta Kakati in his book *Purani Asom or Dharmadhara* mentions that there was a colony of Vaishnavite settlers in the north-east frontier.¹³ Gradually it became popular and during the time of *KalikaPurana* (10th Century) it spread from Sadia to Lakhimpur, where said to have ruled some parts by Chutiya Kings.

In 14th century Satyanarayana and Lakhiminarayana (said to have Chutiya King) granted land to promotion of Vasudev worship which were discovered at Ghilamara, Lakhimpur District. Above these two kings issued copperplate inscriptions dating 1392 and 1401 A.D. and deciphered by

SarbeswarBaruah of North Lakhimpur.¹⁴King Satyanarayana makes a gift of 600 *putis* (pura) of the area named Ludumimari on the bank of the river Dhavali along with the requisite number of artisans to NarayanDvija, son of Uma Pati in the Saka Era 1314. The grants also recalls a former gifts of 600 *putis* at Vyaghrmari bestowed by king Pratyaskranarayana. SarbeswarBoruahidentifiesDhavali as Dhal River 5 k.m. to the east of North Lakhimpur town,Vyagrahmari as Baghmari near Jalbhari 5 K.M. to the east-south of NarowaSatra.¹⁵

Gradually the Vasudevism lost its importancefor different reasons which got royal patronage during Chutiya rule. After the advent of Ahom in Assam the whole political scenario in Assam and ultimately Chutiyas were defeated in the hands of the Ahom under the king of Suhungmung(1497-1539) and the Ahomremoved the powerful Chutiya clans from the north bank and gave them settlement in different parts of the kingdom. So that future troubles from them could be avoided. But the lower chutiyas such as *Bebejia*, *Bihia*, *Bahetia*and the other were allowed to remain in Dhakuakhana and Lakhimpur.¹⁶S.K. Bhuyan mentions when Ahom King SuramphaDihingia (1468-1542 A.D.) suppressed the Bhuyans in the bank of river Kadha, a little mentions of existence of Vasudev*pujari*.¹⁷

In an account of the HarinarayaDvij's*Thakur Charit*, there is a description of how king JaydhvajSingha established two *Satra* at Laomuri(Ghilamara) and Charibhagi, bank of 8 k.m. north-west of Subansiririver.¹⁸HarinarayanDvijwrites in *Thakur Charit*that,

"bohujatna kori murtik anila

.....
*Norowa Satra bulidileka akhyaan.*¹⁹

(Brought the idol with great labour and established near a tree on the banks of the Subansiri river. Donated land and about 200 peoples and planting trees and keeping the family,established two *satras*as Charibhagi and Laomuri and named it as NorowaSatra).

King JaydhvajSingha granted land with two hundred men and planted trees. Because of being newly founded his family is known as Narowa family and later the *satra* establishment under this family known as Narowasatra. Then Damodara came back to Bordowa. MoheswarNeog in his '*The Worship of Vasudev*'²⁰ mentions that Ramakanta Ata (1649-1717) (grandson of Sankardevas`sgrand daughter) resides at the VisnupurSatra(Bijni). King Lakshmi Singha sent people to bring him and he came and stayed at a place which came to be seat of the NarowaSatra. From these it can be concluded that though Damodar Ata established the NorowaSatrabut he left the *satra* without much growing. So later Ahom King Lakshmi Singha (1769-80) might bring Ramakanta to this place and under Rama Kanta Ata,thesatras was fully developed. It is known that Ahom King RamdhajSingha took '*sarana*' from Ramkanta Ata and built a temple at Gajapur.²¹KeshbanandraDevGoswamimentions that Narowa AtaRamkanta got the Vasudev idol from RavidharBashaspati (grandson of Ravidev).²²According to a manuscript of the*satra* king JaydhvajSingha brought the Vasudeva deity from Kundil and installed inNarowaSatra, which made for Damodar Ata.

"kundil nagar hitu ati anupom

.....
*Bohu bhumi britti dibu tahar logot"*²³

(There is a beautiful idol of Vasudev in kundil and that idol want to install your *satra* by giving many lands and property).

Ramakanta was succeeded by his son Ramchandra (D.1761). Rama Chandra had a great personality and he received favours from kingSivaSingha (1714-44). Narowa was honoured as a firstclass*satra* in this monarch's reign.Even Siva Singha invited Rama Chandra to his court.Ramachandra performed *bhaona* in his court.²⁴ In course of time the Subansiririver had eroded the CharibhagiNarowaSatra. Then Siva Singhamakes a gift of 2,500 *puras*of land by a copperplate in

1656 Saka Era.²⁵He built a beautiful *satra* between Kadha and Champara river. In *Thakur Charit* it is mentioned that

Tamranga boruah ali

.....

*Ikhob modhyat dilla sthan.*²⁶

(To east is the Tamranga Baruah path and to its west is the Sukati Puta stream. On the north is the Champara river and on south is the Kadha river).

J.P. Wade, who, as an assistant surgeon, accompanied Captain Thomas Welch's Assam expedition (1792-94), in his "*An Account of Assam*", mentions the existence on the Vasudev Than in the present location. In his description of the region north of the Brahmaputra.²⁷

This proves that towards the end of 19th century the Vasudev Than was flourishing under the Norowagosain. But a few years later at the time of the Burmese invasion of Assam, the Burmese destroyed the *than* and the *satradhikar* Lakshmiddev and his disciples fled to Bordowa Than.²⁸ It is said that the invading non-believers set fire to the *kirtanghar* and reduced it to ashes.

PRESENT BASUDEV THAN NAROWA SATRA:

The present form of *Vasudev Than Narowa Satra* is of recent organization after it had remained in a deserted condition after the Burmese inroads in the first part of the 19th century. Towards the end of that century a scion of the Narowa Goswami family Achuta Nanda (1836-1907) (grandson of Lakshmiddev), then of Bardowa happened to be sentenced to life in the penal settlements in the Andamans.²⁹ It is said that he was brave and very talented and a perfect hunter and a swimmer. So he was respected by the British officers. However he is said to have worked a miracle by curing a British officer from a disease. He was able to do other helpful deeds also and in consideration, he returned after some 14 years of convicted life. But his relatives were in no mood to contend him. He therefore, went to Tiyok of Sivsagar. From there he sent people to Bordowa to bring his wife and after 3 years he had a son, Muktinath. Then he migrated to Vasudev Than with his family which was in a deserted condition. With the help of the people and a man named Rangai Al Dhara of Jalbhari Village near the *than*, who was in Vasudev Than during Burmese invasion and settled in Jalbhari, revived the *than* again. Rangai Al Dhara was taking care of the spot, sang songs of god in ceremonies and worshipped the deity.³⁰ Achut Chanda Goswami managed with great ability to raise the *than* again to the status of a *Neo-Vaishnavasatra* and it is now in an affluent condition. He installed the Vasudev idol again which said to have found as a sundered piece in a near pond and it was given the original form. After Achutanandra Dev Ata (1907), his son Muktinath Ata (1895-1988) became the head of the *satra* and under Muktinath Ata the *satra* became very popular among the people. The present monastic head is Mahesh Chandra'sson Rupendra Dev Goswami.

CONCLUSION:

Vasudev Than Narowa Satra is a famous religious site in Assam. Evidences prove that from ancient time onwards, this region is famous for Vishnu worship. This region is a lively evidence of the rules of the Ahoms and the beforehand Chutiyas. The Chutya kings patronised Vasudev worship in this place. Later after the fall of Chutya kingdom, Vasudevism lost its importance and under Ahom king Jaydhvj Singha it was handed over to Damodardeva, grandson of Sankardeva, who was propagating the faith of Sankardeva. Thus the institution becomes a combination of *satriya* culture and ancient vaishnavism rituals. Still some religious places of Dhakuakhana have held the traditional way of performing deferent religious practices, such as Harhi Dewaloy, Ghuguha Mondir, Gorurakhiya Mondir etc. Vasudev Than Norowa Satra is not exceptional. In festival time thousands of devotees gather here and the place is become a symbol of unity and brotherhood of different caste and community. It can be said that present day Vasudev Than is looked upon with more awe than reverential devotion that characteristics the atmosphere of a *satra*. However the institution mainly follows the *satriya* culture.

The *than* attracts a large number of devotees from different parts of Assam. Till 1980 A.D. the devotees came from Nepal, Bhutan, Orissa and take part in the festivals of Vasudev Than. Later, due to the famous students' movement of Assam in 1980, the people hesitate to visit here. Interestingly still the *pujari* and *satradhikar* know Nepali, Oriya, Hindi language very well. Thus god Vasudeva has been the most dominating deity of the region since early time. *KalikaPurana* gives a detail account of worshipping mode of Vasudeva and mentions the *vasudevpatha* falls in the eastern region of ancient Kamarupa. Thus a *saktamondir* came under the influence of *satriya* culture and still hold combination of both *satriya* and ancient *trantivaisnavism*.

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GLOSSARY

adhikar	-	Head of a Neo-Vaishnavitesatra institution
bhakti	-	devotion, religion of devotion
charitputhi	-	biographical literature of the Vaishnava saints of medieval Assam
mahapurush	-	Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, followers of the religious faith developed by the two

manikut	-	the shrine where the Vaishnava scripture are kept
pujari	-	an office bearer of a satra whose duty is to ritually worship the presiding deity of a satra.
samhati	-	a sub-sects of the Vaishnavite order of SrimantaSankardevain Assam.
satra	-	Vaishnava monastery of Assam

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