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A Sociological Analysis of Sattras and Namghars from Marxist Perspective

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Abstract

Aim: This paper aims to identify sattras and namghars from a Marxist perspective. Srimanta Sankaradeva, the saint and social reformer of Assam, established these institutions in fifteenth-century Assam. Both exhibited the Marxist ideal of equality. The existing social conditions are located within relations through which particular meanings are standardized and held up as “good taste” in Marxist cultural theory. Marxism is about a classless society.

Methodology and Approach: The paper consults Marxist theory from a theoretical perspective and evaluates the role and significance of sattras and namghars. It analyzes both institutions under Marxist theoretical orientation. The paper is analytical, descriptive, and theoretical in nature.

Outcome: The research finds that Srimanta Sankaradeva, the reformer of Assam, attained spiritual perfection and regenerated society. He reinterpreted old religious doctrines to suit social needs.

Conclusion and Suggestions: Sattras and namghars preach the ideals of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma, which embraces the doctrine that all humans are equal. The neo-Vaishnavite religion is founded not only on spirituality but also on the social message of unity and fraternity. There is a scope for future researchers to study this aspect of sattras and namghars from various other theoretical perspectives.

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In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material production forces. The total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life “conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx and Engels, 503). Sattras and namghars are two institutions which propagate the philosophy of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. The egalitarian philosophy of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma is aligned with the Marxist philosophy of an equal and classless society. Marx believed that religion, philosophy, literature all are ‘superstructures’ produced by the economic ‘base’ of any society. Marx represented ideology as a “superstructure of which the concurrent socioeconomic system is the base” (Abrams, 205).

An ideology is, in complex ways, the product of the position and interests of a particular class and in any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies and serves to legitimize and perpetuate the interests of the dominant economic and social class. In fifteenth century, the religious ideology of Assam was far from satisfactory. The atmosphere of Kamrupa was surcharged with worldliness. Sankaradeva was not at all happy to find the general mentality of the people as hopelessly degraded, being selfish, eager for royal favour and averse to religion or culture. The emendation of the prevalent religious and social abuses became Sankaradeva’s first concern and consideration. Since the beginning of the thirteenth century the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. The “existence of society itself was moth-eaten from within and without any sustaining vitality from any external source. Amongst religious rites the most spectacular were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums and cymbal, night vigils on virgin worship and the lewd

dances of temple-women” (Kakati, 12). By discarding the dominant ideology of the time, Sankaradeva moulded a new religion. Srimanta Sankaradeva religion is the most liberal, tolerant, simplest and easiest way of attaining God and it is economically most viable. It may be called the religion of the common man. There is “no room for any hostility between the rich and the poor in the name of religion. Even the Saktism and Tantrism learnt the lessons of humanitarianism from Sankaradeva’s faith and these decadent Hindu faiths have been considerably modified” (Saikia, 84).

Both the institutions of *sattras* and *namghars* are products of the Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva towards the closing decades of the fifteenth century. Both the institutions materialize a social consciousness based on an equal and egalitarian society which is at par with Marx’s aspiration to build up a society based on equivalence and compatibility. Though the word *sattr* was used differently in *Satapatha Brahmana* and *Bhagavad Gita*, the word has attained a unique significance in the context of the Neo-Vaishnavite religion. The *sattr* institution does not express religious sentiments only but also contributes towards the cultural advancement of Assam. *Sattras* have been acting more or less as the guardians of religion and morality by keeping close vigilance over their disciples. One of the primary functions of the *sattras* is to see that good social relation is maintained amongst the villagers and to develop the spirit of co-operation amongst all. Like *sattr*, the *namghar* is the backbone of Assamese villages as well as the Assamese society as a whole. Srimanta Sankaradeva established a new democratic social order in the society with the *namghar* at the base and the *sattr* at the top.

Karl Marx believed that religious institutions should not be tools that pacify the oppressed by offering false comfort and wishful thinking. But Sankaradeva subverted the idea of an oppressive religion by creating *sattras* and *namghars* on humanitarian grounds. Sankaradeva protested against the evils of the society through the ideals of *sattras* and *namghars*. Marxism believes that religion arises from and gives voice to real suffering within an exploitative society and in this sense religion is also a protest against the very

suffering and poor conditions it addresses. Marx remarked, “Religion is a form of protest by the working classes against their poor economic conditions and their alienation” (Raines, 5). Sattras and namghars get fitted into the Marxist definition of what true religion should look like. Sankaradeva’s preachings and messages were conveyed to the masses through these democratic channels. The namghar has become a solid base of the Assamese society in many respects. It is the common meeting place of the villagers not only for the kirtana (singing) of Sankaradeva’s preaching, but also for the maintenance of social justice, art and culture. The foundation of “this social order is so firm and deep that it has withstood all political upheavals, i.e., the removal of the age-old monarchies and the establishment of the colonial rule of the British imperialists. Any political changeover in Assam has nothing to do with this democratic religio-cultural structure of the society, the base of which has been laid deep down on the village community” (Saikia, 83).

The “religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i. e. The process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control. This, however, requires that society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence, which in their turn are the natural and spontaneous product of a long and tormented historical development” (Marx, 173). Sattras and namghars establish Neo-Vaishnavite religion not as a religion of bargain and barter between God and men or of sacrifice and easy recompense but one with exclusive emphasis on slow spiritual regeneration, on growth of a new spiritual outlook by laying flesh and spirit in the hand of the Lord. Both sattras and namghars are based on the philosophy that life once surrendered, given over to the Lord, can no longer be believed according to the desires and impulses; they are to be governed by higher laws and purer manners. The Vaishnavite philosophy not only speaks about relationship between God and man but also between man and man irrespective of caste

and creed. This social collectivity is completely aligned with Marxist ideology. Sattras and namghars exemplify that Vaishnavite religion is not a secret doctrine whispered from ear to ear. It is proclaimed in places of public congregation, it is proclaimed in places of amusement, it is echoed when people relieve their hearts in songs. Even to this day, one can see in sattras and namghars the Hari-prasangas where people belonging to different castes join without any distinction of caste, creed or color. This was intended mainly to establish harmony in society and to promote fellow-feeling. The “implications of Marxism as an approach is immense. For instance, it enjoins upon human beings to contribute towards progress under all circumstances. Secondly, it expects people to oppose and fight those tendencies in society which work to the detriment of progress. One can also see the connection between this and what we call ethics of morality” (Prakash,162). The ideal of all- round development of human beings is clearly visible in the preachings of sattras and namghars. Both the institutions have contributed immensely to the socio-religious development of Assam. These institutions served as sheet anchors of Assamese society in the midst of continually shifting political circumstances. They worked to a large extent towards spread of intellectual and cultural activities in the village and in the course of time came to co-ordinate all aspects of social, economic and political life of the Assamese people. Such things place sattras and namghars as institutions clearly epitomizing the Marxist ideals.

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Mrinal Kumar Gogoi is a distinguished academic and administrator with a strong background in Social Work. He holds Master's degree in Social Work (MSW), where he secured the top position. Gogoi cleared the UGC NET in Social Work in the year 2015, showcasing his expertise. He had served as an Assistant Professor & HOD i/c, Dept. of Social Work in various college and universities. He also worked in Assam Medical College & Hospital (AMCH). Currently, he holds the position of Assistant Registrar, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Assam demonstrating his administrative capabilities. He's a recipient of the Vice-Chancellor's Excellence Award, MSSV (2020-21). Gogoi has presented research papers in regional-national-international conferences and his research papers are published in reputed journals. He is a

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Prof. Dayananda Pathak

Dayananda Pathak is a distinguished writer in Assamese and English. Starting his career in Assam Civil Service, he took to teaching in college and universities. He has translated five plays of Shakespeare into Assamese; six plays of Srimanta Sankaradeva; nine plays of Madhavdeva and three plays of Jyotiprasad Agarwalla to English. His translations of the plays of Sankaradeva are already being retranslated to French and Spanish from his English version, later enacted by the actors of France, England, Spain, UK and USA. He is a noted literary critic in Assamese, having to his credit a number of critical books. He was the Principal of Pragjyotish College, Guwahati. After that he joined as the Professor of English in University of Science & Technology, Meghalaya. Thereafter, he was the founder Professor of Sankaradeva Studies in Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon. Right now, he is engaged as the Visiting Professor of Sankaradeva Chair at Panjab University, Chandigarh.