



International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

Volume-III, Issue-III, April 2017, Page No. 117-124

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

Understanding Status of Women in Satra institution of Assam: A Historical Study with Reference to the Issue of Women Entry into the Kirtanghar of Satra

Ankita Kalita

M. Phil Scholar, Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India

Abstract

The status of women in a nation is considered as an index of understanding its civilization. Understanding Hindu society of India is marked by the studying the status of women in Hinduism as a main point. It is because, Hindu customs, manners and the culture as a whole is ordained in Hinduism. The term 'status' while used includes not only personal and proprietary rights but also duties, liabilities and disabilities. In case of a Indian woman, it means her personal rights, proprietary rights, her duties liabilities and disabilities vis-a – vis the society and her family members. Satra is a religious institution developed in medieval Assam as an institutional outfit of Neo-Vaishnavism, a socio-religious reform movement initiated by the saint scholar Sankardeva. The institution not only guided the religious life of the Vaishnavite people of Assam but also their socio-cultural life. In this paper an attempt is has been made to understand the role and position of women in satra institution especially giving importance to the much debatable issue of women entry into kirtanghar (prayer hall) of Satra.

Key words: Religion, Woman, Position, Satra institution, Assam

The role and position of women in Hinduism is a contentious issue and positions range from quite fair to extremely intolerant. Hinduism is based on numerous texts, some of which dates back to 2000 BCE or earlier. They are varied in authority, authenticity, content and theme, with the most authoritative being the Vedas. To understand the position of women in Hinduism, it is necessary to understand the true essence of Hindu scriptures and the division between what is religious philosophy versus what was merely social philosophy in ancient times. The social philosophy varies with time, but the religious ideals do not. The point is critical since Hinduism has a large number of scriptures and lack of right understanding as to their content and hierarchy can be result in distortion of the Hindu religious tradition¹. In the text like Ramayana and Mahabharata reference has been made to the ideal women, while some text such as the 'Manu Smriti' advocates a restriction of

¹ Sharma, Sunita., Women and Religion, ABD Publishers, Joipur, p53
Volume-III, Issue-III

women's rights. In India, during Vedic times women and men were equal as far as education and religion was concerned. Apparently in early Vedic times women also received the sacred thread and could study the Veda. The *Harita Smriti* mentions that a class of women called *brahmabadinis* who remained unmarried and spent their lives in study and ritual. Panini's distinction between *arcarya* (a lady teacher) and *acaryani* (a teacher's wife), and *upadhyaya* (a woman preceptor) and *upadhyayani* (a preceptor's wife) indicates that women at that time could not only be students but also teachers of sacred lore². But after the Vedic age the status of women began to decline. It is because in the *smriti* like '*Manu Smriti*' women are treated as property and denying education and property right. In Manu's code, women are many times equated with slaves who also constituted property. Hindu scriptures are generally classified into two categories-*Sruti* (primary scripture) and *Smriti* (secondary scripture). Upanishads, which are considered as the highest among the *sruti* are in the view that there are no spiritual differences between man and woman. The differences between individuals exist only at physical level. Woman has the same religious and spiritual and religious freedom in Hinduism as man. Like a man, she is the soul in bondage and the goal of her life is the same as that of man, spiritual perfection though selfless work, meditation and yoga³.

'Hinduism' in India both as a force and as a religion came to be challenged time and again by forces which considered the Brahmanical religion as obstruction to their interest. From the time of Vedas to take the shape of a group of various forms of beliefs and rituals, worship system, philosophical ideas, and set of observances, Hinduism went into a historical process of development. In that process, various sub-sects or cults or religious movements emerged as offshoots of or protest against Hinduism by both challenging its socio-religious principles and by interpreting its gods and goddesses in different way. By the sixth to seventh centuries A. D. a new type of Hinduism appeared with the rise of *bhakti* (devotionalism), with a highly emotional and personal focus on a single deity. As a part of medieval *bhakti* movement, Sankardeva started Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam in 15th and 16th Century. Satra institution was the unique contribution of Neo-Vaishnavism to the people and society of Assam.

Sankardeva and early reformers like Gopaldeva of neo-Vaishnavite movement gave a considerable respect to the womenfolk. Neo-Vaishnava Movement produced woman leaders, scholars, and poet who contributed to the culture and civilization of Assam. There was much evidence to show that Sankardeva accorded honour to women. The instance of making a woman named Radhika alias Yogamaya of the volunteer force at Tembuwani for construction of the dam is an example of this⁴. It is because of the tradition of giving respect and importance to women, initiated by Sankardeva, that the emergence of women organizers like Kanaklata or litterateurs like Padmapriya became possible in the history of neo-Vaishnavism. Sankardeva led the way by actively practicing what he preached.

² Ibid, pp-45-46

³ Ibid, p-58

⁴ U.P. Lekharu, (ed)., *Katha Garu Charit*, Nalbari, 1952, p-304

Contrary to myth, he himself offered 'sarana' to women, even in the initial stage of his movement. Actually, the leaders of Neo-Vaishnava Movement showed considerable generosity not only by initiating women to devotional cult, but also by acknowledging them religious heads. The dignity of women attained its height in Assam when Gopaldeva addressed his followers- "take the wives of the *bhakats* (disciple) as equal of your mothers and the *bhakats* as your own body."⁵ The neo-Vaishnava leaders visualized a society in which both man and woman, on equal footing, would chant the name of God. As a writer he tried to uphold the liberty, dignity and equality of women in his own inimitable style. The principal women characters in his writings have all been endowed with strong personality. They are bold and assertive too. The Vaishnava literature decried as well as praised the fair sex in their works. Sankardeva in his 'Harichandra Upakhyan' eulogizes the qualities of a good wife for her love, co-operation, advice and service. But at the same time he had decried the bewitching and mind-enchanting physical beauty and attraction of woman. Nevertheless, the Vaishnava teachers seem to have treated women on the equal footing with men in respect of initiating them into vaishnavism. On the woman like Kanaklata Ai, the grand daughter-in-law of Sankardeva, sailed all the way from Koch-Bihar up to the Ahom Kingdom and remained Bordowa and restored the place to its former glory. Kanaklata Ai initiated many people into *bhakti* and deputed 12 disciples who included 6 Brahmin and 6 non Brahmin to carry on the work of the Order in different parts of Assam⁶.

Satras are broadly divided into groups-monastic Satra and house-holding Satra. Monasticism is one of the most significant features of Satra institution of Assam. In monastic Satras both *Adhikrs* and *bhakats* spend their life in celibacy. Among the Satras practicing monasticism and celibacy, the main Satras are Auniati, Dakhinpat, Kamalbari (both natun Kamalabari and Uttar Kamalbari), Garamur, and Bhogpur Satra. Among these Satras, Garamur Satra remained a monastic Satra till 1915 with both Satradhikar and the inmates leading celibacy life, when he abolished the monasticism. Sankardeva did not introduced celibacy as a part of religious life; but Madhavdeva, the foremost follower of Sankardeva took it as a way of life. Madhavdeva even advised to his followers "Nobody amongst you should renounce the world (*grihasram*), if you seriously desire to render *bhakti* to *Hari* (God). Do not dare to adopt celibacy taking me as your model"⁷. But in spite of such rejection, celibacy finally became a customary practice in a number of Satras: and many of the later proselytizers either renounced their family life or accepted celibacy as their ideal.

Maintaining celibacy in religious tradition definitely implies that they believed that married life created obstruction in religious persuasion. It is important to note that in colonial period newer vocations opened up and more particularly, in post-colonial times, as men emerged out of medieval bondage, and had opportunity of education and employment, celibacy as a system gradually became less popular. In this regard Pitambardeva Goswami

⁵ Bina.Gupta, *Sankardeva's Contribution towards uplift of women*. www.tributetosankardeva.org

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ U.P. Lekharu, (ed), *op.cit*, p-304

of Garamur Satra adopted a right decision to abolish celibacy from his Satra. He writes- “although Garamur and the other principal Satras are founded on the ideals of monasticism (*udasin pratha*), in course of time, both the inmates and the pontiff have become more worldly. As a result, the name *udasin* to mean the system of the Satra had become a misnomer. For, *udasin* means one who is detached from, and above all desires of material life, and fully devoted to spirituality and religious thought. But the inmates and the pontiff- both act in opposition to what *udasin* really means. They are busy with material life and making property. They are more interested in such matters than even the family holders. Among the worldly possessions they are lacking in are only their wives. Moreover, there is no need of hundreds of inmates to carry on the daily and occasional agenda of the satra; thirty to forty inmates, and even less than that, may be sufficient for doing such works. Thinking in this way, he (Pitambardeva Goswami) invited all the inmates of the Satra on 13th March, 1915, and told them that any inmates having age for marriage, or who have attained the marriageable age, may marry”⁸. Abolition of celibacy is definitely a step in the line of respect to women, though it was introduced not as a part of giving respect to the women. Pitambar Goswami after adopting the policy noticed that the Satra looked like a village of men, women, and children. In Garamur satra, later it was seen that women play important role along with men in socio-religious matters. This has happened since its conversion to a semi-monastic system in the early twenties.

It is interesting that ages after Manu made his code, some people in modern times try to defend this primitive attitude towards women and take pride in saying that he was just to the fair sex. In Assam, 19th century social condition did not provide respectable position to women and naturally all the Satras viewed women as a polluted community. The Satradhikars felt the responsibility to maintain and protect the rules as prescribed in the *smriti* and the *dharma sastras* for the wellbeing of the Satra and the society. It was in the name of the traditional Hindu laws that no women was allowed to participate in socio-religious affairs and enter the *manikut* (sanctum-sanctorum) which was the normal procedure followed by all the principal Satras in the Majuli Island. In outside of Majuli, Barpetta satra of Barpetta district still does not allow women to enter its *Kirtanghar*. In the Auniati and Barpetta satar, the rule was once so strictly maintained that women were not at all considered a part of the spiritual society. In the Auniati satra, no woman was allowed to approach the sanctum sanctorum or even the houses of the *Gossain* or the *bhakats*. In the account prepared by Kamaldeva Goswami, which was submitted to P.R.T. Gurdon in the year 1904, along with two of his other counterparts-that of Dakshinpat and Garamur, it is recorded that “women are not allowed to enter into the Satra from the first *prahar* (i.e. upto 9 o’clock morning). They can remain the Satra from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. after that time they are prohibited to remain. They cannot enter the house of the *Gossain* or any *bhakats*, but they are permitted to go into the *namghar*, *manikut* (temple) and *barchora* of Gossain for taking and receiving *Sarana* or religious instructions- which they receive generally at the

⁸ Gangadhar Hazarika, *Mahapuruh Shri Shrimat Dharmacharyya Pitambardeva*, Titabar, 2000, p-33
Volume-III, Issue-III April 2017 120

*barchora of Gossain*⁹. Similarly, in the Dakhinpat Satra, women could enter the Satra campus only “at day time for taking initiation or bowing down to the image or witnessing any festival. But female are prohibited, unless on special grounds to enter into the satra after evening without permission. Even at the day time a female is not allowed to enter the house of a *bhakat* without any genuine reason.”¹⁰ The same attitude was followed by the Garamur satra which reflected in the report submitted by the Yogachandradeva Goswami, the *Adhikar* to P.R.T. Gurdon in the year 1904. In his report, the Satradhikar wrote-“Women are allowed to enter into the Veranda of *Manikut* and *Charaghar* only when come to take *sarana*. Care is always taken not to allow women to remain or remain unnecessarily.”¹¹ But the Satra was converted to a semi-monastic one in 1915 as discussed above, allowing inmates to marry; those restrictions became relaxed to a great extent. Women now not only enter the *Namghar*, but also participated in the congregational prayer. Pitambardeva Goswami’s policy was the pivotal factor in uplifting women’s position in the satra when he encouraged them to play roles in the stage theatre and ‘*Ras-Lila*’ performed in the Satra. The famous Assamese film actress Ila Kakati, daughter of Caru Chandra Kakati, and granddaughter of Bholanath Datta Kakati of Garamur satra, in her younger days used to enact roles in the *ras-lila* performance where acted mostly the role of Radha. Similarly, almost all able girls of the Satra are now allowed to participate in the theatrical performances along with men staged in the *vamsigopal Natya Mandir*. Thus two important developments in the Satra, Pitambardeva Goswami’s liberal outlook towards women, and allowing the inmates to give up celibacy and adopt a conjugal life, have cleared the ground for changing the outlook and policy of the satra towards women in the second half of the 20th century¹².

The condition of Assamese Brahmin widow portrayed in the novel written by Indria Goswami popularly known as Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Goswami has shown the gender discrimination prevalent in the year 1948 of an Assamese Satra called Amranga in her novel “*Datal Hatir Uye khowa Haoda*”¹³ (The Moth Eaten Howdah of the Tusker). At the very beginning of the novel, Goswami writes “the inspiration for writing the novel is the Amranga Satra of South Kamrup. I spent large number of my childhood days in the Satra...I met the ‘characters’ of the novel in this Satra of Kamrup.”¹⁴ Thus, the novel is her real experience build up at Kamranga Satra of Kamrup. Goswami describes the plight of the Brahmin widow in a male-oriented society and she has experienced the restrictions, constriction, compulsions, pressures and applied forces of her conservative society. Her widowhood after only two years of marriage and her subsequent sufferings, intensify her

⁹ Report submitted to the Lt. Col. P.R.T Gurdon, Honorary Provincial Director of Ethnography in Assam, 1904, by the four Principal Vaishnava Satras-Auniati, Dakhinpat, Garamur and Kuruwabahi

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Nath, D, *Satra Society and culture*, DVS Publication, Guwahati, 2012, p-147

¹³ Mamoni Raisom Goswami, *Datal Hatir Uye khowa Haoda* (novel), Chandra Prakash, Guwahat, 2011

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p-5

sensitivity towards the victims of social and individual oppression. The novel asserts a view of harsh socio-political and economic realities of life as experienced by the gendered minorities, particularly the widows of Brahmin society and that is in 'Satriya' culture. The novelist shows the nature of religion in forming everyday identities of women. When Giribala, (the main character of the novel) the widow starched out her hand to eat flesh secretly, something withdrew her hand in the next moment—"it was unpardonable sin for a *damodariya Gossain* widow to eat flesh. It had never ever happened anywhere.¹⁵" in the Amranga Satra, the lives of the women are miserable. Women belonging to all age groups are targeted and victimized. Unmarried teenage girls are held in contempt by the entire community. Old as well as married women are always on the lookout. For unmarried who have attained puberty, in their eyes, these girls are akin to criminals who have horribly offended their gods. As soon as they have located the offender, they banish the girl and her entire family as an 'outcaste'.

In the Till the recent decades Auniati Satra did not allow women to visit the Satra and stay there. But such rigidity has now been relaxed. Willing women are not only initiated by the Satradhikar, and allow entrance to the satra, but they can now also stay there in times defined as need. The female devotees takes active part in religious affairs of the satra. The female devotees are called 'Ai-Sakal'. They perform their regular prayer services on the stipulated place on the southern Varandah of the kirtanghar in the morning and evening. Therefore, they are called 'Kathir Ai Sakal' (*Kathi-varandah*). The members of *Ai-sakal* attend to cleaning the varanda of the kirtanghar alternatively. The women devotees are allowed to enter into the chamariya Satra. The position is honoured in all festivals and functions equally with that of man. Another most important matter is the entry of women in the *Kirtanghar* of the satra. In most of the satras the women are not allowed to enter in the *kirtanghar* of the satra¹⁶. But most remarkable point is that except a few satras the women can enter into the *kirtanghar* of the satras of South Kamrup at all time. The fact that women are given limited liberty in entering Kirtanghar is also proved in case of the some Satras of South Kamrup. Charmariya Satra, Barheramado Satra, Silpota Satra, Sikarhati Satra are some Satras of South Kamrup. In the Chamari, Silpota and Pukhuripar Satra women can enter the inside the *Kirtanghar* but they should be pure from all sides. Moreover, women can enter in the one part of the *Kirtanghar* in the Barheramado, Saruheramado, Urput Satra. But it is compulsory that both men and women can enter the inside the *Kirtanghar* with their traditional dresses *mekhela-sadar* and *dhuti gamusa* respectively. But only the priest can enter inside the *manikut* in all the satra. The women perform religious songs called *naam* in the south verandah of the *Kirtanghar*, but in Silpota Satra women perform *naam* inside the *kirtanghar*¹⁷.

¹⁵ Ibid, p-137

¹⁶ Adhikary, Narakanta., The Mahapurusiya Satras of south Kamrup with Special Referenceto Chamariya Satra and its Impact on the Socio-Cultural life of the People, a Ph.d thesis submitted to the Gauhati University, Guwahati,p-173

¹⁷ Information collected by field visit.

In the Sundariya Satra of modern Barpeta district, there is a *vithi* (small building) of Kalindi Ali, the second wife of Sankardeva. Madhavdeva established the Sundaridiya Satra according to the advice of Kalindi Ai. It was after the death of Sankardeva she was brought to Sundaridiya satra by Madhavdeva, his colleague Madhav Maral, Khira maral from Patbousi Satra and established her in the campus of satra. In the year 1980 this *vithi* was rebuild and established a '*guru-akhan*' there and lighting with *chaki-banti* made a regular custom. Observing the death anniversary of Kalindi Ali is common feature of the Sundaridiya satra¹⁸. This is definitely a sign of respect to the women. In this satra also women are given '*sarana-vajana*' and in the south verandah of the Satra they participate in *naam-prasanga*, and also took part in religious festivals. Barpeta Satra is one of the principal Satras of lower Assam. In 1935, for administrative purpose a 'Satra Management Committee' was formed in Barpeta satra where it was framed that the satra management committee along with the Satradhikar is democratically elected by a large number of voters which are known as '*samuh*'¹⁹. Before 1977 only male members of the '*samuh*' were eligible for casting their votes to form the management committee. On the 5th of January, 1977 the District Magistrate of Kamrup through an order recognized the female voters also of the age of 18 or more than 18. According to the latest Satra scheme, the female voter can also offer their candidature, but while asked whether any one set such example; it is fid that no female candidate had filled their nomination so far²⁰.

The above mentioned description provided a picture of women position in a satra institution. It was from 1946 that the issue was taken seriously by a section of people and continuously demanded the right of women entry. In 1976, Nilima Dutta from the '*Sadou Axom Lekhika Samroh Samiti*' demanded the right to enter the *Kirtanghar* of Satra²¹. In 1988, Swarna Goswami, the noted novelist was misbehaved while she went to the Barpeta Satra on behalf of the '*Sadou Axom Lekhika Samroh Samiti*'. Fanindra Kumar Devachoudhury in his novel '*Anuradhar Dekh*' lamented the case of forbidding Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India to enter the *Kirtanghar* of Barpeta satra²². The issue of women entry to the *Kirtanghar* of Barpeta Satra has recently become a serious debate when a section of people, both men and women demanded the women right to enter the *Kirtanghar* of the Satra in the 'social media'. In order to settle the issue, a public meeting was held in the premise of the Satra under the leadership of the Satradhikar and it was decided to continue the age old decision of 'no entrance for female' to the *Kirtanghar* of the Satra.

The whole issue of women entry into the *kirtanghar* of Satra still remains as an issue of public debate. If maintaining age old tradition in the Satra is important; the capacity to adopt new ideas for continuing its existence is not less important. But it is right to say that

¹⁸ Information provided by the *adhikars* of the satra, Balabhadra Devaadhikari

¹⁹ Bhupendra, Raichoudhry, *Barpeta Satrar Itibrita*, Rekha Prakashan, Guwahati,p-253

²⁰ Information collected from the Satradhikar

²¹ Bubul Sarma, *Sita Dwar Mukuli Kara*, in Dainik Janmbhumi, 30th July, 2016

²² *ibid*

restriction of women entry to the *kirtanghar* of a Satra is definitely a reason to prove that they are given no equal status with their male counterpart in the religious affair.

References:

1. Hazarika, Gangadhar *Mahapuruh Shri Shrimat Dharmacharyya Pitambardeva*, Titabar, 2000
2. Lekharu, Upendra Chandra, *Katha Guru Cahrit*, Nalbari, 1952
3. Nath, D., *Satra Society and Culture Pitambardeva Goswami and the History of Garamur Satra*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2012
4. Pathak, Gokul, *Barpeta Satrar Itihas*, Amar Desh Prakashan, Jail Road, Barpeta, 2013
5. Roychoudhary, Bhupendra, *Barpeta Satrar Itibritta*, Rekha Prakashan, Ambari, Guwahati, 2007