CHAPTER V

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF THE SATRAS
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5.1 The socio-economic condition of the Satras in Goalpara (undivided) and North Bengal is another important point to be discussed along with the Satras. At present many of the old Satras have been almost in dying condition. Some of them are revived recently after the Government patronisation and for the support of some religious minded people of these Satras. The main reason of such discouraging condition of the Satras is their financial hardships. Originally each of the Satras had sufficient landed properties, on which the Satra people depended on, but later on, specially, after the abolition of the Zamindary system the Government had taken away the possession i.e., ownership over the landed property of the Satras. As a result the Satra Bhakats and other associates faced many problems regarding their maintenance and various activities of the Satras. This way the Satras in North Bengal and Goalpara are now facing more problems. These are discussed below referring each of the Satras.
5.2 GOALPARA:

5.2.1 RAMRAYKUTI: A Mahapurusiyā society consisting of three hundred families are living around the village Ramraykuti or Satrasal. Most of them belong to Rajbangshi community and identified as Das. The system of 'Pānch Burhi' i.e., five grand old ladies and 'Pārāmānik' i.e., lady cooks are much interesting enactments at this Satra. Five old ladies selected from disciples of the village are called 'Pānch Burhi' and their main function is to keep the Satra neat and clean. They are not ordinary women to be looked down for their nature of duties, but are selected with care and placed in their positions with much respects. They are honoured with 'mālā' i.e., garlands on the date of their initiation and hence fourth they got a respectable status in the Satra. They have also faithfully performed the sacred duty of singing devotional songs in the Satra as per rules.

The word 'Pārāmānik' is probably derived from the Sanskrit word 'Pramānika' i.e., one from which is proved Pramānika > Pārāmānik, Pārāmānik. They are a batch of seven
ladies selected jointly by the management committee and
the general public from the disciples of the Satra consider-
ing their way of life and devotion to the Satra. They
have some responsible position in the society and they
are to take the burden of looking after the management of
various festivals of the Satra particularly in the kitchen.

Similarly a group of twelve male members are also
selected and they are called 'Bāra-Burhā' i.e., twelve
grand old man. They are also selected jointly by the manage-
ment committee and the general public and are also garlanded
on the day of their initiation. These twelve old men are
recognised as the chieftains of the Mahāpurushiyā society
at Ramaykuti. Their main functions are to maintain reli-
gious sanctities in the Satra and to advice the disciples
to follow the Satriyā principles.

There are eighteen Gāyans and Bāyans selected
by the Satradhikār himself from the Satra Bhakats and
offer them garlands. They are to take initiative for
all performances of 'Bhāonā', 'Nāmkirtan', and other
Satriyā cultural shows in the Satra.
The general disciples are living in the hātīes, locally called 'Pārā's with their families. Women flocks are deferred from entries into the main prayer hall and the Gurugriha.

5.2.2 JINKĀTĀ SATRA: There are two hundred families of Vaisnava sect at Jinkata, Kherbari and Gharialdanga villages. There are some Koch Rajbanshi families also in the Satra. All the people belonging to this sect in Jinkata are known as 'Bhakat'. They are actually the followers of the Nikā Samhati, i.e., a sub-sect of the Vaisnavas who are very orthodox and strictly follow the sectarian principles. Every family has their individual Namghar for family prayer. They join with the other people of the Satra in their common Namghar only on the days of special occasions and festivals. Generally they keep Namghosa, Gurucharit or Ramayana at the āsana in their family Namghar and they offer prayers in front of the āshana every day. It is an indispensable part of the socio-religious activities of the Satra people. At that time they chant Bargeets, read Namghosa, Mahabharata etc. and offer Prosāda. It is very peculiar in Jinkata that
no bhakat takes meal without having bath and prayer in his family namghar. They are still maintaining their old and traditional orthodox nature. They have followed certain social customs in their kitchen by using separate cloth to enter this house, but some exceptions are now occurred in the highly educated families of the Satra.

There is a small committee of twelve old Bhakats in the Satra as in Rāmrāykuti Satra and they are also called 'Bāraburhā'. This was introduced after the establishment of Jinkātā Satra. This 'Bāraburhā' is fully responsible for maintenance of socio-religious discipline in the Satra and the group is very powerful in Satra society. Their decision on various affairs is considered as the final verdict, which, the people of Jinkata cannot deny at all. They control the society in all spheres of life.

Marriage was confined within the Mahapurusiā sect, but now after independence the marriage took place among the other sects also and 'Bāraburhā' has also considered it liberally. They did not take any offence on such marriage. Immediately after marriage the bride and bridegroom are
compelled to take śaraṇa i.e., initiation from their sectarian Guru. Such rigidity on the initiation is not prevailed on unmarried boy and girls. Such rigidity comes up after marriage only.

It is the common practice of every family to offer special Prasād in their family namghar inviting villagers one day in the month of Barbāg i.e., 15th April to 14th May. This function is locally called 'Nabuddiya' a corrupt form of 'naibedya diya' i.e., offering of Prasāda to the Almighty. The Bhakats of the Satra maintain certain customs after born baby or after death of adult cousins. These functions have some similarities with the Vedic traditions as prevailed in our society. The Vedic rites are also performed at the time of marriage and śrāddha ceremonies in the entire Satra society of Jinkata along with Kirtana and prayers.

5.2.3 DHARMAPUR SATRA: Dharmapur is a small village with 108 families who are Vaisnavas and they are actually the tenets of Barpeta Satra. It consists of people from...
different Hindu castes, such as Brahmin, Koch Rajbanshi, Kalita etc. including schedule castes, many of whom take the Paul surname. In respect of Satra's affairs Barpeta Satra is the final authority in case of this Satra. All religious rites like initiation, prayers etc. are arranged from Barpeta Satra. At present a recent development takes place in this Satra: The devotees are divided into two groups; (i) followers of the Vedic rites and (ii) non-follower of the Vedic rites. Each of these two groups oppose each other in various ways in the Satra.

There is a common permanent Hall, which is called 'Hāitārghar' i.e., the house of the entire Satra and it is located in the main entry of the Satra. This Hall is meant for all social gatherings, where the leading citizens of the Satra including the Head of the Satra take main part in various works. The ill-doors of the society are tried in this Hall.

Typical Vasnavite Satras' activities are not available in the Satra, but many of such customs and traditions are still preserved, such as stage of drama,
Bargeet, Satriya dances, etc. The old customs and traditions are not properly maintained because of the poor financial condition of the Satra. Moreover, the modern way of life has also play some roles in this change.

5.2.4 DALGOMA SATRA: There is a social organisation of the devotees centering round the Dalgoma Satra. It is composed of people drawn from different sub-communities of Hindu such as Kalita, Kayastha, Rajbanshi, Vaishya etc. This organisation is divided into two sects, e.g. Dāmodariā and Sankari. Living in different places maintaining their own identity they are very much respectful to the Satra. The Dāmodariā i.e., Brahma samhati sect is taking leading part in all activities of the Satra. The Dāmodariyā and the Sankari devotees living in the adjoining villages are 150 and 50 families respectively. The religious festivals observed here jointly by the Dāmodariyā and Sankari sects is admirable. Such co-operation of these two sects is uncommon in any other Satras of Assam. Everybody in the
village keep a watchful eye for the maintenance of purity and austerity of the Satra.

Members of any family in which some one has died are not allowed admission to the Satra during their respective period of traditional impurity. If any one of the social organisation commits anything wrong in violation of accepted religious practice he or she is punished with fine and unless the punishment is executed or the fine is fully realised, the affected person can never enter the Satra. The whole amount of fine is spent for the purpose of the Satra. The intermarriage among the different communities is prevalent and initiation of the newly married couple is compulsory. The villagers are initiated by the present Satrādhiṅkār.

In the various functions of such as first entry to the newly built house, last rites of a dead, marriage etc. devotional prayers and music are played besides the Vedic rituals. For purification of houses, devotees perform special devotional songs and prayers. Pālnām i.e., series of devotional songs, discourses on Bhāgawat are also regularly held at Private residence in the well-to-do families. The
villagers are also assembled if necessary, at the Satra itself, discuss their social problems and find out their solutions to take appropriate course of actions.

5.2.5 SHYAMRAI SATRA: The Shyamrai Satra in the heart of the Goalpara town, acts as a catalytic agent for bringing about a cultural integration of the people belonging to different sects and communities from the time of its establishments. It is the dominant centre of Sankari culture in the town. It acts as a cementing force among the different communities. The various festivals of the Satra are observed with the sincere co-operation and participation by the people of different caste and communities. They have totally forgot about their differences in community life and make the Satra an ideal place of integration. The overall management of the Satra is entrusted with the group of the twelve Burha-Shakats. One Bharali is also selected and he is to bear the burdens of looking after all matters of temporal and spiritual importances. He is one of those twelve Burha-Bhakats. These Burha Bhakats attend daily discourses on
religious scriptures along with other devotees. Aged ladies are selected as lady discoursers (Pāthakāni) who along with other a few ladies join them in prayer sitting on the second row in Namghar. There is another committee to look after the overall development of the Satra.

5.2.6 ĀMGURI SATRA: This Satra is also known as Gopinātha Satra after the name of the Vigraha of the Satra. Vigraha is an image of Banshidhāri Śrīkrīṣṇa known as Gopinātha. There is a Mahāpurusiyā society consisting of the hundred and fifty families living in this village. Most of them are Rajbanshi and Kalita communities. On every Thursday the ladies of this village assemble there to carry on discourses and Kirtans of God. On every first Sunday of the month the aged devotees including female members meet there to carry on discourses on the Bhāgawat. Most of the people in the village are cultivators and the Satra is not strong financially. Intercaste marriage among the Rajbanshis and the Kalitas are also occurred frequently and freely. These are solemnised either in accordance with the Vedic system or the newly introduced Vaishnavite systems with nāmkirtana.
5.2.7 BISHNUPUR SATRA: There are about nine thousand people of Mahāpurushiyā sect living in the village around the Satra. Majority of them are of the Rajbanshi community. There are many people of the communities, Sudras, Kalita, Hira and Kaibartya (Fisherman) who follow this Satra. They are considered as members of the Mahāpurushiyā society after the formal initiation by the Satrādhikār. Majority of the people depend on agriculture. The financial position of the Satra is very weak. The Satra was managed by the Adhikār family and therefore it could not make much progress. The Satrādhikār used to entrust the responsibility with one Patnāk and twenty other families. The general public do not participate in day-to-day offerings and discourses in the Satra. They only take part in different festivals when observed there. Though the twenty families managed the affairs of all festivals in the Satra they could not take independent or individual decisions. They had to abide by the instructions of the Satrādhikār and his family members. The present Satrādhikār, Sri Gaurikanta Adhikary is playing a vital role to get the local people involved in the management of the Satra.
Majority of the people of the society are religious minded. Vedic rites are also followed in the society in matters of marriages and last rites of a dead one. Intermarriage between the Vaisnavas and Shaktas were strictly prohibited in the past, but now laxity is observed in such marriage. The villagers strictly follow the Vaisnavite principles.

5.3 NORTH BENGAL:

5.3.1 MADAPUR SATRA: The forefathers of late Tokai Bhakat managed the affairs of the Satra like ordinary priests. Late Tokai Bhakat was the only head of the Satra. The local people followed him in running the Satra. He could manage the Satra somehow with the co-operation of the devotees. After his death the present Satrapati i.e., Satrādhikār Sri Mainath Bhakat takes over the responsibility of Madapur Satra. Under his leadership a management committee was constituted. Sri Mainath Bhakat, later on, handed over the management of the Satra due to financial troubles. But the committee could not improve upon the condition of the Satra.
The same conditions are still prevailed and the Satra is somehow survived.

5.3.2 BAIKUNTHAPUR SATRA: There were one thousand and five hundred followers with deep devotion living in the nearby villages around the Satra. In course of time, however, these followers lost their identities because of deteriorating condition of the Satra. There are about two hundred families apparently belonging to Dāmodariā sect in the Satra locality, but they have almost forgotten about their past identities. The Adhikār of the Satra, Sri Kanakendudev Goswami, is now functioning as a priest in various religious and temporal rituals for the villagers. Frequent contact with the Assamese people have, however, helped them in regenerating a feeling of their Guru Damodardev and his teachings. The indigenous villagers are mostly of Rajbansi community and they have on great respect to the Satra.

Other Hindus living in the villages have also shown respect to the Satra and participate in its various festivals with financial and physical supports. If the people of the
main land of Assam come forward with determined support, it will be possible to revitalise the Satra and revive popular faith on the Vaisnavism of Assam at the Baikunthapur Satra.

5.3.3 MADHUPUR SATRA: The Satra institutions have been playing an important rather exclusive influence on the social, religious and cultural lives in Assam since the sixteenth century. At various points of time in history the territorial boundaries under the Satriya culture extended from river Karatoya in the West to river Dikrai in the east.¹ There has now been a shrinkage in its area of influence in course of time. The political changes brought about concomitant changes in social and cultural activities. Cooch Behar was merged with West Bengal, a part of the old Kingdom was given away to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and indigenous population overawed by the numerically stronger alien refugees. Even in the midst of all these odds, Madhupur Satra

¹ Neog, M.; 1969; 'Pabitra Asam' (Introduction), p. 34
is still retaining some of its old glory and flying the high colours of Assamese culture in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. Sacred memories of Sankara-Madhava are still respectfully remembered with due observance of all ceremonial obligations connected with them. After the passing away of Satradhikār Laxmikanta Ātoī, Shri Fatik Chandra Hazarika was initiated to succeed him. With the co-operation of a few local youths he is carrying on all daily obligations of lighting the banti, doing prayers, offering oblations, chanting hymns and singing devotional songs. Majority of the people in the surrounding area are converted devotees of Sri Chaitanyadeva of Nadiya with a considerable number of alien refugees. They were originally the followers of this Satra. The river Torsa is flowing by a distance of one kilometre from the Satra.

The various festivals are observed here with the co-operation of the local people. The devotees from Satraśāti, Jinkata, Simlabari etc. of undivided Goalpara district have also extended co-operations.
In the last few years birth anniversary of Sankaradeva was observed with befitting manner. Seminars and discussions on Sankaradeva and his religion, art and literature were also organised with highly qualified scholars of Assam and West Bengal. Cultural shows depicting various aspects of Sankari musics, Bargeets and drama were also staged. All these have generated some amount of enthusiasts and interest among the local people specially the indigenous section of them.

The financial grants and other patronisation from the generous people of Assam and its popular Government Madhupur will recapture its fore bearing glory of the past by re-establishing it once again as a flourishing fles point of Assamese Vaisnavism.