A STUDY ON CULTURAL TOURISM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SATRAS OF ASSAM

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Introduction: Cultural Tourism is the subset of tourism of tourism concerned with the country or region’s especially its arts. It generally focuses on traditional communities who have diverse customs, unique form of arts and distinct social practices which basically distinguish it with other types and forms of culture. Cultural includes tourism in urban areas, particularly historic or large cities and their cultural facilities such as museums and theatres. It can also include tourism in rural areas showcasing the tradition of indigenous cultural communities and their values and lifestyles. It is generally agreed that cultural spends substantially more than standard tourists do.

Assam - the very mention of this word brings to one’s mind the delightful blend of culture, heritage, faiths and beliefs of the numerous ethnic tribes and sub-tribes residing in this region. The culture and tradition of the state, its music, dance and literature are all interwoven into the social fabric and cross all barriers of caste, creed and religion. In fact, a mention of the rich tradition of the state, without referring to the diverse lifestyle, arts-crafts, fairs and festival of the people residing therein, would be as good as incomplete.

Assamese culture today, in its true sense dates back to almost two thousand years. To trace the roots of such an assimilated culture, having different source culture is a difficult task and a matter of research. It is believed that Assamese culture in its original form developed during the first millennium AD, under the great dynasties of Pragjyotisha-Kamrupa. In the 15th century, a renewed religious-cultural movement swept the entire Assamese society, under the leadership of the great Vaishnavite saint, Srimanta Sankardeva. Between the 12th and 15th century, as in the rest of India, political and social lives of Assam was in shambles, full of chaos and disintegration among various communities. Through the Bhakti Movement, Sankardeva brought these communities under the same roof, providing a systematised code and conduct of life which made Neo- Vaishnavism a social revolutionary movement ushering through two distinctively unique institutions – the Satras and Namghar.

The cultural renaissance brought about by Shrimanta Sankardeva laid the very foundation of the Assamese socio-cultural ethos. Perhaps not a single aspect was left out by the reformer in his pursuit to shape the effervescent Asomiya culture. The wholesome contribution by the Vaishnava scholar spread across a whole range of subjects like language, literature, music, songs, education, industries, reforms, etc. touched every aspect of life that is relevant till today. The Satras happened to be his experimental ground of the subjects that in the long run became a part and parcel of Asomiya life and culture. All these subjects have
Satra is a socio-religious and cultural organisation which developed in medieval Assam. Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam was propounded by Srimanta Sankardeva, the great social and religious reformer of Assam, in the 15th and 16th century. The term Neo-Vaishnavism applied to the Assam version of Vaishnavism of Sankardeva to differentiate this phase of Vaishnavism from its early phase. Satra institution is the unique contribution of Neo-Vaishnavism to the people of Assam. The Satras of Assam are the most distinguished and influential socio-cultural institution of the state. Socially the Satras form a popular institution and have earned the status of being a national institution of Assam. Socially the Satras form a popular institution and have earned the status of being a national institution of Assam. Satras are the places for religious practices, cultivation of art and literature and craft, painting, music and dance. However, mere religious socio-cultural or even aspects of their art and literature on their own do not identify the Satras. There are more than thousand Satras in the whole Brahmaputra Valley, however, being located in the Majuli island. The Satras played a great role in the social life of the contemporary period. It was not only a place for spiritual solace but a place to shelter the poor and the hungry. The bhakats had to earn for their living. Similarly, the Namghar set up in the villages for worship became the hub of socio-economic activities and arbiter of local disputes. In fact, it became something like what Maheswar Neog calls "Village Parliaments" run on democratic principles. The banking system of these institutions prevalent for ages is a subject of research. Did any such system exist in any part of contemporary India? The ivory works of Barpeta Satra is another feature of Asomiya culture. The preparation of traditional jewellery in Barpeta at the insistence of the reformer continues to flourish till today without any Government patronage.

Another big factor was the cultural contribution of the Satras, which were the centres of excellence. They helped a great deal in evolution of the Asomiya socio-cultural idiom. The language, the literature, the music, the songs, the dance, the plays, etc. gave a distinct identity to the cultural spectrum. The first play composed by the guru titled ‘Cihna Yatra’ at the tender age of 19 was in fact the beginning of modern theatre in East India. Culturologist Ratna Ojah is of the opinion that Sankardeva was the first personality to use a stage for performing the play. Significantly, performance of the play was responsible for breaking the age-old caste barriers as persons from various backgrounds - from ‘high’ caste Brahmans to ‘low’ caste koibartas participated together.

Objectives:

1. To describe the role of Satras in the development of the cultural tourism of Assam.
2. To highlight the problems and prospects of cultural tourism in respect to the Satras of Assam.
3. To study the linkage of Satra culture and tourism development of Assam.
4. To study on measures on the development of the cultural tourism of Assam.

Methodology: The study relies on secondary data. The secondary data have been collected from research works on satras and from other published books and articles. The study is descriptive in nature.

Discussion:

Majuli:

Majuli was one of the nerve-centres of the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement during its heydays. It was at Majuli then known as Dhuwahat, Ahom territory) that Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva met his foremost disciple and apostolic successor, Madhavadeva for the very first time, in the 16th century. This event, referred to as Manikanchan Sanyog is the single most epoch-making event in the history of the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement. After this meeting, the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement gained momentum and the medieval caritas (the hagiographies) are full of references to Majuli. Majuli is also a great centre of music and performing arts, of Ankiya Nat and Satriya Dance. The Kamalabari Satra is the home of legendary musicians and performing artists like the Late Maniram Dutta Muktiyar Bayan who was the Chief Director of dances of Kamalabari Satra and Raseswar Saikia Barbayan, who contributed greatly towards the conferment of the Classical status upon Satriya Dance.

The First Satra

It is said that Sankaradeva established the first Satra here by planting a Bilva tree and naming the place Belguri. Here it was again that Sankaradeva’s son-in-law Hari, was executed under royal orders. Sankaradeva stayed at Dhuwahat for 14 years before proceeding to Western Assam.

In the post Sankara-Madhava period (17th century onwards), Majuli once again became one of the main centres of propagation of Neo-Vaisnavism due primarily to the pioneering efforts of Saint Vamsigopaladeva and his successors.

- **Garamur Satra:** This Satra was established by Lakshmikantadeva and preserves some unique ancient weapons like cannons (Bortop). An important form of dance called Raasleela is performed here with great enthusiasm. It is a depiction of the mischievous sport played by Lord Krishna with his Gopis, on the banks of the river Yamuna, in the historic town of Vrindavan.

- **Auniati Satra:** This Satra was founded by Niranjan Pathakdeva and has thousands of followers and devotees all over the world. It is especially famous for the Paalnaam and Apsara dance performed here. Moreover, the Satra has a good collection of old
Assamese articles, like jewelry, utensils, and handicrafts.

- **Dakhinpat Satra**: Founded by Banamalidev, the Dakhinpat Satra is renowned for the famous Raasleela that is enacted here with great pomp and glory. So much importance is given to this form of dance in the state that it has been declared as one of the major festivals of Assam.

- **Kamalabari Satra**: Kamalabari Satra was founded by Bedulapatam Ata and is an important center for art, culture, literature and classical studies. One of its branches, the Uttar Kamalabari Satra plays a major role in the spread of Satriya art both in India and abroad.

- **Bengenaati Satra**: Muraridev, the grandson of Sankardeva’s step mother, was the founder of this Satra. It is an important center of performing arts and has a rare collection of antiques. Among these, the royal robes of the famous Ahom King Swargodeo Gadadhar Singha and the royal umbrella, both made of gold, are worth mentioning.

- **Samaguri Satra**: Samaguri Satra is renowned for the traditional masks that are made here. It is one of the most important pilgrimage centers of Majuli. The satra is renowned as a core for classical and cultural studies.

**Cultural Contributions**

The Satras of Mājuli were, and still are, a religious centre, a school and a library. Not only the existing books were preserved with utmost care, but books were also brought from other parts of India. Every Satra possesses a library consisting of manuscripts to the extent of a few thousand copies. Big Satras like Auniati and Daksinpat once contained more than a thousand manuscripts, some of which are being preserved in different antiquarian institutions like the Kamarupa Anusandhana Samiti (Assam Research Society) and the Department of Antiquarian and Historical Studies (DHAS). One of these Satras is believed to contain the Bhagavata of Sankaradeva, written by the Saint himself, in his own handwriting, which he had presented to Damodaradeva.

Majuli is also a great centre of music and performing arts, of Ankiya Nat and Satriya Dance. The Kamalabari Satra is the home of legendary musicians and performing artists like the Late Maniram Dutta Muktiyar Bayan (who was the Chief Director of dances of Kamalābāri Satra) and Raseswar Saikia Barbayan, who contributed greatly towards the conferment of the Classical status upon Satriya Dance. There are a total of about 30 Satras in Mājuli, many of which are in the mainland, (a few of them are in Chaporī areas) with a distinct spiritual influence on the region. These are located primarily towards the middle of the island. Each Satra represents, within its region, a centre for cultural activities and even acts as a democratic institution to settle local disputes. Most of the villages associate with their respective Satras, and the villagers take part in the activities of their own Satras during
festivals and occasions. These Satra Villages house the Namghar (council house) where all the activities related to the Satra are carried out. Many of these Satra villages are also important centers for the Majuli Island. For instance Kamalabari, Garmur and Dakhinpat are the semi-urban places, juxtaposed with Natun Kamalabari Satra, Garmur Satra and Dakhinpat Satra, which are the main centres of trade and commerce.

Satras of Barpeta:

Barpeta Satra is one of the largest and powerful satra of Assam. These five hundred years old institution has established a completely distinguished identity among all the Vaishnavite Satra in Assam. With the advent of Shrimanta Sankardeva Barpeta region turned into a place of great religious importance. Large number of Satras were established by the disciples of this great Vaishnava saint. Since time immemorial these Satras attracts large number of devotees from all over the state, particularly during festivals and anniversaries.

The heritage and culture of Barpeta District is predominated by the remarkable work of the great Assamese renaissance figure and reformer Mahapurush Shrimanta Sankardeva who laid the foundation of Assamese culture and heritage in and around the district. Subsequently the great saints disciples namely Madhabdev, Haridev, Damodardev and their devotees followed the good-works of the great figure. A good number of Satras was founded by these great saints that are considered regio-cultural institutions or monastries that created deep impact in the Society, polity, economy etc.in the region. Although the Satra institutions were established for the propagation of Vaishnavite faith but with passage of time these institutions gradually transformed into open universities to become all-embracing socio-cultural centres covering numerous subject including education, music,dance, sculpture ,drama, fine-art, Ivory-works etc.

- **Patbaushi Satra** :The Satra at Patbaushi was established by Shrimanta Sankardeva. His Vaishnava faith was spread by the guru's able disciples Shri Madhav Deva, Shri Damodar Deva and Shri Hari Deva. It was from this satra that Srimanta Sankardeva spread his faith, literature, music art-forms, culture and work-culture to its fullest form. Here the guru spent 18 years of his life with remarkable achievement including completion of the 'Kirtan Ghosa' and composition of 20 numbers of invaluable Borgeets. Some of the items used by these Gurus and Sachipat puthis are well-preserved here. The Satra is located about 2 K.Ms North of the Barpeta town.

- **Ganakkuchi Satra**: This satra was founded by Sri Madhab Deva for which the land was purchased by Shrimanta Sankardeva for 1 Tola (about 10gm) Gold and nominated his close disciple Shri Madhab Deva as the satradhikar to stay here to spread his faith and he went on to stay here for 18 long years. Some of the items used
by the guru and Sachipat puthis are well-preserved here. The Satra is located within the Barpeta town area.

- **Jania Satra**: This Satra was established by Sankardeva's disciple Shri Narayan Das Thakur Ata. He composed a large number of devotional songs here. This Satras located at a distance of 8 K.M. from Barpeta in Barpeta Jania Road.

- **Sundaridiya Satra**: The Satra was established by Shri Madhab Deva after leaving Ganakkuchi Satra. The first satradhikar of Barpeta Satra Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata initially come to this Satra and became a disciple of Shri Madhab Deva. It was here that Paal Nam and Beer Nam or Thiya Nam was created by Sri Madhab Deva. A large number of items used by the guru including Sachipat-puthis are preserved here.

- **Barpeta Satra**: Sri Madhab Deva founded the Barpeta Satra and stayed here for 8 long years. Here he appointed Sri Mathura Das Burha Ata as the first Satradhikar of the Satra. It was Burha Ata who systematised the administration of the Satra leading to development of the institution and the region of Barpeta. A democratic system was introduced which is effective till today. Large number of followers came to Barpeta & accepted the Vaishnava faith irrespective of their caste high or low that created an egalitarian Society. A new work culture developed among the followers. The Satra has several buildings. The front gate is called 'Batsora'. The main 'Kirtanghar' is where prayers or 'Nam Kirtan' are performed is an architectural splendour. Earlier built as a Kutch house was concretised with big-pillars in 1952 with decorative wall paintings. All the 'bhakats' or 'devotees' discussed all kinds of problems in the Jagmohan Ghar. In the 'Bhajghar' a lamp is continuously burning for more than 400 years that is called 'Akhay Banti'. Sri Krishna Doul festival is organised at the premises of Doul ghar. There is a small zoo and small 'rangial' garden. Within the premises a cultural school, Keli kadam tree,Shri Shri Mathura Das Burha Ata Library, study-room, office and kitchen are also located. Constitution formulated by Sri Mathura Das Ata is still in vogue.

- **Baradi Satra**: This satra was also established by Sri Madhab Deva and stayed here for a very short period. The Sankarite culture spread far and wide from Baradi making it a centre for learning. The place is located about 2.K.M. east of Barpeta town.

- **Satra Kanara**: Established by Sri Sri Narayan Das Thakur Ata. This Satra is damaged by natural calamities. Floods creates problem for running the Satra. As a result the original habitants of this place shifted to Gajia and Ganakkuchi in Barpeta. The Satra is located at a distance of 16 K.M. from Barpeta.
Findings:

Jorhat and Barpeta district has wider prospects in tourism developments. The water highway of Assam, mighty Brahmaputra, flows through north-eastern border of the Jorhat town. There are wider scope on water transport, water sports etc for international tourist. Majuli-Nimatighat ferry services have sufficient prospects of tourism developments and should be maintained with maximum standard. Despite having immense potentialities of the tourism sector in Assam, especially in Jorhat and Barpeta is facing a lots of serious problems. The specific problems are as follows:

1. The tourism sector in Jorhat and Barpeta district is getting lack of attentions from the government and proper exposures in the domestic and international field.

2. The infrastructure of Jorhat and Barpeta district is too poor for the tourism development. Jorhat district have the limited and poor quality infrastructural facilities in terms of road, rail and air communication. The facilities like accommodations, food, shopping and entertainment are major impediments to the growth of tourism in Jorhat and Barpeta district.

3. Hotels are an important segment of tourism infra-structure. Unfortunately there is no any five star hotels in which may provide up to date accommodation to the foreign tourists.

4. The government of Assam has not taken required steps to preserve the historical monuments of the district, the main attractive spot Majuli itself subjected to the fury of recurring floods of the mighty Brahmaputra.

5. There is lack of awareness regarding prospects of tourism among the people of Jorhat and Barpeta district. Even most of them are not aware of the value of tourism. Without cooperation from the masses the government could not execute the schemes of tourism development properly.

Recommendation:

After analyzing the prospects and problems of Jorhat district on the basis of the primary data the following measures are recommended for the development of tourism in the Jorhat district.

1. More publicity about the prospects of tourism both in the national and international level about the Jorhat district should be given.

2. Local masses awareness program about the tourism developments and its positive impact should be lounged in the grassroots level.

3. Infrastructure and transport service of the Jorhat district should be improved. Tourist busses of international standard should be flying on the road.

4. The existing airport of Jorhat should be improved to the international level. There should be a provision of tourist information counter for airlines, trains, hotels, and tourist information centre at the airport and district head quarter with proper facilities. It is necessary to set up five star hotels and few special categories of heritage hotels.
5. The beautification and refurbishment of the historical monuments of Jorhat district should be given priority. Master plan should be prepared for the attraction of the tourist spots. Beautiful ponds like Rajmao and Tinikunia can be beautified with providing boating facilities to attract and tourist amusements. The river beach of the Brahmaputra should also be developed for the spread of tourism.

6. Tourism staff should be organized towards tourist welfare. Tourism information service should be made more efficient.

7. There must be peaceful law and order atmosphere in the district.

8. Handloom and Handicrafts and dance and music festivals should be organized for the attractions of the international tourists in Jorhat district.

**Conclusion:**

To conclude, there are lot of prospects for the development of tourism industry in Jorhat district which is expected to provide employment facilities along with the socio-economic growth of the state. It is clean from our findings that Jorhat and Barpeta has bright prospect of tourism on conditions that the tourism promotional schemes should be properly implemented.

**References:**


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