Neo-vaishnavite Movement of Assam: A case Study of Mayamara Vaishnavism

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Abstract- This Paper is about the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement And its One important Branch Mayamara Vaishnavism. Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam was first established by the sankardeva. The movement started in the middle of the present day Assam at a place called Bardowa near Nagaon and spread over the entire north eastern region of that time from Sadiya in the East and Koch Belar in the west. It was basically a religious movement, preaching the monotheistic faith in lord Krishna, the supreme creator of the Universe not through any worship but singing lord krishna’s name’s in Congregational Prayers, ultimately it was not confined only into the corridors of religion but like a wild fire it spread into social, literary and cultural spheres, so much so that a neo-vishnavite Assamese Society came into being a society where all persons Irrespective of casts and creeds could live move and have their beings as equals. At the Time of Sankar Deva’s vaikuntha prayana(Passing away), he left his religious order in the hand of his most devoted disciple mahapurus Madhabdeva. But after his death the neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam devided into four sects or Samhati. They are The Brahma Samhati by the Damodardev, Purusa Samhati by Purusottoma Thakur, Kala Samhati by Gopala deva and Nika samhati by Mathura das and padma ata. And Anirudhadeva (a disciple of The Gopala deva who established kala samhati) for the first time Established a Branch of Kala Samhati Satra in upper Assam and which was later on came to be known as the Mayamara Satra or moamaria Satra and his neo-vaishnavite Ideology as the Mayamara Vaishnavism.

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavism, Vaishnavism, Mayamara Vaishnavism, Anirudhadeva, Kala Samhati.

Introduction

Mayamara Vaishnavism is a Branch of neo-Vaishnavism of Assam, which was first established by the sankardeva. The movement started in the middle of the present day Assam at a place called Bardowa near Nagaon and spread over the entire north eastern region of that time from Sadiya in the East and Koch Belar in the west. It was basically a religious movement, preaching the monotheistic faith in lord Krishna, the supreme creator of the Universe not through any worship but singing lord krishna’s name’s in Congregational Prayers, ultimately it was not confined only into the corridors of religion but like a wild fire it spread into social, literary and cultural spheres, so much so that a neo-vishnavite Assamese Society came into being a society where all persons Irrespective of casts and creeds could live move and have their beings as
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Anirudhadeva first founded his satra at his own village called Vishubalikunchi near Narayanpur in the present Lakhimpur district of Assam in 1601 AD but later (in 1606) shifted it to Naharati, 9 km south of the present Bihpuria of the same district, owing to the raids of the Nishis (dafalas). A man of radical outlook, Aniruddhadeva made the depressed communities and tribes like the Kaivartas, Haris, Nadiyals and Kacharis, including the poor artisans the target of his missionary activities. Following Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, he also gave initiation to a Muslim tailor named Sheli, renamed as Dhyanapati. Anirudhadeva placed these disciples on an equal footing with the caste-Hindus and mixed freely with them, which made him immensely popular in the common circle. For this, he was severely criticized by his contemporaries, but he accepted all challenges with courage and determination. Anirudhadeva fostered among his disciples a strong community feeling and there by greatly contributed towards social formation in upper Assam, in particular. Aniruddhadeva was a literary genius and an expert musician. Anirudhadeva rendered into Assamese the 5th Skandha of the Bhagawata and composed the Puranjan Upakhyan based on the contents of the 25th to 31st chapters of the 4th skandha of the above text. Besides, Anirudhadeva authored a religious text called Bhakti Mangal Ghosa in 805 verses in line with Madhavdeva's namghosha. Anirudhadeva wrote another text called Nij-Sastra in both prose and verse for the senior disciples, who learnt the fundamentals of Vaishnava philosophy. Its recitation, however, is still confined to this class of devotees and the text is considered a secret one. Aniruddhadeva's mastery over music is evident by the fact that he had not only composed 182 devotional songs but had also prescribed raga for each of them.

The disciples of Aniruddhadeva came to be known as Moamariya or Mayamoriya and the satra as Maomara or Mayamara. They have a distinct place in the history of late medieval Assam because they organised the first popular rebellion against the Ahom monarchy in 1769, which in course of time paved the way to its downfall and implementation of the British rule in Assam. For this, the Mayamara satra and its gurus were held responsible. Consequently, not only the disciples of Aniruddhadeva, but also the guru himself were severely condemned. The other reason for which the Mayamara Satras got alienated from other satras was that it accepted mainly the depressed people to its order. As
a result, Aniruddhadeva and his mayamara Satras remained in the backlog of study and research. Aniruddhadeva’s Naharati Than(Satra Eariler) also not exception in this mater.

**Review of Literature**

Following are some of the literatures I have reviewed which shall be helpful in analyzing the subject matter. The book entitled, *“The Mataks and their kingdom, castes & tribes of Assam”* (1985), by Sristidhar Dutta discuss about the origin of the terms Matak, Moamaria & Mayamara. This book also deals with the racial Origin and Political background of the different tribes and castes composing Mayamara or Moamaria Community. This book also deals with Anirudha deva and his Mayamara Vaishnavism. In this book we find Aniruddha deva as the main founder of the Mayamara Vaishnavism and the development of satra instution in Balikunchi, which was later on shifted to Marnai due to the tribal raids. In this book we also find the main cultural contribution of the Aniruddha deva and the origin of the name ‘Mayamara’. In this book writer give us three different theory about the origin of Mayamara Vaishnavism and its historical significant. The book *‘Life and Teachings of Sri Sri Aniruddha deva’* which was edited by Dr. Swarnalata Lata Baruaha,Retired professor of Dibrugarh University,found some relevant articles related to my topic. Among them *“Sri Sri Aniruddha deva: A Great Scholar and Saint”* which was written by Biswanarayan Shastri is a important one.In this Article Shastri write about how Aniruddha deva established Mayamara Satra at Balikunchi and later shifted to the Naharati Than of Marnay, his Literary Contribution and mith and Reality Regarding to the origin of the Name Mayamara. In another Article of the same book Purnanda saikia wrote under the title of *‘The Bhakti Movement in Assam and sri sri Aniruddha deva’*,what are the main Contribution of Bhakti Movement to Assamese society by Aniruddha deva and also discuss in detailed about how Anniruddha deva Start a new Branch Of Vaishnavism in Assam under the banner of neo-Vaishnavite Movement of Sankardeva,how far it successful ,why naharati Satra, later on came to be known as the Naharati than and what was the main importance of this than to the deciple of Mayamara Vaishnavism. In the Same edited book another Article titled *‘origin of the names Mataka, Moamaria and Mayamara & their Historical Significance’* by Sristidhar Dutta Write How the ame Mataka,Mayamara,Moamariya origin,he briefly discuss three different theory regarding to the Origin of the Mayamara or Moamariya and its Historical Significance. The book entitled *‘Mayamara Vaishnav Samajar Than Satra Itihas aru Aittyja’* edited by Dr. Dambaru Dhar Nath Discuss about how Naharati Than Emmerged and this than journey From Balikunchi Satra to Naharati Than (Satra earlier).Dr. Nath also write about Religious Rituals which perform every Mayamara Satra and Mayamara community. The Book *‘Mahapurush Sri Sri Anirudha deva’* written Manik Gogoi Give us full coverage of Anirudhadeva from his Early life Work and Till his death.
writer give full detailed about the early life and how Anirudhdeva initiated in the kaljahr Satra And how Anirudhadeva established His own Satra in Balikunchi and later on transferred to Naharati. The book entitled ‘Mayamora Adya guru Sri Sri Anirudha deva aru terar Dharma Dhara’ written by Bhudhar Das give us detailed image of the 17th ce Religious life of Upper Assam, he also briefly discuss about the Main Contribution of the Anirudha deva to the Neo-Vaishnavism and to justify this Bhudhar Das briefly Discuss the Whole Work of him from Bhaktimongal Ghosa to the Nij Sastra. Das also discuss the Main Reason why the Bhakti Mongal Ghosa not Allow to read any Ordinary person and why double initiation is need to Read this book and why this book only read in Midnight by specific and Authorized Village old man Group. The Souvenir ‘Sri Sri Anirudha devar Dharma Darshan Aru Sampratik Mayamara samaj’ is edited by Dultan Gogoi. In this Souvenir an article named ‘Mayamara Vhaisnav Dhmar Aiddyaswar sri sri Anirudhadeva’ written by Dr. Birendra Kumar Gohain writes about Why Anirudhadeva was called as a Aiddyaswar by his disciple And how Anirudhadeva Transfare his 1st Mayamara Satra to Naharati than(earlier Satra). Another article on the same book ‘Anirudha deva Ek Awalokan’ written by Phanidhar Bora, mainly discuss about the Ideology of Anirudha deva and the difference between neo-vaishnavism and Mayamara Vaishnavism. The work also talk about Nij Sastra of Mayamara Community and the secret reading of the book by some double initiated old Mayamara community disciple. The article says that some of old scripture along with Nij Sastra are preserved in the Naharati Than (Earlier Satra).The book entitled ‘Srimanta Sankardev aru Anugami Gurusakal’ a book written by Bhu dhar Das we found the life history of Anirudha deva and his Mayamara Satra insitutions .Here Das discuss about early life of Aniruddha deva and how Aniruddha deva Initiated into Kaljhar Satra by Gopal deva and later on how Aniruddha deva established his own Satra Instution in Balikunchi of Narayanpur area at first and Later on due to Tribal Raids shifted to Marnay area which is about 9 km. far from the Balikunchi. The Souvenir entitled ‘Tumixi Xuhrida Aatmaa Priyatama’ 2015 a Souvenir of Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, In this Souvenir a Article titled ‘Vaishnavbad,Sri Sri Anirudhadev Aru Mayamara Dharmiya Sanskriti’ written by Susil Kumar Gogoi. Gogoi writes about what is vaishnavbad, what is Mayamara sect of neo-Vaishnaism,Main deference between the neo-vaishnavism and the mayamara vaishnavism. Mr. Gogoi also writes about the Main Principles of Mayamara vaishnavism which is not found in any other sect of Neo-vaishnavism in Assam. **Objectives of the paper**

The present paper has the following objective-

1. To highlight Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam
2. To highlight Mayamara Vaishnavism and its Origin.
3. To analyze the Organizational framework of Mayamara Satras of Aniruddha deva.
Methodology
The present study is based on historical and analytical method. The data or facts have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included both the published and unpublished written documents in the archives. Secondary sources have been used to supplement the primary sources. They include various books and articles written by different scholars on the Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam, Mayamara Vaishnavism.

Origin of Mayamara Vaishnavism
Mayamara Vaishnavism is a Branch of neo-vaishnavism of Assam, which was first established by the sankardeva. The movement started in the middle of the present day Assam at a place called Bardowa near Nagaon and spread over the entire north eastern region of that time from Sadiya in the East and Koch Belar in the west. It was basically a religious movement, preaching the monotheistic faith in lord Krishna, the supreme creator of the Universe not through any worship but singing lord krishna’s name’s in Congregational Prayers ultimately it was not confined only into the corridors of religion but like a wild fire it spread into social, literary and cultural spheres, so much so that a neo-vaishnavite Assamese Society came into being a society where all persons irrespective of casts and creeds could live move and have their beings as equals. At the Time of Sankar Deva’s vaikuntha prayana (Passing away), he left his religious order in the hand of his most devoted disciple mahapurush Madhabdeva. But after his death the neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam divided into four sects or Samhati. They are The Brahma Samhati by the Damodardeva, Purusa Samhati by Purusottoma Thakur, Kala Samhati by Gopala deva and Nika samhati by Mahura Das and padma ata. And Anirudhadeva (a disciple of the Gopala deva who established kala samhati) for the first time established a Branch of kala samhati Satra in upper Assam and which was later on came to be known as the Mayamara Satra or moamaria Satra and his neo-vaishnavite ideology as the Mayamara Vaishnavism. The terms ‘Matak’ and ‘Moamaria’ or ‘Mayamaria’ are used in an identical sense because all the members of the Matak community are also disciples of the Mayamara Satra. And the actual term is not ‘Moamara but ‘Mayamara’ The Mayamara Satrar Vamsawali contends that the appellation ‘Mayamara’ was given to their original Guru Aniruddhadeva by the Ahom king Sukhampha Khora Raja (1552-1603), being impressed by the former’s mastery over maya or magic, by which, he could create a cobra out of an empty pitcher and then make it vanish simply by touching the sides of it. From this incident, Aniruddhadeva’s Satra came to be known as ‘Mayamara’. R.M. Nath gives a different interpretation to the origin of the term ‘Mayamara’. Nath states that “the Moria sect of the Austrics, who were originally known as the Mei-Morias settled in the north-eastern part of the country which was later known as the head or the ‘Mahtak’ or Matak country. Later on they mixed up with the Bodos and other tribes and were known as Morans, while their tribe-name was changed from Mei-Moria to Maya-Moria or Moamaria. But his theory is not supported by any other source, nor is there any evidence to ascribe Austric origin to the Morans against their well-founded
Bodo origin. It is seen that in case of the other Satras of Assam, most of them are named after their geographical location. It is, therefore, probable that the Satra was called Moamara because it was located at one time, in the early period of its history, on the bank of the Moamari Bil which abounded in Moa fish. This view was first forwarded by Maniran Dewan. Supporting Dewan’s contention, British Officer Robinson stated that the people who inhabited the area close to the lake were called Moamara and the Satra located therein was also therefore called as such. There is a tribal area in upper Majuli which is still known as Moamara, which evidences the existence of a lake bearing that name in that area at one time. The lake might have dried up or washed away by the Brahmaputra, as Majuli is still the most flood-affected area of Assam. The term ‘Mayamara’ is found neither in the Buranjis nor in the Chritpathis (biographies of the Vaisnava saints). Only one official record, a letter dated 8th Ahara, 1724 Saka (July, 1802) written by King Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811) to the then Governor-General, Wellesly, used the term ‘Mayamara’. But, in course of time, the term ‘Mayamara’ became more popular than that of ‘Moamara’, perhaps because, the heads of the Mayamara Satras give wide publicity to this term through their published Vamsawali. Moreover, as there is hardly any difference in the accent of the word ‘Moamara’ to ‘Mayamara’, the gradual corruption of the term ‘Mayamara’ to ‘Moamara’ or vice versa was but very natural. As the Mayamara Mahanta accepted disciples from amongst the so called low caste or depressed classes of the society and greatly compromised with tribal manners and customs, the term ‘Moamara’ or ‘Mayamara’ was also used in a derogatory sense. Haliram Dhekial Phukan, and Maniram Dewan state that because of this reason, the other Satras did not keep any relation with the Mayamara Satra. My informant also narrate same thing to me, he also added that though the word Mayamara and Moamaria are identical but the meaning of the both work differ from each other. E.A. Gait mentions that the term ‘Moamaria’ was a nick-name given to the original disciples Anirudhadeva, who lived near the Moamari lake, used to catch and eat a kind of fish called Moa. Gait’s opinion is echoed in the Census Report of 1881 which states that “The Assamese of the lower districts regarded the Gosain and his medly following with some contempt, which they expressed by the term ‘Moamaria, or catchers of the Moa fish, in allusion to the fishing carried on by his Dom disciples in the lake on whose bank the Gosairt had seat.” Imperial Gazetteer also writes in the same vein. Perhaps, it was this reason that the Mayamara Mahantas preferred to designate their Satra as Mayamara and repeatedly emphasised that the actual name of their Satra was not ‘Moamara’ but ‘Mayamara’.

Organizational framework of the Mayamara Satra

The Mayamara Satra is purely of non-monastic line, Its Gosain or Adhikar (Head of the Satra) and his devotees lead housholder’s life with their respective families. Therefore, unlike the monastic or semi-monastic Satras, the Mayamara Satra at present possesses no hati or residential huts intended for accomodating celebate devotees. However, the chronicle of the Satra mentions the existence of Cari-hati or four rows of residential huts in the monastaries established in various places from time to time. Possibly, till the early part of the twentieth century, there were some devotees in the Satra campus, who were leading celebate lives on their own.
Mayamara Satras were generally established at places away from the humdrum of life. In the structural design of the buildings of the Mayamara Satra, certain specialities are noticed. Each of the principal Mayamara Satra is marked by the existence of a Batcara (Gateway), a Namghar (prayer-hall), a Sastraghar or Dharmaghar or Mankuta (Shrine), a Gurughar (Satradhikar’s residence), a Than (cremation ground of religious head) and a tank where at the time of initiation ritualistic baths are taken. The first four are common to all satras but the last two are specialities of Mayamara only.

Community organization of the Mayamara Satras
The community organization of a Mayamara Satra consists of two principal sections viz. (i) Adhikar or the head, the Deka-adhikar or Juva-adhikar or the heir apparent and Padadhikar or the would be Deka-adhikar. In the Mayamara Tipuk Satra, Acarya, Mahabhakta or Mahabhakat and Mahapurusiya are also incorporated in this category, (ii) The other category consists of the Sisyas or disciples. The first category of disciples who are office-bearers generally reside within the Satra campus and the second category i.e. the laity live in villages and towns outside the Satra complex. In Mayamara Satras like those of non-monastic order, headship is hereditary and he is called Satradhikar or simply Adhikar or Gosain. Next to the Gosain is the Dekadadhikar, briefly Dekadadhikar or Yuvadhikar, meaning the heir apparent or would be Adhikar. The Dekadhikar is appointed by the Adhikar with the approval of the community of devotees on the basis of seniority. On the same principle, the Padadhikar is appointed by the Yuvadhikar. The Adhikar is the religious head and spiritual guide of the devotees or disciples under his care. Only he has the authority to initiate the devotees or give Parana and bhajana. Next to the Adhikar in power and prestige is the Dekadhikar and next to him is the Padadhikar. When the Adhikar remains absent or goes out on Cahar phura or religious tour, the Dekadhikar generally performs the duties of the Adhikar. The sisyas or disciples of a Mayamara satra, as in other satras, are of two kinds, (i) Saraniya and (ii) Bhajaniya. Generally, every neophyte just before or after he gets married, is given initiation, in the latter case along with his wife. After initiation, he is simply called Nam-Bhakat or Saraniyal Bhakat. Similarly, women receiving initiation is called Nam or Saraniyal Bhakatani. After initiation, he or she is allowed to take active part in religious functions. A Bhakat or devotee after remaining Saraniyal or laity for a long time, could proceed for Bhajana in his matured age, when he is again initiated and promoted to the status of bhajaniyal bhakat. He is then given the opportunity to go deep into mystery and philosophy of the faith, participate in the recitation and exposition of the Nij-Sastra composed by Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva. A Bhajaniyal devotee becomes qualified to hold higher ecclesistical offices like Gaon Burdha, Barburdha, Siromam or Bargaonburdha. Management of the Mayamara Satra
The management or administration of a Mayamara Satra as other Vaishnava monastaries is run by the Adhikar with the help of a number of functionaries attached to different departments like the Sastraghar or Marikuta, Namghar, Yajnaghar and General management. The Manikuta department takes care of the Marikuta which is the central chamber of a Mayamara Satra. The religious scriptures are kept in a
separate chamber called Sastraghar or Dharma-ghar. The scriptures consist of the Nij-Sastra and the Bhakti-Mahgal Ghosa composed by Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva, the Mukti Mahgal Ghosa composed by the fourth Adhikar of the Satra Sri Sri Nityanandadeva and other works composed by later Adhikars. The person who is placed in charge of this chamber is called Namghariya. His duty is to look after the cleanliness of the Marikuta and lit lamps in this chamber and also in the Than-ghar every evening. The Bar Khataniyar or Bar-Bhakat performs the work of nam-prasahga (congregational prayer) with his assistants, one or more, called Khataniyar. Yajna-ghar is found only in the Tipuk Satra. From morning till early hours of night, a series of devotional services are held in the Namghar. In this chamber, the Namghariyas play the daba (drum) in the morning and in the early hours of night. Each Namghar has also a few orchestral parties known as Gayan-bayan. The person in charge of reciting the Bhagavata is called Pathak or Patheki. Pathak is assisted by a few other Pathaks. The person in charge of cooking and distributing food and haj are called respectively Randhani (cook) and Bilaniya (distributor).

**Relation between the Guru and the Sisyas**

The nature of relation between the Guru and his sisyas (disciples) of the Mayamara Satras as well as between the disciples themselves had been somewhat different from other Satras. Although Guruvad is a salient feature of the Kala Samhati Satras, it is in the Mayamara Satra that the principle was strictly followed in practice. The disciples of the Satra considered their gurus to be a living embodiments of God and is called Aniruddhadeva, the Adyamurtti or primal image. For them, the guru never dies; Aniruddhadeva simply closes the drama of his life. Any humiliation done to him they considered it to be done on their own persons and were determined to avenge it. It was in the name of their guru that they got themselves united on the eve of the Moamariya rebellion. Although this tradition has suffered some set back in present times, they still hold their guru in high esteem and the latter also makes best efforts to keep close contact with them. He is always accessible to the disciples. Any disciple at any time can directly come to the Guru and discuss any problem with him. Community feeling is also very strong among its disciples. They usually come in groups to visit the Guru. After harvest, the disciples used to offer a quota of their production to the Guru. This practice still exists. It is also their custom to come to the Guru to offer pranam before or soon after getting married. The disciples generally address the Guru as Deuta (Father). They also use other appellations like Dukhani Caran (His pair of holy feet), Jivandhan (wealth of life) and Gurudeva (God father). But their Deuta is only a senior friend in the community of disciples. To develop more intimate relationship with the disciples, the Adhikar undertakes tour programme called Cahar Phura or Prabas Phura (to be out of the headquarters) from time to time. In this Satra, when the disciples bow their heads to him, he also reciprocates doing namaskar. This practice could never be imagined in other Satras.

**Codes of conduct of the Mayamara Satras**

The Mayamara Satras have some codes of conduct which set up a discipline in the socio-religious behavior in the Mayamara society. It had also helped the Satra to mould its society to a definite social system. The violation of any code of conduct is considered as aparadha or offence. Among such offences nam-aparadha (nam
meaning God’s name and *aparci dha* means offence) is the most serious. After taking ordination, the devotees become *Atds* or *Atais* (originating from the word *Aima*, meaning divine soul) and they are to consider each other as part of the divine soul and also as part of the great community, namely, the human community. Though this concept of universal brotherhood and devotion exist in all *Vaishnava Satras*, it is in the *Mayamara Satras* that the ideal was practiced in reality. Any harsh word or rude behaviour to any disciple is considered as a *nam-aparadha*. Any one guilty of this offence can be penalized by the *Satra-dhikar* in consultation with community of disciples. Till he is not pardoned, the offender remains ex-communicated from the society. The codes of social behaviour are revised from time to time to suit the changed social circumstances and values.

**Conclusion**

Mayamara Vaishnavism is important branch of the *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Assam. The *Mayamara satras* of Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva have even today a bond of unity among their disciples. It is known that when different castes and tribes like the *Morans, Kacharis* and *Chutiyas* were converted to the new faith, Sri Sri Aniruddhaveda and the succeeding *Mayamara Gosains* permitted them great laxities. They were not altogether prevented from following their age-old customs and rites suddenly, which might result in wide resentment amongst them. Even, after their conversion to *neo-Vaishnavism*, some of the adherents continued to worship some of their tribal deities while accepting at the same time Krishna, Vishnu or Hari as the superme Lord. Although from the point of principle, this should not have been permitted, Aniruddhaveda possibly did not take cognizance of those rites, which were done privately. On the other hand, such relaxation popularized the *Mayamara* sect and contributed to its numerical strength.

In this way, through the elevation of socially backward people by presenting before them a higher and healthier mode of life and by opening the portals of monotheistic religion to all, Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva fostered fellow feeling and universal brotherhood among different castes, communities and tribes and there by led to the formation of a new society.
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