

Growth of Vaisnavism and Christianity in the Duar Areas of Lakhimpur

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Abstract: The influences of the larger community on the minor community are indeed a general phenomenon in every society. Only the degree is different in this context. It can depend on the framework of the larger community to extend the influence on other minor communities. Hinduism has influenced the entire Brahmaputra valley from the early times. But the tribes of the Brahmaputra had to follow animism from early times. Some similarities like worship of the river, Sun, moon, animals, etc., of Sanatan Hinduism have been seen in tribal religion, but it may be considered as the direct or indirect influence of Hinduism. In the case of the hill tribes, especially the Nyishi people are quite different. They are independent, and their society has been open from early times. There is no place for class division and the caste system in its social, political, or religious sphere. Although the Nyishi people have followed the Donyi-Polo religion since the early times. All the religious matters were handled by the priest class. There was also seen animal sacrifice in their religion. Verrier Elwin, British-Indian anthropologist, argues about the influences of Hinduism on the indigenous religious faith of the Nyishi, - the same sacrifice, the same colorful festivals, myths, and legends of a rather similar pattern. But there was no cast system and divisions in their society.

Keywords: Animism, Hinduism, Donyi-Polo, Nyishi, Sanatan, Duar.

1. Introduction

1.1 Brief Introduction of the Duars of Lakhimpur.

The term 'duar', whose literal meaning is door, i.e., a route of entry and exit between two neighboring kingdoms, facilitates socio-cultural and economic exchanges. Duars are generally a geological formation mostly found in specific mountainous regions. They are characterized by a distinct pattern of parallel ridges and valleys shaped over time by erosion and tectonic forces. The term duar became popular in medieval Assam from the early 17th century. The term Duar is specifically used for the growth of the relationship between the people of the plains and the people of the Hill tribes. Door or duar comes from the Sanskrit word *Dvora* or *Duaram*. From ancient times, these routes have been used to communicate with the people of the hills. With the passage of time, these routes were popular not only as a means to interact with the hill tribes, but also to expand trade and commercial, political, and cultural relations with the hills. Duars thus implies the passes that connect the lowlands with the hills. The Duars of Lakhimpur are Dikrang or Harmutty, Dijo, Joking, Siajuli, and Dollungmukh.¹

¹ Borah Padma, Asom Buranjir Prakshapotot Oitihiyamondita Narayanpur Aru Anyanya, published by Dilip Kumar Boruah, Narayanpur, 2011, p.42

1.2 Brief Introduction of Lakhimpur

Lakhimpur District is situated on the lower Arunachal Himalaya's north bank of the river Brahmaputra and the North-East Corner of Assam, India. The district lies between 26 degrees 48 seconds and 27 degrees 53 seconds Northern latitude and 93 degrees 42 seconds and 94 degrees 20 seconds East longitude. The district is bounded on the North by the Siang and Papumpare districts of Arunachal Pradesh and on the East by Dhemaji and the Subansiri River. Majuli stands in the South, and Biswanath stands in the west.

1.3 Brief Introduction of the Inhabitants of the Duars of Lakhimpur.

The Inhabitants of the Duars of Lakhimpur are Nyishi, Apatani, Galos, and the Hill-Miris. All are hill tribes. The Nyishi are the largest ethnic group of Arunachal Pradesh, and most of the Nyishi people settled in the border areas between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh from the early times. The Nyishi people used earlier Dikrong, Dijo, Pichola, Johing, and Siajuli as the passes or door to communicate with the plains. Other tribes like the Apatani also used the Dijo pass, Galos, and the Parbotia-Miris used Dollungmukh and Bordalani. Nyishi has its own language, tradition, and culture.² They had to follow Animism, but later on, Visnavism and Christianity influenced them.

1.4 Brief Introduction of Ahoms

The Ahoms belong to the Tai or Shan race, i.e. Mongoloid. They migrated from Mao lung, Unann Pardesh, present China in 1215 and founded the Ahom Kingdom in Assam in 1228 A.D. Sukapha was the founder of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley. Suhunmung Dihingia Raja(1497-1539 C.E.), Pratap Singha(1601-1641), and Rudra Singha(1696-1714 C.E.) were the greatest rulers of the Ahom dynasty. Under the reign of these rulers, the boundaries of the Ahom kingdom extended entire the North-East India. The kingdom lasted till 1826 A.D. By the treaty of Yandaboo between the British and Burmese, Assam went under British control.

1.5 Brief Discussion of Vaisnavism

Vaisnavism means to worship one supreme God, and he is Vishnu. The main principle of this religion is to follow truth, non-violence, tolerance and equality, and respect for other religions. In Assam, Vaisnavism was propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva. He was a great messiah who rescued the people of the Brahmaputra Valley from the regressive medieval practices like human sacrifices. Besides, the people of this region were curled in the wreaths of Tantras, illiteracy, lingering amidst, cast discrimination, and socio-political segregation and conflict. Faith-culture and the prospect of a future of a greater integrated nation were in pandemonium. Sankardev not only spread the cult of the Bhakti movement in Assam but also enriched the people socially, culturally laid the foundation of a great Assamese nation. Satras, Namhgar are the chief organisations of Vaisnavism. Satras have a prominent role in propagating Vaisnavism.³

Literature Review

We have found and followed some books written by British writers, Indian writers, Journals, and research papers during our study period. Books like Father Nicholas Krick's '*An Account of an Expedition against Abors in 1853*', E.T. Dalton's '*The Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*' -1872, and Professor Haimendorf's '*Ethnographic Notes on the Tribes of Subansiri Region (1947)*', M.L. Bose's book *History of Arunachal Pradesh*, Dr. Lakshmi Devi's "*Ahom-Tribal Relations- A political Study*", etc. But there is a gap as the study elaborates the impact of the Visnavism and Christianity on the Nyishi under Ahom and British Rule in Assam. Therefore, we have written an article regarding the topic, which can be more effective on such studies, and anyone can understand the influence of Vainavism and Christianity on the people of Lakhimpur duars.

² Sarmah Siva, Bara Vaishnavar sthan Narayanpur aru Mahapurush Madhabdev Samanbite eyar santasakal, Dayamani Publication, Narayanpur 2007 p.35

³ Sarma Satyendra Nath, A Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Medieval Assam (1200-1800 A.D) p.

2. Research Method And Objectives

The work will be a descriptive and interpretative analysis of the influences of the *duars* situated in the present Lakshimpur. The main objectives are to examine the influences of the Hindu and Christian religions on the Nyishi society of the duar areas. It also tries to elaborate on the political, cultural, and economic changes due to the religious changes. The study shall be based on the analysis of the primary and secondary data available in the libraries (Government, Local, and private) and archives of both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh of India. Tungkhungia Buranji and Deodhai Buranji are used as the primary data. We have access to limited written records of our study period, which are preserved very privately. In case a creative interview technique can be employed, an unstructured approach where questions evolve naturally as the conversation progresses. Where necessary, these oral sources might be used with proper justification. The myths, legends, and folktales will also be of worth to bring clarity to the subject. We have used Journals, periodicals, research papers, and also used help internet as secondary data.

3. Influence of Vaisnavism and Christianity on Nyishi and Other hill tribes (hill-Miris, Galos, and Apatanis) of the duars of Lakhimpur under Ahom Rule and Colonial Period:

In Assam, the Bhakti or Neo-Vaisnavite movement was launched by Sankardeva and his disciple Madhabdev in the 15th-16th century. Sankardeva introduced a creed, adhering to the main principles of Bhakti, which could revolutionize the entire face of the life of the people and lead to the formation of a broader civil society. It had united the diverse tribal communities of the region and gave it a culture to identify later as the Assamese culture.

The Satra is the most important organ of the Vaishnavite organization. The Satras were centers of learning and education and guardians of religion and morality. The first Satra was set up by Sankardeva at Bardua in about 1494. Madhabdeva and Damodardeva, both disciples of Sankardeva, gave definite shape to the structural and organizational aspects of the Satra Institutions.

In the course of time, numerous Satras were established in different parts of the country. Among the Satras of the 16th century, the Gharmara Satra of the north of the Subansiri Valley had a prominent role in propagating Vaishnavism among the hill tribes and the people of the plains. During the colonial period, especially from the early 19th century, the Stradhikar of Gharmara Satra, like Basukrishnadev Goswami, Lilakrishna Goswami, and Dayakrishna Goswami, established cordial relations with the neighboring hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.⁴

Among the Satras of the 16th century of Assam, Gharmara Satra is one of the oldest Satras of the Subansiri Valley. According to the Charit Puthi of Gharmara Satra that Shankarishan, a Brahman of Kanauj, established a Satra at Gharmara of Sadiya in 1216 A.D. Chutia King SatyaNarayan patronized to establishment of the Satras. Jaykrishna was the last descendant of Shankarisan. After the fall of the Chutia kingdom, Jaykrishna brought the Satra from Sadiya to the present Dhenukhana of Dhemaji district. The name of Satra was not changed. He had no successor, and so he invited his mitra Jadumoni to take the responsibility of the Satra. Jadumoni accepted his invitation and sent his son Jagatananda to take charge of the Satra.⁵ Gharmara Satra became the Vaisnavite Cult instead of the Vedic cult. From 1510, Sakas of the Gharmara Satra have propagated the ideals of Neo-Vaisnavism entire the hill-plains of the Subansiri region.⁶

The Nyishi, one of the major tribal communities, are concentrated in the central-western part of Arunachal Pradesh. The Nyishi concentration area comprises the East Kameng, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, and Kurung Kumey Districts. During the reign period of Ahom King Pratap Singha, introduced Posa System. This system made close to the hill tribes and also growth the economic relation between the hill tribes and the Ahom administration. By the terms of this system, people of the

⁴ Goswami Rupali and Sharma Bipul Boruah(Ed) , *Rhitayan*, Alibat Prakashan, Guwahati, 2015, p.107.

⁵ Op.cit. Goswami Rupali and Sharma Bipul Boruah, p.70

⁶ Ibid p.72

plains of a particular region offered the commodities as well as the needs of the hill tribes. The Ahom king formed the duars like Naduar, Charduar, and Chaiduar as the entry and exit for the hills to the plains. The Nyishi are inhabitants of Naduar, Charduar, and Chaiduar, and up to the Dollungmukh duar of Lakhimpur. During the British reign period, the Kimin, Dijoo, Bandardewa, Ouhat Johing, Siajuli, etc. became the passes to communicate between the hill tribes and the people of the Lakhimpur. The Nyishi are originally followers of animism.⁷

But a lot of the Nyishi people of the duar regions like Kimin, Siajuli, and Dirgha became followers of Vaisnavism from the early 19th century. The letters between Basukrishna Goswami, Stradhikar of Gharmara Satra, and the Chief Commissioner of Assam, P.R. Gordon, highlight about the Nyishi and the Hill-Miris relation with the Gharmara Satra. It can be said that the British authority closed the duars and forbade them from entering the plains when they stood against the British. As a result, the plains-dependent hill tribes were dying of starvation, and their two chiefs, Madh Gam and Tad Gam, sought the help of the Stradhikar Basukrishna Goswami to obtain permission from the British Government to descend to the plains. Satradhikars had given an application to the authority in favor of the Gams. It is not known whether the British Government accepted the application. The successor of Basukrishna Goswami was Stradhikar Lilakanta Goswami. He had contributed much to expand not only Vaisnavism but also to propagate education among the Nyishi people of Kimin and Siajuli. Lilakanta Goswami established two model Satras at Siajuli, where devotees would have hostels as well as schools. Culture training center, weaving training centers, and ashrams.⁸ Branches of the Satras were also established in Kimin, Dirgha, Passighat, Tezu, and Likabali. These are attempts to awaken education and religious consciousness among the people of Arunachal and other people.

Dayakrishna Goswami, son and successor of Lilakanta Goswami, made more cordial relations with the hill tribes. He formed the Pahar-Bhaiyam Cultural Development Center at Siajuli, Kimin Marginal Social Welfare Ashram, Gharmara Adrash Pahar-Bhaiyam Cultural Development Centre, and the branches of Satras at Dirgha Naharbari, etc. The branches of Satra are located in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh. The Satras provided free education to the orphan tribal and the tribal children, and also provided the spiritual culture of the Satra. Late Dayakrishna Goswami was known as Parbotia or Dafala Gossain among the people of Arunachal Pradesh. With the inspiration of Neo-Vaisnavism, the people of the hills, especially the people of Kimin, Siajuli, Dirgha, Passighat, and Itanagar, etc, perform Bhaona, Satriya dance, and singing Satriya songs on many occasions. The posts like Bormedhi, Sarumedhi, and the Pasoni were given to the Nyishi people of Lakhimpur duars.

Gharmara Satra had also propagated Vaisnavism among the Mising tribes inhabiting the Dhal River of Lakhimpur. The inhabitants of the Dhal area were plain Missing known as Panibotia, and most of the Missing people became disciples of the Gharmara Satras during the time of the Stradhikar Basukrishna Goswami. Even the Toibotia and the Ghasi clans of the hills had also been influenced by the ideologies of Neo-Vaisnavism, and they had cordial relations with the Satradhikar Basukrishna Goswami. It can be cleared from a letter of the British Government on 7-10-1910, that the Commissioner of Assam Valley, P.R. Gordon, requested the Gharmara Satradhikar to stop the bloody war between the Ghasi Miris living between Gosam and Dollung in the hilly areas South of the Subansiri river. The letter during the British rule reveals the influence of the Gharmara Satradhikar on the people of the northern hills (present-day Arunachal) of the undivided Lakhimpur district. One of the historical documents of the Gharmara Satra was a copy of a letter which was written by Satradhikar to King Jogeswar Singha. The letter mentions the prevention of terror among the people by the hill Miris in the form of Burmese Doania during the Burmese Invasion. It is mainly about the crisis that arose in the eastern part of the Swarnashree (Subansiri). However, Gharmara Satra has been planting and spreading the seeds of Neo-Vaisnavism among the Torbotia, Ghasi, and Panibotia Mising. Basukrishna Goswami himself visited the foothills region and propagated the Eksaran Bhagawati dharma. His successor Lilakanta Goswami

⁷ Rikam Nabam Tadae, Emerging Religious Identities of Arunachal Pradesh, published by Mittal Publication , New Delhi,2005,p.143

⁸ Op.cit. Goswami Rupali and Sharma Bipul Boruah ,p 108

and later Dayakrishna Goswami influenced the hill Miris and Plain Mising through the Gharmara Adarsh Satra Pahar-Plain Cultural Development Centre. Bhaona, Satria Dances, Kirtan Path, etc, were organized among the areas of the hill Miris by the Pahar-Bhoiyam Development Centre under the guidance of Satradhikar Dayakrishna Goswami.⁹

It is important to note that although a very humble beginning of the Christian Missionary works into the hills inhabited areas of Nyishi, Adi, parbotia-Miris, Apatanis, and Nagas, etc. They started with the prime motive of spreading Christianity among them. In upper Assam, the Missionaries' work was spreading among the Misings of Sadiya in 1836 subsequently at North Lakhimpur in 1894 and at Pathalipam (presently near NHPC) in 1895. But the Missing people did not cooperate with them. It can be said that Gharmara Satra, Sessa Satra, and Namati Satra had influenced them. But they had maintained their traditional cultural pattern, including their language.¹⁰

However, to analyses the unity of the country and the harmony between the hills and plains, the name of the Gharmara Satra of Lakhimpur district of Assam must be mentioned. The main pioneers of this programme, who entered the tribal people since the time of British colonialism, were Basukrishna Goswami, Lilakanta Goswami and Dayakrishna Goswami. Satradhikar Dayakrishna Goswami had contributed much to propagate Satria culture among the Nyishi, Apatanis, Adis, Parbotia Miris, plain Missing, etc, during the pre-independent and the post-independent period. So, Gharmara Satra has called the pioneer in the east, spreading Neo-Vaishnism among the Nyishi, Missing, Hill-Miris, Apatanis, Adis and Mishimis, etc of Arunachal Pradesh. Gharmara Satra had fulfilled the aims of Sankardeva to unite the hills and plains by the Vaisnavite religion.¹¹ Last but not least, Gharmara Satra is not only an ordinary Satra, it has a rare and unique library where available lot of old Sanskrit books, Khasipatar Puthi, Dravian Puran (Itanagar Buranji), etc. The Satra is also known as the museum and archive of old Assam.

4. Role of the Missionary in the duar areas of Lakhimpur.

The British had not had the opportunity to enter Assam or this part of North-East India until the Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826 C.E.). After the victory in the Anglo-Burmese war, the historic Treaty of Yandaboo was signed by British General Campbell and the Burmese Governor Maha Min Kiao-Hatin on 24th February 1826 C.E. According to the terms of the treaty, the Burmese had no right to claim on the Ahom territory, Manipur, Cachar and the Jayantia kingdom. After this treaty, the rule of Assam passed to the British. David Scott was appointed as the Governor General's Agent to administer the North-East Frontier, including Assam. David Scott was not much interested in intervening in the internal affairs of the Duhalas. He continued to follow the policy of Posa towards the Duhalas. But he was interested in expanding education and under his patronage, there were established eleven LP schools at different parts of the Brahmaputra Valley. The Charter Act of 1833 paved the way for missionaries to work in India. As a result of the implication of the Charter Act of 1833, the missionaries from the United States of America, Germany, and Portugal began to arrive in India to propagate the religion.¹²

In Assam, the Missionary works started from 1836 onwards. The members of American Baptist Missionaries, like Dr Nathan Brown, Dr Miles Bronson and Oliver Cutter, were sent to Sadiya to propagate Christianity. At that time, their work was entitled 'Shan Mission' because they had done work for the Shan Community. They had brought a printing machine and started to publish books in local languages, and also tried to translate the books into local languages.¹³

⁹ Ibid.p.108

¹⁰ Konwar Nogen, Otihasik Gohpur aru Anyanya Prabandha, Sristi Prakas, Gohpur,2017 p.112

¹¹ Op.cit. Goswami Rupali and Sharma Bipul Boruah (ed)p.129

¹² N.P.Mason, These Seventy-five years 1911, ef.M.S.Sangma." Attempts to Christianise the People of Arunachal Pardesh by the American Baptist Missionaries' Proceedings of NEIHA, Pasighat, 1986, p.263

¹³ Milton, S.Sangma, History of American Baptist Mission in North-East India,Vol.1, New Delhi,1987,p.143

They established a school at Sadiya and started to teach the students in the Tai language. But due to strong opposition from the indigenous people, they left Sadiya and opened their official works at Sivasagar. From Sivasagar, under the guidance of Dr Nathan Brown, O.C. Cutter, the first Assamese version Magazine Orunodoi was published in January 1846. The magazine initially focused on Christianity.¹⁴

With the expansion of the British territorial boundaries in the North-East after the treaty of Yandaboo, the Baptist Missionary and other Christian Missionaries from the United States of America and other European countries had encamped at different parts of this region. Their main goal was to propagate Christianity, and for this purpose, they at first taught the local language. Through the local language, they tried to propagate the holy utterance of the Christian religion. The Christian Missionary had also gone to the hills to propagate Christianity among the inhabitants of the hills. Among the hill tribes, the large number of the Nyishi people of Present Arunachal Pradesh was influenced by Christianity.¹⁵

Education in Lakhimpur was primarily shaped by the missionary efforts, and in this context American Baptist Missionary had played a significant role in introducing formal education. In 1878, Miles Bronson left from Sivasagar for the Garo hills, and the Missionary works of Sivasagar were handed over to Rev. C.E.Patrik. In 1886 C.E., Patrick sent two evangelists – Nathaniel Horo and John Bagra to Jaihing Tea Estate and Angarkhua Village of North Lakhimpur. But the Missionary did not succeed in expanding Christianity. Rev. C.E. Patrik arrived at North Lakhimpur through Nimatighat via Majuli. To establish a permanent Mission office at North Lakhimpur, he sent a request to the Home Mission Board of America to send the members. Based on his request, the Home Mission Board of America sent Rev. John Firth and his wife, Mrs Eva Webster. In 1893, they reached at Sibasagar and then, after some months, reached at North Lakhimpur. They first teach themselves the Assamese and Hindi languages. From 1898, the school became an Assamese Medium School, and Mrs Eva Webster became head teacher. John Firth and Eva Webstar travelled the Nyishi settlements to propagate the gospel. Mrs Eva Webstar was working on the translation of Christian literature into the Nyishi language in Assamese Script.¹⁶

In 1893, John Firth established two churches at Jaihing. He visited from Lakhimpur to Orang to spread the gospel. In 1902 Lakhimpur Baptist Christian Association was founded. The Association tried to spread the gospel among the plain and hill tribes. The first Nyishi man who converted to Christianity was Nara Sensu. He migrated from Pochu Pei Village of Ziro and settled in the foothills near Kakoi of the Present Lakhimpur district. But the full-fledged Mission work had begun from 1900 to 1946 among the Nyishi of the plains like the Valley of Ranga, Kakoi, Durpang and Bandardewa- Harmoti. It can be said that the people of the plains of Ranganadi (Panior) of North Lakhimpur, part of the Dafala hills, converted to the Christian religion. Among them were Tabia Begi and Yowa Tado. Ekhin Chimir, a hill Miri (presently Nyishi) of Ranganadi Valley, was appointed as the first Convention Worker in the Mission of 1911, which was called as Miri Mission. Nara Sensu, Tabia Begi, Yowa Tado and Ekhin Chimir were the first local evangelists who spread the Gospel among the Nyishi people and the Parbotia-Miris¹⁷.

But during the early stages, they could not succeed in influencing their own people to spread the Gospel due to a lack of proper communication and education. In 1931, with the efforts of Nara Sensu, Yowa Tado, Tosin, Tabia Begi, Ekhin Chimir and Dinanath Marak, the first Nyishi Baptist Church of Nyishi was established at Rangajan village of present North Lakhimpur. Gradually, the Church became the institution to spread the Gospel among the Nyishi people, and it also became a mission epic center for the Nyishi and an eye opener in secular and spiritual. One of the positive activities of

¹⁴ Pande Dulami Harenz, Journey of up and down of John Firth English School, published in Continuum – Souvenir of Meet Together Celebration of Ex-Student of J.F.C.E.H. School. , North Lakhimpur, 2003,p 43

¹⁵ NEIHA Proceedings Passighat, 1986,p.153, John Firth, Report from North Lakhimpur, 4th Triennial Conference , Sibasagar, December,14-22,1895

¹⁶ Op.cit. Harenz Dulami Pande, p.49

¹⁷ ibid.59

the Baptist Missionary work was that they used the Assamese language as a medium to expand religion. It resulted in expanding and growing the grammar and dictionary of its.¹⁸

6. Conclusion and Findings

The hill tribes of Lakhimpur duars had always followed the policy of isolation. They had their own customs and tried to avoid assimilation with others' rituals or customs. But for the first time broke the isolation policy of the hill tribes, especially the Nyishi society of the duar areas of Lakhimpur. Vaisnavite saints had played an important role in propagating Vaisnavism in the duar areas. Saints of Vaisnavism founded Satras in the duar areas. Satradhikar is the religious head of the Satras Institution. Satra is the center of Knowledge. Besides the propagation of the religion, Satra also became the center of literature, grammar, drama and Satria dances, etc. The Influence of Vaisnavism resulted in the establishment of the Satras in the duar areas. Superstition under the name of religion was reduced, increasing the communication that led the trade and commerce between the hills and the plains. Later on, Christianity increased the modern education in the duar areas. Primary schools were established in the duar areas. It led to educating the people of the duar areas, and gradually, higher institutions were also established. Establishment of modern education in the duar areas had little success in removing the inhuman system, like the slave system, from the tribal societies of the hills. On the other hand, Christian Missionaries had not only propagated religion and education in the duar areas but also provided medical facilities in the duar areas. It gradually arouses the health consciousness among the hill tribes. The modern treatment of diseases like Cholera, Malaria and diarrhoea is now available in remote duar areas. Instead of its, there was also growth of Industries like the Tea Garden, coal, and Oil Industries in the duar areas of Lakhimpur district under the British colonial rule. Thus, the religious influences on the duar areas increased humanity among the people of the hills and the plains of the Duar regions.

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¹⁸ Ibid 67

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