



Research Paper

“The Mayamara Satra and its Impact on society ”

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Received 06 July, 2025; Revised 15 July, 2025; Accepted 17 July, 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

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The Mayamara Satra was both a cause and result of the creation of Mayamara social and religious identity. As an institution of Mayamara vaishnavism the Mayamara Satra acted to detribalize the tribal society and at the same time at creating a tribalised satriya culture. Therefore a set of customs, religious laws and scriptural works were produced and organizational infrastructures developed for the preaching tenet and unify the society. Thus the Mayamara system of vaishnavism was created which was different from other *satra* system in both institutional structure and ideological setting.

The *satra* institution is a product of the *Bhakti* movement in Assam led by Sankardeva (1449-1568) in the 15th-16th century. ‘Neo-Vaishnavism’ is a term applied to the Assam version of the *Bhakti* Movement led by Sankardeva which is an extension of the all India *Bhakti* Movement started by Ramanuja in the 8th century.¹ The *Bhakti* movement stressed upon devotion (*bhakti*) to one God rejecting the importance of brahminic ritualism, priesthood and on relaxation of caste distinction in the field of religious practices. He preached that to God there was no difference between a *chandala* and a *brahmana*, and souls of all creatures were equal and were by themselves part of the supreme Lord. Sankardeva used vernacular language instead of Sanskrit language in his literary works. He translated the main scripture of the *bhakti*-the *Bhagavata Purana* into Assamese language and engaged other contemporaries to undertake projects on translation of the other works. Thus Ananta Kandali and Ram Saraswati, two contemporary scholars of Sankardeva, undertook projects by translating the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* respectively into Assamese verse.

The process of the evolution of the *satra* as an institution forms a long course of history. Sankardeva died in 1568. After his death Sankardeva’s *bhakti* religion became divided into four sub-sectarian groups on ideological ground.¹ These four divisions were *brahma samhati* by Damodardeva, *kala samhati* by Gopaldeva, *purusha samhati* by Purushottam Thakur and *nika* or *nistha samhati* by Mathuradas Burha Ata. Among these sub-sectarian groups the *kala samhati* was different for its egalitarian outlook. Ridiculously called as black (*kala*) to indicate its association with the tribal society which possessed much of the Buddhist elements, this sub-sect was the most revolutionary in outlook and ideology.² Aniruddhadeva was a disciple of Gopal Ata and a fitting successor of the Satra.

Aniruddhadeva created a new sub-branch in *kala samhati* order known as Mayamara branch with an objective of the establishment of vaishnavite culture among the tribes and low caste people of Upper Assam. Initially he began to preach in his native place Narayanpur in upper Assam in the year 1601.³ Gradually Aniruddhadeva’s activities spread all around. He then went to Majuli island and established Satra there on the bank of a pond called *Moamari bil* in the extreme western part of the island and began to preach among the people of the fishing community(*kaivarta*) inhabiting there.⁴ Tradition maintains that the name *Moamara* or *Moamariya* later sanctified as *Mayamara* or *Mayamariya*, was coined from the fact of his association with the *Kaivarta* people who lived on fishing the *Moa* fish in the *bil* (pond) called *Moamari*.⁵ The *Moamara Satra* was, however, washed away by the Brahmaputra leaving no trace behind and Aniruddhadeva had to shift again to the north bank- this time to a place called Bihpur where he founded Naharati Satra surrounded by the same category of people. Aniruddhadeva died in the year 1626; but his name and the creed thrived. Trained in the ideals of *kala samhati* order, Aniruddhadeva was a revolutionary in social outlook and rejected all that was ritualistic and brahminical. He identified himself with the downtrodden and so-called lower class societies. After the death of Aniruddhadeva his son Krishnadeva took the responsibility of the religion in 1626 A.D. and he shifted his Satra to Khutiapota in 1630 A.D. During that period Pratap Singha (1603-1641 A.D.) was in the Ahom throne and the relation between the state and Mayamara Satra became deteriorated from his time. Later on, the fourth *guru* of Mayamara Satra Nityanandadeva was assassinated by royal force at the instruction of the Ahom king Surampha

in 1650 A.D.⁶ During the reign of Gadadhar Singha also another *guru* of Mayamara Satra Vaikunthanathadeva was killed as per the royal order in 1691 A.D.⁷ As a result of such atrocities done by the Ahom state, the disciples of the Mayamara Satra, decided to rebel against the throne under the leadership of their *guru* Astabhujadeva in 1769 A.D. During the rebellion *guru* Astabhujadeva was killed by the Ahom force in 1770 A.D.⁸ and the post of *guru* was remained vacant for 14 years. Later on, under the initiative of Gaurinath Singha and *satradhikara* of Auniati Satra, Pitambaradeva was re-installed in the Satra.⁹ During the Burmese invasion, the Satra again fell in insecurity and it was shifted to Majuli by Bhaktanandadeva. In the meantime the rebel group established a separate kingdom named Matak kingdom and as per the request of Matibar Barsenapati, the ruler of the Matak Kingdom Bhaktanandadeva shifted the Satra to a suitable place near Dinjan river and named it as Dinjoy Satra.¹⁰ The Mayamara Satra was expanded with the creation of several *satras* time to time under itself known as Puranimati Satra (1683 A.D.), Madarkhat Satra (1880 A.D.), Garpara Satra (1806 A.D.) Maricha Alahi Satra (1936 A.D.), Bagaritaliya Satra (1940 A.D.), Tipuk Satra (1757 A.D.) etc. Now, the Tipuk Satra became a sub-branch under the Mayamara Satra as it has created many *satras* in its locality with their unique characteristics.

The *Moamara* or *Mayamara sect* professed much liberal attitude towards the tribal and socially despised communities, and was egalitarian in its outlook. This sect was, therefore, more popular among the socially backward classes like the Kaivartas, Morans, Matakas, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis etc. A very significant aspect of this sect was that it taught its followers to regard no one as superior even including the king, with the sole exception of their preacher-the *guru*. The Mayamara Satra has immense impact on society and it has given a new identity towards its followers as *Mayamara* or *Mayamariya*. Under the influence of the Vaishnava culture, delivered by Mayamara Satra, the tribal people gave up their previous tribal culture and a gradual process of transition had taken place in their society. On the other hand, the tribal elements also influenced the Mayamara *satriya* culture to some extent.

The Mayamara *Satras* are non-monastic *satras*. The *satradhikaras* follow the teachings of their predecessors while preaching the religion among the devotees. So, there is a strict administrative system in the *satras* to continue the religious rites and rituals in the original form. The system is shaped in a hierarchical order according to the power and position acquired by the functionaries. So, the duties of the functionaries are divided as per the requirement of the system. The different functionaries of Mayamara Satra like *barbhakat*, *bargaonburha*, *khataniyar*, *acharya*, *mahabhakta*, *tini burha patheki*, *tamuli*, *gayan*, *bayan*, *pasakia* etc. are liable to do the specific duties allotted to them for the smooth continuation of the Satra. Above all of them, the *satradhikara* is the main source of power and he is considered in the society as the representation of God. He is addressed by the disciples as *deuta* or father as he is the guardian of his disciples, who are ready to die for the sake of their *guru*.¹¹ The functionaries are also always help the *satradhikara* to maintain peace and order in the society.

Every religion has some ethical point of view in its philosophy, by following which a person can proceed in the right way of life in search of peace and happiness. Aniruddhadeva also as a propagator of vaishnavism not only dealt with the religious ideologies, but some reformatory ideas also germinated in his mind. So he input some unique ideas of his own in *bhakti* philosophy. At the same time he tried to reform the society through religion. The values of Aniruddhadeva are still contemporary to the society and are practiced actively in Mayamara society. Lots of hymns related to morality are found in the religious books of Mayamara vaishnavism like ‘*Puranjan Upakhyan*’, ‘*Bhakti Mangal Ghosa*’, ‘*Nij-Shastra*’ and other writings. According to these *sastras* ‘*satsanga*’, purity of heart, detachment to the worldly pursuits and attachment to only one i.e. ‘*Hari*’ are the qualities of a true vaishnava and a true vaishnava is always seems to be the representative of a good person. According to vaishnava philosophy, one should always conscious about the sins, which would make obstacles in his path of salvation. There are five great sins (*Pancha Mahapap*) like—(i) *Brahma badh* (murder of a Brahman), (ii) *Guru badh* (murder of one’s *Guru*), (iii) *Go badh* (killing of a cow), (iv) *Guru Patni Gaman* (illicit relation with *Guru*’s wife), (v) *Caurya* (stealing of other’s property).¹² One who commits such sins would definitely go to the hell and the only way to get liberation from it is the recitation of ‘*Harinama*’. Aniruddhadeva always preferred for a simple life with high morals. He always advised his disciples to detach themselves from the materialistic life.

The cultural relationship of the Satra with the society is based on the different activities of the Satra. *gayan-bayan* is the main cultural activity of the Satra and it has its own importance in the field of traditional music and dance of Assam. So far as the socio-cultural relationship, different kinds of tribal traditional ritualism and the *satriya* culture given by the Satra, were mixed up and created a unique culture in the society which have influenced the food habits, dressing style and social behavior of the people.

Conclusion:

The Mayamara Satra founded by Aniruddhadeva and based on his teachings acted as a strong agent of socio-cultural change among the tribal and backward communities of Assam. Beginning with

the Kaivartas of Majuli and its neighbourhood area in the north upto the Moran-Mataks, Ahoms, Chutias and the Kacharis in the south-eastern part of Assam, all backward and subaltern classes of people became members of the sect. Being rooted in the *nirguna* a school of *bhakti* doors of the Satra were open for all such communities. The Mayamara Satra thus formed a society which was distinguished for its social composition.

The Satra encouraged the tribal people to register themselves as its members even with much of their earlier culture. It therefore adopted the policy of social inclusion on the way of the formation of the society. As Aniruddhadeva and his successor *gurus* were liberal towards tribal life and culture, the Satra created a society where tribal culture existed in the vaishnavite form.

The Mayamara *gurus* beginning with Aniruddhadeva were men of letters and learning. Most of them translated the Sanskrit scriptures and distributed the knowledge among the disciples in their own language. The Satra also taught them the art of music, dance and painting.

In the field of religion and morality, it brought about significant reform in that it abolished idolatry, violence perpetrated by killing and sacrifices of birds and animals, and by attacking ritualism and caste disparities.

The Mayamara Satra under its *gurus* gave a separate identity to its disciples as a distinct socio-political and culture groups. Like Sikhism developed by Guru Nanak, Mayamara vaishnavism also created the ‘Matak’ society with its own identity.

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