Political Expression of Satras: Walking a Long Distance

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Abstract
The relationship between State and religion is interdependent. Religious institutions provide moral support to the State directly or indirectly. The Satra is a medieval socio-religious institution, a product of Vaishnavism in Assam. The great reformer and proponent of the neo-vaishnava movement, Sankardeva established the institution for socio-religious reform of the society. Starting its journey in 16th century, the institution still continues with ups and downs in phrases of history. In its 500 years of history it itself became a power structure and attained socio-political importance of great stature. After the demise of Sankardeva the movement itself became fragmented because of the ideological differences among preceptor and slipped from its basic goal of socio-religious reform. As a result the institution also deviated from its basic goal, and lost the original reformatory thrust. By receiving material gain from the State in course of time it became a royal institution and involved in state politics directly or indirectly. With this developments neo vaishnavism no longer remained a people’s religion and the Satra institution no longer a socio-cultural-religious institution that was established to create a society based on equality and fraternity. This paper analyses the relationship between Satra and State from its very beginning.

I: Introduction

The relationship between religion and politics continues to be fascinating and illusive. Generally there is an interdependent and ‘triadic relationship between state, religion and society’. Religion provides moral basis of the State’s authority as well as an institutional and metaphysical structure for social transaction. In turn, religion is influenced by changing of political power and social norms and attitudes. The role of religion and religious institution in politics is influenced by the specific kind of state and society relation that obtains in a given historical conjuncture (Mitra, 1991:775).

In this context, Marxist aphorism ‘Religion is the opium of man’ and ‘Religion is the heart of heartless world’ sees economic transformation as the driving force of history,
leading to a classless society in which the influence of primordial sentiments will increasingly disappear, has importance. Despite the postulation that religion is an epiphenomenon of an exploitative economic structure; works as an instrument for smooth exploitation by the ruling class, its role to fight against that exploitative social order is now widely recognised (Sarma, 2011:111). Religion is seen by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) to have a direct relationship to the socialist revolution and to revolutionary forms in general. In any such event, religion is always used as a political force. Regarding the relationship between religion, politics and social change Max Weber’s (1864-1920) work *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit Capitalism* (1905) says that the Protestant ethic was an important force behind the development of capitalism in Northern Europe. Robert N. Bellah (1927-2013) in his *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (1957), however, demonstrated that it was not only Protestantism that helped capitalism grow but religions in other social context too possessed such potentiality (Sharma, 2011:111). Analyzing the role of religion in socio-economic change, Robert N Bellah viewed that religion established the very foundation of Japan’s modern industrial economy.

*Satra* is an important medieval socio-religious institution of Assam. Starting its journey in 16th century, the institution had to face ups and downs in phases of history, but continues to exist. Though there is a drastic change in the physical structure, from the daily sittings of the monks1 and such lay disciples to a systematised form and maintenance in the past 500 years. Maintaining continuity for more than five centuries the institution attains a special importance in the socio-religious and political sphere of the state. The most important institution inherited by the people of Assam from the socio-religious reform movement led by Sankardeva (1449-1568) itself turned into a power structure with the passage of time. This backdrop would help to have an analysis of the political trajectory of the *Satra* institutions over the years.

**II: Neo-Vaishnavite movement and the *Satra* institution**

In the last decades of the fifteenth century, the current of religious history of Assam took a new turn with initiation of the *Vaishnava* movement (Bhakti movement). It took about two centuries to firmly get established the *Vaishnava* faith as the supreme religious sect in the Brahmaputra Valley. The *Vaishnava* movement in Assam however was not an isolated phenomenon from the current of *Vaishnava* revival that swept over India during that period (Sarma, 1999:1). The Movement also evolved a new religious institution known as *Satra* which began to serve as an instrument of spreading the faith, which finally helped to sustain and stabilise *Vaishnavism* by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social life (Sarma, 1999:1). In the initial years of the neo-*Vaisnavite* movement the word *Satra* was used in the sense of a religious sitting, not as systematised institution. In course of time these religious sittings of devotees began to develop on a clear line and finally emerged as a well-developed institution having a distinct structural characteristic.

1 Disciples, locally known as *bhakatas*, participate in the religious discussions with their gurus.
The political situation of the state at the time was not very favourable for Sankaradeva, to freely preach the doctrines of his creed. Several rival powers professing divergent religious views were creating ferment in the country, and Sankaradeva had to proceed carefully in his mission, even at the risk of his life. He declared spiritual equality for all men and loudly proclaimed that even a *Chandala* is superior to a Brahmin if that *Chandala* becomes devoted to *Hari* (God) whole heartedly. He rejected caste superiority as a ground of respect among men, otherwise equally venerable, as lovers of God. He had among his disciples people from the Mahamedan community, aboriginal races of Assam, as well as from high class learned Brahmins. The most pious amongst them held the forefront position in his system irrespective of his caste, and founded religious orders of their own. In his *Kirtan*, Sankaradeva stated all living beings as the creation of one God and no distinction should be made on the basis of caste regarding the prayer of God.

Sankardeva’s Neo-vaishnava movement in Assam aimed at reforming the complicated Brahmanical ritualism and instituted a social reform programme targeted to teach the common people; the simple ways of living and belief, equality of men irrespective of their caste or tribe identity, and practice of non-violence. His major thrust was however, on the eradication of the complicated and elaborate systems of rituals and practices associated with propitiation of multitudes of gods and goddesses under which peasant and workers faced extreme exploitation from all powerful priestly class (Neog, 1965:80). Sankardeva, therefore, introduced simple way of congregational prayer, *nam-kritana*, to the Supreme God-Vishnu or Krishna—and propitiate him with simple devotion – *bhakti* (Nath, 2012:7). The two aspects of his teachings-belief and submission to one supreme God, and rejection of caste distinctions in the religious plan as an attempt to create a unified society of universal brotherhood, was not in consonance with the ideal of the Ahom feudal state (Nath, 2012:8). The Ahom state, therefore, closely observed the Neo-Vaishnava movement in a suspicious way and planned to curb it down especially when Sankardeva proselytised Madhavdeva (1489 A.D-1596 A.D) at Belguri Dhuwahat, which was then within the Ahom territory. Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva in Assam, like other parts of India met with strong opposition from the Brahmin priesthood, as it was a crusade against the excesses of the priest craft. They managed to gain the ears of the Ahom king of Assam. Thereafter Sankaradeva had to undergo a lot of troubles, which culminated in beheading of his son-in-law at the order of the Ahom king. In great disgust Sankaradeva left the jurisdiction of the Ahom kings, and sought refuge in the lower Assam which was then under the rule of the Koch kingdom of Cooch-Bihar. The hostilities of Brahmins followed Sankaradeva in the kingdom of Cooch-Bihar, the king who was himself a Hindu. Sankaradeva had to face a big

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2 Chandalas is a class who looks after the cremation ground of the Hindus. Their social status was at the bottom of the Hindu society.
3 Mahamedan is used for people from the Muslim Community.
4 *Kirtana* is the greatest work by Srimanta Sankardeva. It is a collection of poetical works. It is the fundamental work on which the neo-vaishnavite movement based on, next to the Bhagawata.
5 Madhavdeva was another preceptor of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement in Assam. He was the religious as well as artistic successor of Sankardeva after the later’s demise.
trial in the court of Koch king, but came out victorious. Sankardeva subsequently entrusted the responsibility to Madhavadeva, his favorite disciple, to carry forward the movement. Another eminent disciple of Sankardeva and successor of the movement was Damodardeva (1488-1598). During the time of these two successors, the *Satra* got its institutionalised structure. Due to ideological differences among the disciples after the death of Sankardeva, the *Satra* institutions got divided into four independent sectarian divisions, known as four *Sanghatis* - *Brahma*, *Purusha*, *Nika* and *Kala Sanghati*.

During the time of Ahom king Pratap Singha (1603-1641), the attitude of the state towards *Satra* or *neo vaishnavite* movement changed. It was because the Movement by that time became popular among the masses and secondly Brahma *Sanghati*, which was organised under the brahmanical leadership of Damodardeva was able to attract people from higher class of the society. So, by that time the *Satras* were able to have both these dominant sections of the society- masses, which constituted the major section of the society and the higher class, who were qualitatively dominant in the society. It has been recorded that although Pratap Singha gave financial as well as moral support for establishing *Satra* institution in Upper Assam, but their rapid development made him suspicious of the institution and therefore he ordered to destroy them (Nath, 2004:9). The attempts of the authority however failed to check the growing popularity and development of the *Satra* institution. At this point of time, the state had only one option; that was to adopt a cordial relation with the institution for their own benefit and *Satras* as means for establishing relation with their subjects. The process of *Satras* emerging a royal religious institution started from this period, by receiving material support, from the state in various forms; particularly of landed property. It has been recorded that King Jaydhawaj Singha (1648-1663) made a grant of three thousand puras of land to *Garmur Satra* during its second *Satradhikar*, Jairamdeva. In fact, this grant provided a firm footing to the *Satra* and gave it an economic security. Consequently, a sort of relationship developed between the *Satra* and the state in which they became indispensible for the each other’s survival. The growing number of disciples under the domain of *Satras* made the Ahom authority suspicious of its mass-based development. Most of the subjects of the Ahom state were the disciples of *Satras* and the *Satradhikars* received great honour from them. The

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6 Each principal *Satra* is marked by the existence of a *namghar* (a socio-cultural, religious institution), a *manikut* (sanctum of Assamese vaishnavism), a *batchara* (gateway) and two or four rows of *hatis* (a systematic row of the residences of the disciples). This is the physical layout of a *Satra*.

7 The *neo-vaishnavite* movement is fissured into four *sanghatis* (*sanghatis* or sub-sects). Sankardeva handed over the leadership to Madhabdeva, but the followers of Damodardeva and Harideva did not accept Madhabdeva as their leader and formed their own group (*Brahma sanghati*). Madhabdeva at the time of his death did not name a successor. After his death three leaders formed their own denominations: Bhabanipuria Gopal Ata (*Kaal sanghati*), Purushottom Thakur Ata, a grandson of Sankardeva (*Purusa sanghati*) and Mathuradas Burhagopal Ata (*Nika Sanghati*). They differ mostly in the emphasis of the *chari vastus* (four fundamental principles). The *Brahma Sanghati* emphasised on *deva* (image of the chief incarnation), The *Purusa Sanghati* emphasised on *naam* (devotion through chanting of devotional songs), the *Nika Sanghati* emphasised on *sat-sanga* (relationship with wise one) and *Kala Sanghati* emphasised on *guru* (teacher or leader).

8 *Pura*- Measurement of land, consisting of 4 *bighas* of land, 1*bigha*=7,200sq.ft or 0.33 acres.
Satradhikars always had an immense influence over their disciples in all aspects of their life. Therefore it became necessary for the state to depend upon this dominant institution to attain moral legitimacy from its subjects. In the process, it became customary for every Ahom king after their accession to the throne, to make a visit to the principal Satras of Majuli, namely Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garmur. Similarly every new Satradhikar after his accession to the headship was to make a customary visit to the court of the king on invitation (Sarma, 1975:167). It was also necessary that nomination of a Satradhikar of the principal Satras be done and confirmed by the king, which he was to give proper publicity through a proclamation (Sarma, 1975:167). This became an established custom in course of time and it was practiced by the British Government too during their rule. The tradition carried on even after independence by the state government through notification by publishing of the investiture of an adhikar in the official Gazzattes.

Kala sanghati was the last division of the neo vaishnavite movement developed by Gopaldeva, a disciple of Madhavdeva. Among four Orders or sanghatis, the Kala sanghati was the most radical with respect to the original teachings of Sankardeva (Sharma, 2011:119). The satras belonging to this order flourished mainly in the fringe region of Upper Assam and bhakats belonging to tribes like the Moran, the Chutiyas, the Kacharis, Barahis etc. The Mayamora Satra belonged to this sect. Morans, the largest constituent of the satra, were a plain tribe inhabiting the eastern part of the Ahom kingdom. After undergoing the process of Ahomisation and sanskritisation, they turned to wet-rice cultivation from shifting cultivation (Guha, 1991:112). But the Morans had led an isolated life due to their geographical disadvantageous location. Their relation to the Ahom state was limited to being a tribute-paying community. Mayamora Satra, with most of the disciples from the Moran tribe strongly denounced the vedic rites and ritual superiority of the Brahmins. The Mayamora Satras belonging to the Kala Sanghati was radical to the original teachings of the neo-vaishnavite movement. But Ahom religious policy anchored on an alliance between the monarch, the Shakti worshippers and the brahmonical section of the neo-vaishnavites (Guha, 1991:106). It shows that there was a direct contradiction between Ahom state religious policy and the basic principle on which the Mayamora Satra was based on. The Ahom state gradually developed a suppressing attitude towards Mayamora Satra and its disciples. Even several of its leaders were executed on royal orders. However, the growing royal suppression only bolstered the resilience of the followers of the Mayamora Satra, and they turned their activities somewhat underground and esoteric (Sharma, 2011:120) and took the form of a civil rebellion in the late 18th century i.e. Moamoriya rebellion. As an important place of the time shaped by the Ahom monarchs, Majuli was expected to stand by the royalty during those fateful days. The existing socio-religious structure of

9 These Satras are considered as principal Satras because of their both socio-religious dominance as well as economic influence.
10 See Asam Buraaji by Haliram Dhekial Phukan, incorporated in Haliram Dhekial Phukan Rachanawali, ed. L.N.Tamuli, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 2005
11 Satradhikars like Nityanandadev (1650 AD), Vaikuthanathdev (1691 AD) were executed on Royal orders (Sharma, 2011:120)
the land however did not allow this to happen; in fact the people of Majuli became divided on this issue and fought among themselves, killing or cruelly dealing with their opponents, leading to wider social schism and hatred in the times that followed. The principal Satras of Majuli, Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garmur those received state patronage and had disciples from aristocracy, was expected to provide a firm footing to the Ahom monarchy in this days, but it did not happened (Nath,2012:53).

After the Moamoriya rebellion, the state faced Burmese invasion (1817-26). The Moamoriya rebellion checked the very root of the Ahom monarchy; still it was running in a destabilised way till Burmese invasion took place. The Burmese invasion completed the dark period of the Ahom state, which the Moamoriya left uncompleted and opened the door for total dissolution of the monarchy of 600 years. At the close of the 18th century, the monarchy suffered from both internal strife and external threat, internal instabilities were in the form of personal clashes among the officers of the monarchy and the external threat was coming from the advancing of colonialism and the Burmese policy of territorial expansion. The period of Burmese rule was also significant to the Satra as to Assam in general. Burmese caused several destructive activities in Satra, they destroyed their valuable properties as well. The charit puthis of the Satradhikars of the principal Satras of Majuli have recorded that the Burmese encamped at Majuli and ruled it through a network of administrative management (Nath, 2012:63).

The Burmese rule came to an end by the Treaty of Yandaboo (24th Feb, 1826). They renounced their entire claim to the British, ending their rule of almost four year in Assam. Occupation of British marked the close of the Ahom rule in Assam, under which patronage the principal Satras of Majuli consolidated, leaving little trace of its influence over so many Satras with which the monarchy had once intimate relationship. Increasingly, the principal Satras with tremendous social influence, property and power quietly shifted their allegiance to the new authority, trying to retain their same status in the new situation as they had enjoyed during the earlier times. As a matter of fact, these Satras from the very beginning maintained cordial relationship with the British (Nath, 2012:65). As Satras were the most influential socio-religious institution at that time, the colonial government also wanted it to be under its influence. One was armed with its political power i.e. the new authority and the second one was with socio-religious power, provided moral as well as institutional support for social transaction, both were interdependent. Therefore Jenkins (1834-1861), Agent to the Governor General in Assam, and Commissioner of the State invited all Satradhikars who claimed ownership of landed properties received from the royal office in the earlier period, to present before him the documentary evidence in support of their claim. The step did not have any further importance other than to prove the change in political power. It is because that although some of the Satras could not prove the documentary evidence of their landed property and temporally lost their property, but in course of time, the Government (British) re-granted their lands. For example Garmur Satra lost its documentary evidence during the Burmese invasion and failed to prove its documentary evidence as a result

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12 Biographical literature of the Vaishnava saints of medieval Assam.
it lost its landed properties temporally and in course of time it regained its lost properties. The colonial government tried to proof that keeping allegiance to the defunct Ahom aristocracy, who were no longer in power, would serve their purpose, and that, therefore, they would not retain the wealth and influence unless the British government supported and approved (Nath, 2012:65). The colonial governments succeed in their aim and started a friendly relationship with the Satras. Both of them offered support to each other, the British helped them materially and the Satras, in establishing the British rule. It is noted that almost all the high office bearers and Governors of Assam of the British period, made it a point to visit the principal Satras after their assumption of the offices (Sarma, 1966:83).

The nineteenth century showed initiation of reform process in the Indian society. The social reform programmes were integral part of the India’s struggles for freedom. In many places in India people showed their resentments over untouchability, child marriage and poor condition of women in the society. The process to eradicate the inequalities of the society - child marriage, widow marriage, untouchability and eradication of opium however did not receive enough support from the socio-religious institution of Assam i.e. Satra. The Satra institution in this context had a significant role to play as well as reform the societal rules and regulations (Nath, 2004:65). The Satradhikars were aware of the situation, but they were unwilling to interfere in all social affairs. Regarding the abolition of opium, the Satradhikar of Dakhinpat satra wrote to the colonial government about his wishes for abolition of the opium, but not immediately. This is because the opium was considered as an antidote of diarrhea diseases. In support of such attitude, A.W. Watham the British secretary mentioned the importance of the opinion of the Vaishnava guru at the floor of the Legislative Assembly on abolition of opium (Nath, 2004:22).

In addition to the social and religious issues the Satras during the colonial period raised voice on the sensitive issue on medium of instructions in schools and offices. The Satras did not show its discontent on imposition of Bengali languages instead of Assamese as official language in Assam; rather it favoured the decision of the British administration. The Satradhikara of Auniati Satra, who was responsible for publication of the Assamese newspaper the Asom Bilaseenee in the year 1871-72, was in favour of the British decision of introducing Bengali language in the courts and schools of Assam. During Gandhi’s movement against untouchability, Hemchandra Goswami of the Auniati satra clearly stated his position about the abolition of caste discrimination saying that Satradhikaras like him did not have right to oppose the rules of the Sastras (holy books). The attitude of the Satradhikara towards the foreign rule was clear from his speech to welcome Sir Andrew Gourlay Claw, Governor of Assam.

13 Jogendranarayan Bhuyan,(ed.) Ratneswar Mahanta Rachanawali, Publication Board, Assam, Guwahati, 1977, p. 343. Ratneswar Mahanta wrote to Hem Chandra Goswami: “It is very painful for me to let you know that Auniati Gossain does not seem to like our mother tongue- he says let the Assamese be used only in our daily transactions and ordinary talks but books written in Bengali”.
Your Excellency has graciously set your foot on the sacred soil of Majuli, hallowed by the sanctity of Satras like Auniati and Dakhinpat, famous in the annals of the lands patronised by the kings of yore and ever upheld by the British Raj. On this auspicious occasion, our words of greetings go forth to welcome such a high souled guest.............We are constantly in playful mood for the glorious Victory of the Allies, so that, in international Peace and Freedom may reign supreme soon over the distressed world14.

The Garmur satra, one of the principal Satra established by the Ahom King in the 17th century had lost its proof land grant (copper plate) during the Burmese invasion. Subsequently it failed to produce its claim before the British administration when the documentary evidence was asked for. Consequently the Satra had to lose many of its devottar and dharmottar15 lands. However, the Government later considering the status and credibility of the claim granted one thousand puras of land to the Satra in the beginning of the 20th century16. The gratitude of the Satra on this act was reflected in its support to the colonial government. Later during Lord Chelmsford’s visit to Majuli in 1920, the administration made the land grants to the Satra permanent. In appreciation of this, whenever a campaign was sent to suppress some rebellions, the Satradhikar did help the British with elephants, manpower, boats and other provisioning (Sarma,1966:297).

There were reflections that outlooks and orientations of some Satradhikaras used to differ even under domain of the overall institution. For example, the Satradhikara of Garmur Satra (Pitambardeva Goswami) was to an extent able to follow the initial aims and objectives of the institution. He took active participation in the freedom movement of India and even was jailed. As indicated earlier a series of socio-economic reform programmes started parallel to the freedom movement of India. These were primarily eradication of the habit of opium consumption and intoxicating liquor from among the illiterate masses, creation of a sense of self-dependence through boycott of foreign goods, such as clothes, abolition of caste prejudice and untouchability, introduction of widow remarriage and creation of communal harmony etc (Nath, 2012:72). The Satradhikara of Garmur Satra was aware of such developments and intensively visited the remote villages of Majuli and undertook a series of social reform programmes. In a tour in 1920 he said,

The concept of high and low (in caste hierarchy), touchable and untouchable, and the sense of caste-vanity are not supported by logic; it originates from men’s ignorance one’s lack of knowledge of the scriptures...The truth comes out when one looks into the origin of the caste system (Sarma, 1966:96).

14 See the copy of Memorandum submitted by Hemchandra Goswami to Sir Andrew G. Claw, Commissioner of Assam, dated 14th Feb, 1945.
15 Land donated by the state to some religious institution or leader (priest) for the purpose of religious activity. These lands were tax-free lands.
16 Government of India’s letter No. 248-397-2, dated 8th Feb, 1902
Parallel to such programmes, the Satradhikara of Garmur Satra undertook some measures to make the villages self-dependent. He started the cooperative movement in Majuli in 1918 and innovate certain aspects of the village economic life (Nath, 2012). The result of such initiatives was that the relationship of Garmur Satra with the colonial administration got strained, more particularly after the 1926 session of the Indian National Congress at Gauhati, where the Satradhikara met Gandhiji. In subsequent times, the Satras got divided into two houses, one supporting the freedom struggle and other maintaining a relationship with the ruling British.

There is however records that the Satradhikara of Garmur Satra attended the grand darbar at Jorhat organised to celebrate the occasion of the accession of King George V and Queen Mary in 1911 to show loyalty to the colonial power. During the First World War, Satradhikara of Garmur Satra contributed 500 rupees to the Government Relief Fund although he could not subscribe to the War Loan Fund (Hazarika, 1973:113). On October 20, 1920, he along with his counterpart, the Auniati Satradhikar Lilakantadeva Goswami, received Lord Chelmsford, the Governor General of India, when the latter travelled from Jorhat to Lakhimpur through Majuli (Hazarika, 1973:113). In most of his meetings of that time, he said that according to the scriptures going against the ruling authority was irreligious (Hazarika, 1973: 113). In 1911 while delivering a lecture at the public meeting held on the darbar occasion, the Satradhikara of Garmur Satra said:

> Now we are under the British; but it is true that a country which is at present under the rule of a foreign country would always be ruled by foreigner. For everyone wants to be independent. Even India could obtain independence at some point of time— that is a different aspect. But at present we are under the British Government, therefore everyone should show respect towards it (Hazarika, 1973:113).

Overall, it appears that the approaches and stand of the Satradhikara of the Garmur Satra showed contradictions. There was an expression of pro-state attitude in the initial years, which later had changed with the spread of nationalistic sentiment. It may be because of the fact that the structural and behavioural pattern of the Satra institution had deep impact in his early years which later had changed after the joining the Gandhian National Movement or at times being a dominant leader of the socio-religious institution it might be a kind of ceremonial behaviour.

### III: Conclusion

The Satra institution which was a product of medieval socio-religious reform movement led by Sankardeva lost its primary aim in course of time due to material as well as political ambition of most of the leaders of the institution. They played direct or indirect role in the political affairs of the state during different periods of history. The Rajaghoriya Satras established and patronised by the royal family always played role in favour of the state from the medieval period. The behaviour of these Satradhikaras at present time has not changed from the nature of their predecessors in the medieval...
monarchial system. It is interesting to note that at present every candidate contesting in the Assembly election or parliamentary elections from Satra-based constituencies visits the Satras seeking blessings of the Satradhikaras and support from the inmates of the Satra. Indeed all Satradhikaras are maintaining some kind of political influence and tries to enjoy all possible types of the royal prerogatives. With such developments, most of the Satras, especially those with Brahmin abbots, lost their progressiveness and reformist thrust. In such an environment there is scope to argue the neo-vaishnavism no longer remained a people’s religion and the Satra institution no longer remained a socio-cultural-religious institution that was geared to create a higher and wider plane of cultural or societal identification.

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