



Naamghar Association of America

NEWSLETTER

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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Naamghar is very unique to Assam, and such simplistic yet highly spiritual tradition is not seen in other States of India. It is the meeting place of spiritual thinkers. It started in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century with the great neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam led by Srimanta Sankardeva. It teaches about social behavior and living harmoniously, irrespective of the religious or ethnic background of the people in the society.

It is estimated that there are about 10,000 Naamghars in Assam, and about 800 Sattras, out of which about 60 may be fully functional in all the aspects of a Sattra. There are a few Naamghars in Odisha and West Bengal, but none in Bihar or UP, that we know of. According to Auniati Satradhikar Sri Sri Dr. Pitambar Dev Goswami, the Chief Minister of Assam donated funds for construction of Naamghars in Delhi and Bangalore after seeing the efforts of NAAM in North America. Please join us to fulfil our goal. Thank you!

Sincerely,
Dr. Binoy K. Bordoloi

Q&A

Q: What is NAAM?

A: Naamghar Association of America (NAAM) is a non-profit spiritual and cultural organization formed to construct and manage a Naamghar for the Assamese diaspora to celebrate and perform the spiritual traditions and philosophical teachings by Srimanta Sankardeva. With strong ties with all the Sattras of Assam, NAAM seek to provide a forum for learned spiritual leaders and traditional artistes to share their knowledge and talent with the current and future generations of the Assamese diaspora.

Q: What are the immediate goals of NAAM?

A: Some of the immediate goals of NAAM include spreading awareness on NAAM initiatives, build a digital media platform, plan for fund raising, and participate regularly in Naam-proxongo. NAAM seeks volunteers from the large Assamese diaspora across the United States to achieve these goals. Please join us (details at the bottom of this newsletter).

Q: Does NAAM collaborate with other organizations?

A: NAAM is actively seeking to collaborate with all community organizations which are willing to help achieve NAAM's mission. NAAM plans to have meaningful discussion with all organizations in our community; please contact us if you would like to be a part of this conversation (contact details at the bottom).

FEATURED ARTICLE: *THE SOCIAL ROLE OF NAMGHARS*

By Sri Sri Dr. Pitambar Dev Goswami, Satradhikar, Auniaati Satra, Majuli, Assam.

Religion is said to be one of the shaping and guiding force of our lives. Without its illuminating influence, life will cease to have any meaning. It is the essence of human life and reflection of our social beliefs and customs. Since time immemorial, temples shrines, monasteries and ashrams have remained the embodiment of our religious and spiritual sentiments. Devotees throng here in large numbers to offer prayers and appease the gods for fulfillment of their wishes. In Assam, the *satras* and *Namghars* occupy a prominent place in the religious lives of the people. They are closely entwined with the socio-religious fabric of our lives. No one can imagine of the Assamese society without them. Founded and established by the great Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, Satras bear the unique distinction of bringing the *Guru* (God), *deo* (priest), *bhakat* (worshipper) and *namm* (prayer) together. In Satras, each of these elements has its own relevance and importance. Naamghar are satras in miniature both in its physical structure and ideals. They are not only the centers of worship, but also centers of spiritual enlightenment. They play a great role in building the spiritual and moral character of the people. *Naamghars* preach the ideals of righteousness and teach us to dominate pride and ego for the attainment of the divine.

To analyze the *Namghar* in the right perspective, we may go through six aspects, namely – *Namghar* as (a) Cultural Centre (b) Prayer Hall, (c) Village Court (d) Village Parliament, (e) Archive Centre and (f) Auditorium. As a whole, it is a multidimensional community centre for the village community where people from all concerns irrespective of caste and creed can sit together not only for chanting *Hari Nam* but also to discuss all social issues. Equality in Spiritual domain is the main message which has emerged from the core of the *Namghar*. *Namghar* has proved that for spiritual development caste system never hinders one. *Namghar* spreads the message that the highest religion is the religion of loving all without any discrimination. For propagation of *dharma* as well as to reform the society Sankardeva developed a new type of culture based on mythological stories and it is popularly known as Satriya culture that includes *Bhaona* (Mythological drama), *Geet* (Songs based on religion) Dance and playing instrument (*Khol, Tal*). Practice of all these are generally done in *Namghar* resulting unity and brotherhood among all sections of the people in the society. Simultaneously it also reflects the concept of Sangeet - “*Gitam Vadyam Nityam trayam sangeetam Uchajata.*”

Another aspect of *Namghar* is its role as a judicial court. All types of disputes in society are settled here and directions are also given from the floor of *Namghar* after carefully listening all the parties. People generally accept it. In judicial system various type of punishment is awarded for the offence as per law of the land. But in judicial system, even after awarding rigorous imprisonment sometimes the culprit never realizes his or her misdeed. In *Namghar*, punishment is simply to bow down before the people by offering betel-nut and promising in the name of God not to do such crime or mistake in future. It is to be considered as greatest punishment for the crime. This leads to social stability.

Panchayati Raj system is the old concept for our society. It is the grassroots of the Parliamentary system. In village, *Namghar* is the only institute for all types of Panchayati Raj System. For resolving the various social issues including the household problems village people gather at the *Namghar* and with spiritual doctrine problems are sorted out very amicably. People get a good moral teaching from this system.

Namghar is the place where various religious events/functions are performed in a full spiritual manner. But the ritualistic processes are not dogmatic and not based on superstition in vogue in the society. Rather Sankardeva introduced the religion in such a lucid manner that people can follow the spirituality in a simple but logical way. To perform all these, *Namghar* is the only religious institution which is not seen in other Hindu monastery. In this way, *Namghar* becomes an educational institution with religious flavor for building up a progressive society. The devotees get an opportunity to know many things mainly relating to Hindu scriptures. Because for praying one has to read the religious books and memories the hymns and sometime one has to explain the same also. So, to become a *Pathak* or a *Namloguwa*, one must acquire all sorts of knowledge. The devotee who is engaged as a *Namlogowa* or *Pathak* (explainer of religious doctrines) and *Sutradhar* (anchor in the Bhaona) has to chant Sanskrit sloka and must explain the inner meaning of it. To acquire this knowledge he has to study a lot of books.

Namghar also acts as an archive centre. The age-old religious manuscripts particularly *Kirtan*, *Bhagawat*, *Gunamala*, *Namghosa*, *Chorit Puthi* (biographies of Sankardeva, Madhavadeva and other *mahapurushas*), *Nat* (drama) are preserved here. All cultural

functions like *Bhaona*, *Ankia Nat*, devotional Songs are performed here, and audiences enjoy it. Besides these, meeting, discussion and discourse on different topics are also held in Namghar for which it may also be considered as Auditorium.

The architectural structure of the *Namghar* consist of four parts namely the *Korapat* (gate), *Rangolisora* (Porch), *Namghar* (prayer hall), and *Monikut* (jewelhouse).

Korapat: it comes from the word *kopat* and refers to the main gate or door to the *Namghar*. Better known as *toran* in Assamese, *Korapat* is the edifice built right at the entrance to the *Namghar*. It is as it were the gateway to paradise. Legend has it that Joy and Bijoy, the gatekeepers of *Vaikuntha* (Paradise) were driven away from paradise for succumbing to vice and temptation. They were reborn as *asuras* in their afterlife. Hence before entering the *Namghar*, the devotee should free his mind from all evil thoughts. Without complete purity of thought and action, God can never be attained. All prayers to seek Him will bear no fruit unless we cleanse our mind and soul. The spiritual and moral cleansing starts at the *Korapat* itself as one beholds the serene and blissful atmosphere prevailing in the precincts of the *Namghar* standing at the vantage point of the *Korapat*.

Korapat is generally designed with lotus, peacock, elephants, lions. Here the lion sit on the elephant indicating the powerful sin (Symbolically elephant) is dominated or eliminated by the Hari Nam (symbolically lion). Here lion is '*Nam Singha*,' meaning *Hari Nam* is powerful like lion. Sometimes lion is kept in a sitting posture which symbolizes *Hari Nam* is vibrated all over from this holy place.

Rangali Chora: It is the space between the *Korapat* and main prayer hall. A colourful shed is erected in this space. When a devotee enters by crossing the *Rangali Sora*, then it is assumed that he plunges into *Bhaba Sagar* (the spiritual mysterious ocean).

Namghar: Basic in design, it is a large prayer hall build in the traditional style and generally placed in the east-west direction. It is the central hall of worship where devotees gather and offer prayers. The hall is erected or supported by some pillars. The roof and shape of the hall is like a tortoise which is considered to be as incarnation of the Lord Vishnu. Among the pillars, the pillar which is situated at the left front of the adjacent *Monikut* is called as *Lai Khuta* (Main Pillar). It is decorated with lotus flower covered with colourful *Gamocha*. The senior most devotee or head priest is generally allowed to sit at the feet of the *Lai Khuta* to show the due honour. While chanting *Hari Nam* the devotees sit in perpendicular position to *Monikut* both left and right in different rows keeping the middle portion vacant. At the centre of the vacant middle portion, the main person who initiates the chanting of *Hari Nam* is seated. The other devotees followed while chanting *Hari Nam*.

The *Namghar* is open to all people irrespective of their diverse social and economic backgrounds. It is the symbol of the collective consciousness of the people. All individual differences vanish as the devotees share a common platform. *Namghar* propagates the ideals of love, benevolence equality and peaceful coexistence. In the *Namghar* devotees display utmost restraint and decorum in their dress and behaviour thus creating the perfect ambience to engage in prayer and worship.

Monikut (literally, the jewel hut): It is an independent room with separate roof attached to the *Namghar* (also called *bhajghar* in western Assam). It is the sanctum-sanctorum of the *Namghar*, and usually houses the *guru-asana* (the Guru's Seat) and in a few cases images of the supreme deity. It is fully walled, with either no windows or small ones, and it is so called as it acts as a repository of important articles like the sacred scripture and all the precious thing dedicated to the Deity. This room is a later addition to the basic namghar structure. *Monikut* comes from the Assamese word *monikut* which is a combination of two terms *moni*, i.e., jewels and pearls, and *kornika*, i.e., head or topmost part. It is believed that after long years of meditation the saints and sages finally had a glimpse of the Supreme Being seated under the bower of jewels and pearls. The term *monikut* owes its etymological origin to this religious belief extant in Hindu mythology. While paying obeisance at the *monikut* the seat of the divine, a total submission and surrender of one's self to the deity is required. God is our lord and we are his followers. The sense of service to the lord brings us closer to Him and prepares the ground for spiritual communion with Him. This spirit of oneness forges a divine intimacy with God and give us a sense of security.

Namghar is a democratic institution. Equality is preached and practiced here. Here, all sections of society assemble and arrive at decisions through a democratic process. Nobody is barred from expressing his views on matters under discussion. In many respects, it assumes the role of a village parliament albeit without legal or judicial sanctions. It provides a platform for grass root democracy and can be termed as the precursor of Panchayati Raj which is now being actively espoused in India. It functions as a village court. All local disputes are solved here. The parties to the dispute meet here and an amicable solution is sought to be reached at. The elderly folk of the community deliberate on the issue at hand and pass their judgment. *Namghar* also functions as the moral watchdog of the society. Indecent and immoral code of conducts that threatens social discipline are not tolerated. Those guilty of the same are handed out punishment with a view to bring about moral reformation of the people.

Namghar also function as centre of learning. Moral lessons on righteous living are offered here. The *bhaonas* (dramatic performances), verses from the holy scriptures etc. provide a wealth of philosophical knowledge and wisdom which leads to spiritual and moral awakening.

Namghars are also cultural centers. They have played a great role in the preservation and propagation of our rich culture and tradition. The various bell metal and brass items as well as the *xorai* used in the *Namghar* bear the unmistakable stamp of the exquisite craftsmanship of the artisans. The wood carvings on the walls bear glimpses of our rich art and sculpture.

All the routine affairs of the *namghar* are scientifically justifiable. For instance, the practice of keeping the mouth covered with a cloth during distribution of *prassad* and lentils is done to ensure cleanliness and hygiene. The cloth acts as a mask and blocks transmission of infection besides preventing falling hair from contaminating the mixture. This may also be compared with using the mask in operation process by the medical staff.

Again, it is seen that the worshippers sit cross-legged on mats during prayers. The mats are prepared from locally available materials like bamboo, reeds, straw etc. Sitting on such mats regulates the flow of heat and warmth into the body. Besides it also activates the digestive system and prevents illnesses. Another significant matter is in sitting posture body portion is directly connected with the Earth which helps to release the excess product of ignition like electricity's earthing process.

Even the method of preparation of the *prassad* is quite scientific. The ingredients of the *prassad* like *mah saul*, lentils, fruits, etc. help in digestion. However, to avoid stomach upsets finely sliced pieces of ginger are also added to the mixture. Beneficial chemicals present in the ginger reduces gas and cures indigestion. Again, as per rituals, unlike after eating food, mouth rinsing is not allowed after taking the *prassad*. So, there are chances of *prassad* particles getting stuck in the teeth and leading to tooth decay. But the highly fibrous sugarcane served in the *prassad* helps clean teeth and its juice washes off oral and tooth direct keeping one's teeth sparklingly clean and healthy.

Further, worshippers clap their hands and chant the prayers in unison. Even the vigorous clapping is highly beneficial for health as it enhances blood circulation. The sweat released by the pressure exerted on the fingers while clapping flushes out toxins and excess salt from the body and calms it down and relaxes the mind. To control the cholesterol, sugar problem and blood pressure and even not to be victim of these, chanting of *Hari Nam* is highly effective exercise. Thus, clapping to invoke God can lead to a healthy body as well as a healthy mind.

The purely white customary *dhoti* and *seleng sador* is most appropriate from the psychological point of view. *Dhoti* comes from the word *dhot* which refers to our age-old customs and traditions, beliefs and values, rites and rituals. The white *seleng sador* is the emblem of human kindness and sympathy while the *gamocha* symbolizes love and benevolence for humanity at large. The colour white itself is the symbol of peace. It bestows on us a sense of mental calm and quiet attitude and facilitates the ground to meditate on God. The same sense of calm and composure is instilled into the doctor by the white coat that he wears on duty. It steadies his mind and enable him to attend to his patients or carry out operations with focus and concentration. Spreading knowledge about the scientific basis that governs the rites and rituals practiced in the *Namghar* can go a long way in consolidating and strengthening its position in the socio-religious life of the people. Further, building the *Namghar* in keeping with the spirit of the present times can also facilitate its success. If this is done, *Namghar* will continue to attract devotees and remain a fertile ground to sow the seeds of society and nation building. ●

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

JOIN THE NAAM WORKING GROUP: We need your help in achieving the dream of building a naamghar in the United States. Therefore, NAAM is open to everyone who is interested in building the naamghar. If you are interested in getting involved actively in NAAM's mission, please join the NAAM to Info@naamghar.org. The Working Group meets regularly via teleconference/video conference to discuss various issues that are related to NAAM and its mission and goals.●

WELCOMING NEW WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

We welcome the following members of the Assamese community in the United States to the NAAM Working Group:

- Srmti Anu Perlmutter - McLean, VA
- Srmti Rashmi Kalita, San Jose, CA
- Sri Susanta Bordoloi, Unionville, CT
- Sri Hemangajit Dutta, Springfield, NJ

Contact Us

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