Assam's Sattras

Why in news?

Assam's Sattras is gaining more attention due the upcoming state's assembly elections.

What are Sattras/Thans?

- They are monastic institutions created as part of the 16th century Neo-Vaishnavite reformist movement started by Vaishnavite saint-reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1596).
- Each Sattra has a naamghar (worship hall) as its nucleus and headed by an influential Sattradhikar.
- Monks also known as bhakats are inducted into Sattras at a young age.
- They may or may not be celibate which depends on the kind of Sattra they are inducted into.
- Now there are about 900 Sattras spread across Assam but the main centres are Bordowa (Nagaon), Majuli and Barpeta.
- They promulgate Sankardeva's unique worship through art approach with music (borgeet), dance (xattriya) and theatre (bhauna).
- These sattras are of paramount importance for Assam people and lies at the heart of Assamese culture.

What is Sankardeva's philosophy?

- He propagated a form of Bhakti called eka-sharana-naam-dhrama, and embraced a society based on equality, fraternity, free from caste differences, orthodox Brahmanical rituals and sacrifices.
- His teaching focused on prayers and chanting (naam) instead of idol worship.
- His dharma was based on the four components of deva (god), naam (prayers), bhakats (devotees), and guru (teacher).
- These sattras acted as the centres of religious, social and cultural reforms for his movement in the 16th century.
- But after the demise of Sankardeva, due to ideological differences among his disciples, Sattras got divided into four independent sectarian divisions.
- Hence the institution deviated from its basic goal and lost its original reformative thrust.

What is the relationship between the Sattra and the State?

- During the Ahom reign, Sattras received lots of donations in the form of land or money from the kings but they were kept out of political control.
- Unlike temples, Sattras did not require state patronage because they were self-sufficient, grew their own food and could sustain themselves.
- But now both the state and central government give annual grants to sattras in the hope for political support.

How has the Sattra emerged as a poll plank in recent years?

- Over the years, there have been claims that Sattra lands are encroached by illegal settlers in surrounding areas.
- In 2016 state assembly election and in the Lok Sabha elections of 2019, Sattras and its encroachment became a focus area for political campaign.
- In 2019, a bill was introduced in the assembly that empowers the state to remove encroachments from the land belonging to Sattras.
- In August 2020, as part of Assam Darshan scheme 2.5 lakh was provided to each 8,000 Naamghars.
- However the encroachment of Sattras is a politicised issue as the nature of settling is more economic than religious.
- Encroachment is done mostly by the people who are displaced by floods or spurred by other economic factors.

Source: The Indian Express

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