

THE NEO-VAISHNAVISM OF SRIMANTA SANKARADEVA: A GREAT SOCIO-CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN ASSAM

Dr. Rinku Borah
Assistant Professor,
Department of Sociology,
Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon

Abstract: *The Neo-Vaishnavite movement, spearheaded by Saint Sankaradeva is a great socio-cultural revolution in Assam, which takes an important role to create a strong social bond among the people of Assam. It started on the theme of working towards the upliftment of the backward classes and minimization of the rigidity of caste distinctions. He believes that to obtain final release or to feel the existence of God, one need neither be a Brahmin, nor a Sage, nor should one know all the scriptures. So, he accepted his disciples from all castes and tribes and they could even act as teachers in his Vaishnava order. He spread the idea of the Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma and dispelled the darkness of ignorance, superstition and irrational beliefs and practices. The Neo-Vaishnavism faith developed a democratic outlook which permeates the entire teachings and practices in Assam. Moreover, Neo-Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankaradeva became a powerful mechanism, and a cementing force in the process of acculturation of the different social groups. This paper is an attempt to study about Neo-Vaishnavite movement as a great socio-cultural revolution in Assam and its impacts on the social life of the people of Assam.*

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavism, Satra, Namghar

I. Introduction

Sankaradeva was a versatile genius, who has revolutionized the whole Assamese society. He laid the foundation of Assamese society. He gave Assam new discipline of faith in a single divinity. He was the greatest spiritual leader of Assam, who simplified the modes of religious practices with great emphasis on 'Bhakti' and he made it accessible to every members of the society by rendering the Holy Scriptures into the language of people. Sankaradeva is a religious reformer who brought his disciples to the pure monotheism of his Vaishnava faith.

Sankaradeva specially discussed about the orthodox nature of Hindu Religion. He enjoined his followers to be guided by the principles of tolerance and catholicity. The

doctrine preached by Sankaradeva is termed as Ek-Saran Nama Dharma, means believe in one God, i.e., Vishnu. Eka-Sarana means complete surrender (mind, body and ego) to the feet of almighty God by chanting his name as Hari, Rama etc¹. Because he believes that the best way of reforming the religious life of a people was not to attack what was evil but to present to them what was good. The worship of other God and Goddesses are prohibited in his religion. According to him, the supreme God is Krishna, who is the saviour of all. As the faith derived its source and inspiration from the Srimad-Bhagavata purana, the system is called the Bhagavati Dharma². In this system, there is an important aspect known as Sarana. The word Sarana derived from the Sanskrit root sr, literally means shelter or refuge, protection etc. and hence eka sarana in Mahapurusiya system means taking absolute shelter or refuge in one God, Vishnu-Krishna.³ In Sarana system, the devotees can maintain direct communications with the lord without the help of anybody. In this system, there is no any system of caste or class. But he specifically emphasised on personal cleanliness—physical, mental and spiritual. Sankaradeva discarded the system of idol worship and he gives prime emphasis on recitation or chanting of the holy names of the deity. In the initiation process, he introduced four elements i.e., Guru, Deva, Nama and Bhakat which are devotionally known as ‘Icari Bastu’.⁴

The neo- Vaishnavite movement of Sankaradeva ushered an era of wide culture comprising of music, dance and painting. He was not only an expert in handling the pen but also in singing, dancing and enacting what he composed. Through this, he spread his views on Vaishnavism and he advised his followers not to exhibit any aggression towards the adherents of other Creeds and said,

“Parara Dharmmaka Nihimsibā Kādacit”, (Sharma, 2003) (Never ever bear hatred towards others’ religions)

Sankaradeva thus brought a great social reform by spreading secular ideas. It was because of the formative movement of Sankaradeva that the stigma of casteism and

¹. R.N. Choudhury, “Sankaradeva’s Philosophy of Religion” in *Srimanta Sankaradeva and his Philosophy*, G. Barua (Ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 2011. Pg-211.

². D. Chutia, “Srimanta Sankaradeva: An Introduction” in *Srimanta Sankaradeva and his Philosophy*, G. Barua (Ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 2011. Pg- 23

³. *ibid*

⁴. R.N. Choudhury, “Sankaradeva’s Philosophy of Religion” in *Srimanta Sankaradeva and his Philosophy*, G. Barua (Ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 2011. Pg-211.

untouchability could not attain such criminal proportion in Assam as prevailed in other parts of India till date.

This paper is an attempt to study about Neo-Vaishnavite movement as a great socio-cultural revolution in Assam and its impacts on the social life of the people of Assam.

II. Significance of the Study

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement, spearheaded by Saint Sankaradeva is great socio-cultural revolution in Assam, which takes an important role to create social cohesion among the people of Assam. When the society was in turmoil, fragmented, then Sankaradeva spread his ideas and ushered an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam. He established some religious institutions, which were used as powerful instruments to bring about a much reform among the people of Assam. The impact of this movement cut deep into the fabric of the Assamese society transcending all barriers of caste and tribe. The ideas and philosophy of Sankaradeva gradually became an integral part of the life Assamese people. Therefore, it is utmost necessary to study his ideas and philosophy from sociological point of view. It can also broaden the scope to analyse Sankaradeva not only as a great social reformer, but also as a sociologist which tried to remove all obstacle in the context of social interaction and make effort to create a healthy relationship among the people of Assam.

III. Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam: a Historical Outline

Vaishnavism is one of the oldest religions of India in which people believe on Vishnu, as the Supreme God. The followers of Vaishnavism believe that Vishnu takes diverse incarnations (Avataras) from time to time, which is an important feature of the Vaishnava Cult. The followers of the Neo-Vaishnavism Believe that divine grace could be achieved only through devotion which was open to all classes and castes and one can attain salvation through knowledge and rituals (karma). It has been found that some socio-cultural factors inspired saint Sankaradeva to develop Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam.

When Sankaradeva was born in 1449 AD, Assam was in a state of socio-political turmoil. Since the beginning of the 13th century, the ancient kingdom was slowly undergoing a process of political disintegration; and prior to and even during his time, there were rise and fall of about half a dozen of royal dynasties and kingdoms of small to moderate size. In the East, Ahoms (a Chinese-Tai race) who invaded in 1228, had captured a large portion of Chutiya and Kachari tribal kingdoms and were continuing their attacks. "In the Western

region, the Khen dynasty had given way to the Powerful Koch dynasty with a brief interlude of rule for twenty-old years by Hussein Shah – the Afghan from Bengal. The North East was the powerful kingdom of the Chutiyas. To the South, the Kacharis ruled from Dimapur and the hills were populated by various tribes who never recognized any outside ruler. In Central Assam, there were the miniscule states of the Bara Bhuyans. Bhuyans are a land-owning class descended from the Kayasthas of Kanauj”.⁵They had also constantly fought with the tribal Chutiyas to maintain their rule over the loose ends of the ancient Hindu Kingdom of Kamarupa. It should be mentioned here that Sankaradeva himself was from a leading (Siromani) Bhuyan family. In the context of describing the social conditions of that particular time, Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati (1978) pertinently describes that:

“The Bara-Bhuyans were keeping a vigil over the broken fragments of the Hindu Kingdom like many wardens of the marches without any overlord...The existence of the society was threatened. Moreover the society itself was mouth-eaten from within with no sustaining vitality from external forces. The land was infested with it in errant teachers’ of Vamachara Tantric schools with their philosophy of sex and palate. Amongst their religious rites were blood-sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums and cymbals, night vigils on virgin worship and lewd dances of temple-women.”⁶

In the fifteenth century Assam presented a varied picture of diversified culture. The majority of the people belonged to non-Aryan tribes have their own distinctive manners, customs and religious beliefs and practices. In that period, Saktism was also widely prevalent. The followers of Saktism were practising some evil practices like animal sacrifices and sometimes even human sacrifices in the name of religious rites and rituals. In such a disturbing condition, Srimanta Sankaradeva created awareness among the common masses against these kinds of evil practices, and spreading unified religious ideas that gave shape to a set of new values and social synthesis in Assamese society. Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva has used its spiritual propaganda as weapon to fight mainly against Saktism which survives on vulgar materialist outlook. It takes an important place among the different Bhakti cults of India due to its unique and innovative character that shared the values of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by saint Sankaradeva in Assam in the first decade of the 16th century and reached its climax

⁵. B. N. Puri, *Studies in Early History and Administration in Assam*, Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1968. Pg 6-7

⁶. B. K. Kakati, “A New life, letters and a state” in *Sankaradeva –Studies in Culture*, B. P. Chaliha, (ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 1978. Pg-12

towards the middle of the 17th century. It started on the theme of working towards the upliftment of the backward classes and minimization of the rigidity of caste distinctions. The first attempt to bring the backward tribes, castes and classes into the fold of Vaishnavism was made by Srimanta Sankaradeva himself who accepted his disciple irrespective of their caste, tribe, class or religion.

IV. Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and its impact on the socio-cultural life of the people of Assam

Sankaradeva propagated his doctrine of Bhakti based on the principle of universal brotherhood to the caste ridden society. While discarding the caste codes, Sankaradeva, gave more emphasis in the matter of personal cleanliness both inward and outward and correct social behaviour for the purpose of establishing social harmony in society and for promoting fellow feeling⁷. Thus, Sankaradeva brought a greatest social reform by giving social recognition of the common man without making any distinction among them. He viewed that-

“Kukkra Śṛgāla Gardahbaro ātmārāmā
Jāniyā savōko pari karibā praṇām” (Mahanta, 1990)

He declared that the souls of Dog, Srigalas and Asses are variety of God and so, they should be saluted. So, Sankaradeva through this reformatory movement tried to remove the stigma of casteism and untouchability. As a result, this stigma could not attain such criminal proportion in Assam as prevailed in others parts of India till date. To achieve his goal, Sankaradeva established a new democratic order through the institution of Namghar, which is considered as the centre of the intellectual and cultural activities of villagers. He preached that one could realise truth and perceive God without arranging any gorgeous and expensive worships one could devote one’s mind only in chanting the name of God.⁸ Sankaradeva was a practical initiator (Guru) who has inserted the service to ‘Bhakat’ (devotee) in his religious faith. He believed that God is not far away from human being and so, in his religious ideology, the best message of religion “Service to man is service to God” is reflected properly. He again introduced some cultural programme to motivate and educate the common people to accept and practice the religion.

⁷. ibid, pg-29

⁸. B. P. Chaliha (Ed.), *Sankaradeva Studies in Culture*, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 1998. Pg- 132.

This religion is the most liberal, tolerant, simplest and easiest way of attaining God and it is found as economically more viable, which may be termed as religion of common masses. Sankaradeva kept his neo-Vaishnava faith aloof from the pull of politics of the time and remain as a common man. He declared a principle that he would never be a guru of a king. It has been found that during his period, though Sankaradeva received patronage from Maharaja Naranarayana of Koch Bihar, he strongly refused to accept the king as his disciple. So, Sankaradeva was a believer of secularism in politics. In this religion, there was no any concept of caste, class and racial distinction. He also held the banner of revolt against excessive rituals, and superficial formalities of religion and domination of priestly class. He spread a new message that common masses, irrespective of their class, caste, race etc, could also attain spiritual excellence through simple devotion and faith in one supreme God. He again resists and exposes the evil effects of untouchability. Sankaradeva's religion was more secular in nature and he declared that "to obtain final release or come to the presence of God, one need neither be a Brahmin, nor a sage, nor should one know all the scriptures".⁹ So, people from all castes and tribes were accepted by Srimanta Sankaradeva as disciples; and they could even act as teachers in his Vaishnava order. The Neo-Vaishnavism faith developed a democratic outlook which permeates the entire teachings and practices in Assam. The Neo-Vaishnavism Philosophy was enlightenment of the human conscience through universal love. People of the so called untouchables or lower caste also came in contact with the highest castes in Assamese villages and they could take part in all functions of the villages. He embraced into his fold people of all denomination: the Mikirs, the Mishings, the Garos, the Bhutias and the Bodos as well as a Kayastha, a Kachari, a Chutiya, a Kaivartya, a Ahom, a Brahman, a Koch, a Chandal (scavenger), and also people of other faith like Chandsai, a Muslim, who reportedly became a much respected devotee and rose in the ranks.¹⁰ Neo-Vaishnavism became a veritable movement with a mass appeal which initiate social harmony in Assam. Hence, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement ushered an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam. It gives emphasis on societal reforms, socio-cultural integration among the people of Assam, and spiritual upliftment through the holy ideas. This movement was revolutionary because Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam not only impacts on religious faith but also on way of life of Assamese society. It encompassed the social, cultural and religious spheres of Assamese society. Even, it developed a new kind of Philosophy, art and music in

⁹. C. K. Mahanta (Trans.), *The Kirtana*, Asom Satra Sangha, Jorhat, 1990. Pg-19.

¹⁰. M. Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times*, Motilal Banarcidass, Delhi, 1965. Pg-65

the form of 'Borgeets', 'Ankiya Nats' or 'Bhaonas' (a theatre form introduced for the first time by Srimanta Sankaradeva and which became increasingly popular with the masses, centred around themes from the Bhagavata-Purana and the Ramayana) as well as the 'Satriya Dance' as modes of conveying the principles of 'Ek-Sarana-Nama-Dharma', based on the devotion to one single God 'Lord Krishna' or 'Vishnu' based on a spirit of equality and humanism which found concrete manifestation in the institution of the Namghar. He made a great effort to make accessible his all ideas among common masses and so in most of his works, he used the Assamese language of the period, so that common people could read and understand them easily. But for theatrical cause in his songs and dramas he used 'Brajavali', which is an artificial mixture of Braj language and Assamese. It should be mention here that with the new Cultural Revolution brought by Srimanta Sankaradeva, he again contributes a lot towards language, culture, art and literature to all. The fundamental teachings and tenets of Neo-Vaishnavism were expounded by Sankaradeva and Madhavdeva in their great works, 'Kirtan-Ghosa' and 'Nama Ghosa' respectively.

Moreover, some followers established Satra institution to spread the Vaishnava Faith in the later period, which takes a key role in spreading the ideology of Vaishnava faith in Assam. It is a religious institution or religious centre which is unique and special to the Eka sarana tradition where religious teachings, beliefs and spirituality are imparted and which played a great role as radiating forces of all religious activities of the Vaishnavite communities. The name of Satra was used in the sense of an assembly of devotees. It is the place where the people from different castes and tribes are stayed and preached the God through congregational prayer and religious discourses. Satras of Assam has been celebrating various cultural programmes such as Bhaonas, Ras Leelas, Janmashtami, Dol Utsav etc. which able to generate a strong bond among individual. Satra institutions motivate the minds of common people through performing various religious rituals. The head of the Satra is known as Satradhikar. The Satradhikar of Satra takes initiative in the process of Saran. Through the ceremony, one can come to the fold of Satra or can become a disciple of Satra irrespective of their caste, class, creed etc., especially the role of 'Nikamul Satra' of Tezpur, 'Bareghar Satra' of Nazira etc. are notable in this context. By taking Saran under a guru or Satradhikar an individual could enter into the fold of Neo-Vaishnavism. It thus facilitated the entry of a large number of both tribal and non-tribal people into the fold of Hinduism and creating a social bond among them. The people who took saran were known as the 'Saranias' and they assimilated into the Assamese society through this simple process. The people of different tribal groups such as Moran, Kachari, Chutiya, Deori etc., who took Vaishnavism,

had gradually adopted Hindu conducts of life and religious practices. They also given up many of their impure practice, discarded animism and become more and more refined in their dealings. Through this process, the tribal people came under the fold of Hinduism and assimilated with the other caste people within the fold of Hinduism. So, Satra institution takes important role in context of the upliftment and up-gradation of status of the backward classes and adjacent communities of Assam. But when Satra institution divided into different divisions, such as 'Brahma Sanghati', 'Kala Sanghati', 'Purusha Sanghati' and 'Nika Sanghati' in the later part of the Vaishnava movement, it was remained as a stumbling block in achieving the actual objectives of Vaishnavism. However, the Satras played a great role in the social life of the people of Assam. It took significant role in reviving and popularizing the art of classical music and dance and it also gave Assam a rich religious literature. The main aim of Satras is achieving cultural integration with various ethnic tribes and communities of Assam.

Again, to spread the secular and democratic ideas, the leaders of Neo-Vaishnavite movement established Namghar institution, which is a significant feature of every Assamese village in Assam over time. The Kirtanghar or Namghar (the village congregation hall) takes an important role in maintaining unity and solidarity in Assamese society, which served as a centre of spiritual, intellectual and cultural activities of the villagers. Through this institution, Sankaradeva made an attempt to establish law, justice and peace in the village community. This institution is found almost in every Assamese village. In some places, different castes combined together and constituted a 'Namghar'¹¹. The 'Namghar' has been serving as the village public hall for the last five hundred years and it has worked as a cultural centre, and a common forum for the villagers to assemble in a friendliness and co-operative environment. The village Namghar are run and managed on democratic principles. The Namghar since the time of Srimanta Sankaradeva have been designed and constructed such a way that people of all races and tribes could easily enter in the Namghar and take part in religious functions and ceremonies. It enriched Assamese life socially and educationally and contributed a lot to the realm of literature and art. Moreover, an open wall-less Namghar is a symbol of flexibility where doors are open to everyone and that it is an institution which welcomes all people without making any discrimination among them. All socio-cultural activities of the Namghar are directed towards the Singhasana of Namghar, in which a sacred book is kept written by

¹¹ . V.V. Rao, *A Hundred Years of Local Self Government*, Bani Prakashan Mandir, Guwahati, 1967, Pg-26.

either Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva or his principal disciple Mahapurusha Madhavdeva. Various religious functions are celebrated in Namghar by the villager co-operatively. The Namghar becomes the venue for congregational chanting of prayers or 'Nama-Prasangas', singing of 'Borgeets' or classical devotional songs composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavdeva and enactment of 'Bhaona' on various occasions irrespective of caste, class etc. Hence, these kinds of cultural performances in the village Namghar unite all castes and classes and create a strong tie among them. The Namghar has thereby contributed immensely to the overall socio-cultural development of the Assamese people. The villagers assemble at Namghar on various occasions to discuss matters concerning their village. Surya Kumar Bhuyan¹² considered Namghar as little parliament. In Namghar, all sorts of quarrels and disputes among the members of the village community were settled by the villagers themselves at Namghar. Therefore, it stands in the village community at the court of justice. As a result, the Neo-Vaishnavism tradition initiated by Sankaradeva becomes the very core of the Assamese cultural identity which also contributes immensely to the process of socialisation of the people of Assam. In the context of role of Namghar, Birinchi kumar Baruah mentioned that "the Namghars which were set up as central religious institutions of the village worked to a great extent towards spread of intellectual and cultural activities in the village, in course of time being nerve-centres of village to co-ordinate all the aspects of social, economic and political life of the Assamese people."¹³ Again, A Bhuyan in his book, 'Socio- cultural and Political Role of Namghar' mentioned about Namghar that, "Democratic performance in a society is due to social capital. If one wishes to promote democratic government, one should support the source network of the civic community in the society at different levels. In this specific context of civil social partnership, the Namghar becomes an important conceptual category."¹⁴ "The successful establishment of Namghar institution proves that it is possible and necessary to promote a religion directly in society. Serving, as it does, as a means of Community communication, the Namghar had the (proven) potential to mould a human society based on culture of self-help, tolerance, unity and integrity. Furthermore, the Namghar had mobilized the masses in

¹² . S. Bhuyan, Speech reported in The Assam Tribune, 12.10.1962.

¹³ . B. K. Baruah, *Sankardeva-Vaisnava Saint of Assam*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 1994. Pg-107.

¹⁴ . A. Bhuyan, *Socio-cultural and Political Role of the Naamghar*, Towards Freedom, Kolkata, 2007. Pg-31.

building up their capacities to take responsibility relating to matters of community life, thus proving that ‘Peoples’ participation is the pre-requisite for real development.”¹⁵

V. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it has been found that the Neo-Vaishnavite movement is a great socio-cultural revolution to harmonize the people of Assam. When the society in Assam was in turmoil, fragmented and faction-ridden at that time Neo-Vaishnavite movement spread the idea of universal brotherhood. It helps to spread this idea as there was no any concept of caste, class and racial distinction. The uniqueness of the religion lay in the fact that the practice of Ek-Saran-Hari-Naam-Dharma brought about an ethnic integration and spiritual upliftment through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region. Through the various institutions, Srimanta Sankaradeva tried to remove various superstitious believes and practices from Assamese society and it greatly impacts on the social conditions of the people of Assam. His religion is the most liberal, tolerant, simplest and easiest way of attaining God and able to maintaining social order. In a word, we can term Sankaradeva as a great social thinker, philosopher who brought about an equality of existence among all sections of people.

REFERENCES

- A. Bhuyan, *Socio-cultural and Political Role of the Naamghar*, Towards Freedom, Kolkata, 2007.
- B. Hazarika, *Neo-Vaishnavite Satras of Assam in 21st Century (Problems and Prospects)*, Jagaran Press, Guwahati, 2013.
- B. K. Baruah, *Sankaradeva-Vaisnava Saint of Assam*, Bina Library, Guwahati, 1994.
- B. K. Kakati, “A New life, letters and a state” in *Sankaradeva Studies in Culture*, B. P. Chaliha (Ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 1978.
- B. N. Puri, *Studies in Early History and Administration in Assam*, Department of Publication, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1968.
- B. P. Chaliha (Ed.), *Sankaradeva Studies in Culture*, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 1998.
- B. Phukan, *Srimanta Sankaradeva: Vaishnava Saint of Assam*, Kaziranga Books Publisher, Guwahati, 2010.

¹⁵ . Ibid, Pg- 33

- C. K. Mahanta (Trans.), *The Kirttana*, Asom Satra Sangha, Jorhat, 1990.
- D. Chutia, “Srimanta Sankaradeva: An Introduction” in *Srimanta Sankaradeva and his Philosophy*, G. Barua (Ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 2011.
- D. Nath (Ed.), *Religion and Society in North East India*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 1996.
- D. Nath, *Satra Society and Culture*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2012.
- G. Barua (Ed.), *Srimanta Sankaradeva and his Philosophy*, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 2011.
- M. Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times*, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1965.
- M. Neog, *The Contribution of the Sankaradeva Movement to the Culture and Civilisation of India*, Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, Guwahati, 1998.
- N. B. Sharma, *Bhakti Pradeep of Srimanta Sankaradeva*, Jyoti Prakashan, Guwahati, 2003.
- R.N. Choudhury, “Sankaradeva’s Philosophy of Religion” in *Srimanta Sankaradeva and his Philosophy*, G. Barua (Ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 2011.
- S.C. Bora & B. Kalita, *Sankaradeva Studies*, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 2013.
- S.K. Borkakoti, *Unique Contributions of Srimanta Sankaradeva in Religion and Culture*, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 2006.
- S. Bhuyan, *Speech reported in The Assam Tribune*, 12.10.1962.