

**UNIQUENESS OF SANKARDEVA'S NEO-VAISNAVITE MOVEMENT: A
SOCIO-CULTURAL RENAISSANCE IN ASSAM**

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Abstract

The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement, started by Srimanta Sankardeva created an unprecedented zeal for the cultural and religious reformation in Assam in the 15th century. His Eka-saraniya dharma, with all its philosophy and doctrines as well as rituals and cult has contributed a lot to find out the true spirit to create a vibrant society based on peace, respect, goodwill and honesty. It initiated a new change in the socio- religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationships. The main motto of this movement is to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, humanism, equality and democracy.

Keywords: Eka-saraniya dharma, Srimanta Sankardeva, Neo-Vaisnavite Movement.

Introduction

During the 15th and 16th centuries, there was a unique religious Renaissance occurred in India. It helped dissemination of the Bhakti movement and glories of holy company as propounded by the Bhagabat-purana. The eternal message of this movement was that the all creatures of the world were creation of one God. Following this belief, some great men provided leadership to this memorable movement in several states. Ramananda(1400-1470 AD), Kabir(1440-1470 AD), Vallavacharya(1479-1531AD), Namdev(1400-1430AD), Mahaprabhu, SriChaitanya(1485-1533AD) and Srimanta Sankardeva(1449-1569AD).

In Assam Sankardeva wake a new faith to promote welfare of all living being and emphasised the message of universal brotherhood which was commonly known as Neo-vaisnavite movement.

The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement was started by Srimanta Sankardeva at the juncture of the acute crisis committed in the name of the Hindu Religion in the 15th century. Sankardeva, the

great religious preacher, spiritual leader, social reformer, playwright, poet and composer gave a new direction, new faith to the chaotic Assamese society by initiating a fresh outlook to the existing Vaisnava religion. The movement (neo- vaisnavism) changed the whole face of this part of India and ushered an unprecedented zeal for the cultural and religious reformation which developed a new genre of philosophy, art and music. So, his thinking rested not only in discursive reasoning and abstract principles but also in ethnic integration, societal reforms and Cultural Revolution.

Objectives

The objective of this paper is to focus the features of the neo-vaisnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankadeva, in terms of its humanistic values, literature, art, music and institutions to uplift the traditional values of Assam.

The Role of Neo-Vaisnavism Movement in Assam

In the 15th century, the social condition of India was deteriorated by the different types of distortions and chaos. Various mal-practices were committed in the name of religion affected the whole social structure of that time. In such a crucial period, many Hindu thinkers, and reformers tried to evolve a simpler and liberal faith for all and started a social reform movement (Vaishnava Bhakti movement) based on liberal doctrine to awake the mind of the devotees and tried to assimilate them with the new faith and new ideas.

Assam, in that period, presented a picture of different shades and varied of cultures. The majority of the people belonged to different tribes (non-Aryan) had distinct manners, customs and religious beliefs and people who believed on Hinduism adhered to Vaishnavism and Saivism. Saktism which related with Tantricism was also wisely admired by the different tribes. As a result, socially downtrodden and economically backward classes became the victims of unpleasant practices based on the philosophy of palate and sensual pleasure by the upper caste people. In this crucial and chaotic period, Srimanta Sankardeva appeared as a reformer who tried to uplift the whole Assamese society through his Neo-Vaisnavite movement which resulted a drastic change in the cultural and religious scenario of Assam. A versatile genius, Sankardeva became the uplifter who provided a bedrock to the Assamese society and gave a new shape and light which ushered moral values and social synthesis for the society.

The neo-Vaishnava movement initiated by Sankardeva created a socio-cultural Renaissance in Assam in the later part of the 15th century .It was revolutionary in the sense that Neo- Vaisnavism in Assam meant not only a religious faith but also a way of life which is based on the liberal doctrine of bhakti or devotion opened to all classes and castes. It initiated a new change in the socio- religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationships. The main motto of this movement is to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, humanism, equality and democracy. Through his religious preaching Srimanta Sankardeva made people conscious of child care, dignity of women, removal of untouchability, unity between various tribes and communities, noise and water pollution etc.

Eksarana-Nama- Dharma

The new creed of faith started by Sankardeva known as Ekasarana-Nama-Dharma which preached devotion to a single God (Vishnu or Krishna) who can be worshipped solely by uttering His various names (Namm). Associated with the greater Bhakti movement in other parts of India, it rejected Vedic and other established rites of worship by simplified the form just by uttering the name of the one Deity. Radha Krishna cult is not acknowledged in this system. The four important elements of Neo-Vaishnavism are: (i) God, (ii) Guru (iii) the fraternity of Bhaktas and (iv) Namm.

This Ekasarana Nama Dharma is also known as Mahapurushia Dharma “Eka deva, eka seva, eka vine nai keva” i.e. one God, one shelter, there is none but the one, is the moto of Eksarana vaishnavism. We also find

‘Anya devi deva nakariva seva prasado nakhaiba tara
Murtiko nachaiba grhonapasiba bhakti haiba vyabhicara’
(Bhagavata dvitiya scandha)

It means bow not to other gods and goddesses; partake not of others offerings; caste no glance at their images; enter not the hoes where they are worshipped. This simple and accessible religion attracted both Hindu and non-Hindu communities, along with the tribal people of Assam into its egalitarian folds.

Neo Vaishnavism & Social Revolution: A Democratic Outlook

Sankardeva’s Neo-Vaishnavism is not only a religious movement but also a social revolution based on universal brotherhood. With a missionary zeal, he started his teaching among the all communities irrespective of caste, creed and status to minimise the rigours of caste distinction which had grasped the whole Indian society. Sankardeva declares:

‘Kukura srigala gardahbaro atmaram
Jania sabako pari kariba pranam’

Sankardeva believes that even dogs, foxes and asses have the same soul like of a man. So, everyone should salute them as the manifestation of the same God. It is Sankardev who got the success to prevent the stigma of hellish caste system and untouchability from Assam that still prevailed in other parts of Indian society in those days. Thus, people from all castes and communities were became his disciples and they could even act as teachers and might become the head of the satras. Sankardeva in many places of his writings, announced the fraternity of bhaktas and the acceptibility even of sudras and women to bhakti. Influenced by Sankardev’s New Bhakti Movement, many non-Hindu populations of the country found an attractive portyal into Hinduism and through it they entered into a clean and disciplined way of individual and social life. Among his disciples, there were Kacharies, the Garos, the Miris, the Goalas, the Ahoms, the Rajakas, the Chandals and others, who became pure with the other devotees of Krishna as said in Bhagavata:

‘Kirata Kachari Khaci Garo Miri yavana Kanka Goala

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Asama Muluka Dhovage Turuka Mlecha Candala
Ana papi Nara Krishna sevakara Sangata pabitra haya'
(Kirtana Ghosa)

The main disciples of Sankardeva were Govinda- a Gāro, Rāma-a Kachāri, Nārāyana- a Miri; Bolāi- a Mikir; Srirām- a Kaivartta; Damudara- a Bhutia; Chāncāi- a Muslim which showed a picture of Sankardeva's humanitarian attitude as well as universal brotherhood. The Great Movement brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life and a distinctly healthy tone to social behaviour.

Satra and Namghar: The Socio-Cultural hubs of Assam :

The most important place of initiating the Neo-Vaisnava Movement is seen in two unique institutions—Satra and Namghar, which are associated with social, religious and cultural life of the Assamese people. The Satra and Namghar were not merely centres of religion, even it also promoted mass education and developed some cottage industries which was play a significant role for upliftment of poor people. In most of them banking operation have been going on for four or five centuries. These institutions also used as a people's court for many years and serve as a centre of musical pursuit, songs, dances and bhaona(drama) are encouraged.

The namghar is a miniature replica of a satra whereas a satra, literally meaning as 'holy area' is a network of decentralised monasteries, which is headed by a Guru (teacher) designated as Satradhikar. Srimanta Sankardev, at his birth place (Bordowa) set up his first Kirtanghar (prayer hall) which is the main centre of the entire place. It was a long and open hall where the devotees set together and pray in the name of God. There is no idol seen in the altar, but only a religious scripture is kept there. In addition to prayers and cultural functions, religious discourses were also held in the Kirtanghar. This active place prepared the ground for cultural integration of different sections of the Assamese society with other increasing numbers of people who are willingly associates themselves with the Neo-Vaisnava religion. It is important to recall that after Sankardeva's death, the movement was no longer monolithic. The great disciple Madhavadeva succeeded Sankardeva to be the chief apostle who spread the message of 'Ek Sarana Namadharma' to the different parts of Assam. The first stage of evolution of the Satra naturally began with Sankardeva, but during the time of Madhabadeva and Damodardeva, the Satras attained its proper growth and received the final shape. It, thus came to possess the prayer hall (Namghar) and the Manikut with the wooden throne (Singhashana) attached to the namghar and containing a sacred scripture.

In the middle of the 17th century, the royal authority (The Ahom Kings and Nobles) firmly established the Satra institution and accepted the Neo- Vaisnavism. The Satras started to play a vital role in the social life of people. The leaders of the movement got the scope to preach their faith more peacefully in accommodating atmosphere. As a consequent, a numerous branches of Satras were established by family members and disciples of the Neo- Vaisnavite leaders of the 16th and 17th century.

The Namghar (Kirtanghar) became an integral part of every Hindu village of Assam. The Satras contributed a rich treasure for ecclesiastical literature and started to revive and popularise the art of classical music and dance. The establishment of village Namghar came about with the idea of popularising the Neo- Vaisnavite faith to the masses. The Namghar started to

serve as a forum for not only religious but also the social activities of the community. The village Namghar had been serving as the village public hall, prayer hall, a cultural centre, village court and parliament by providing a common forum for the villagers to assemble in an atmosphere of goodwill and co-operation which were managed on democratic principles. It had a great deal of symbolic value to promote the idea of equality. Therefore, the Namghar became the centre of cultural activities of the villagers and a venue for chanting of prayers or naam-prasanga, singing of Borgeets or classical devotional songs composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhabadeva and enactment of Bhaona on various occasions. No discrimination was made in terms of class and caste in distributing roles in the Bhaona held at the Namghar. It is to be mentioned that an entire handicraft based cottage industries centering around the Bhaona performances had also sprung up over the years. The Namghar had immense contribution to the overall socio-cultural development of the Assamese people.

Literary Works of Sankardeva: A Unique Achievement of Assamese literature.

Sankardeva's literary and artistic contribution is called as the living tradition of Assam. He formed a new essence to the Vaisnava literature in which upheld and beautified the cult of Bhakti.

His magnum opus is his *Kirtana-Ghosha*, a popular work is kept in most of the houses of Assam, today. It contains narrative verses glorifies Krishna meant for community singing. His translation of *Bhagavata Purana* is actually transcreation, where, he translated not only the words but also the idioms and physiognomy too. Sankardeva was the fountain-head of *Ankiya Naat or Bhaonas*, a form of one act play, which became increasingly popular with the masses, centering around the themes from *the Bhagavata-Purana and the Ramayana*. His '*Cihna Yatra*' is regarded as one of the first open-air theatrical performance in the world. It was probably a dance drama, but unfortunately no text is of that show is available today. Another literary creation of Sankardeva was *the Borgeets (Great Songs)*, the devotional songs, set to music and sung in various raga styles. Out of 240 Borgeets only 39 songs survive till now. *Satriya Dance*, that Sankardeva first originated and developed, later preserved for centuries by the satras. It is now has achieved a position among the classical visual art like dance forms of India. Sankardeva and his disciples used many instruments for a dramatic effect in his songs and dramas, which were all indigenous. Two of the most important of these instruments are the *Khol and the Bortal*. Beside these, he created a legendary work on *Sapta Vaikuntha and Vrindavani Vastra*. A new school of painting was developed by him known as the Sankari school of painting. This new form of painting is used in his epoch-making drama *Chinha-yatra* which brought a new ray in the cultural history of Assam. In most of his works, he used the contemporary Assamese language of that time which was lucid and simple, but for dramatic effect in his songs and dramas, he used Brajavali language.

Neo-Vasnavism & Sankardev's Philosophical Thinking:

Srimanta Sankardev was basically a religious preacher. His main aim was to make his Neo-Vaisnava religion popular among the masses and to create a universal religion. He had no intention to write any philosophical discourse but to preach a religious cult. The philosophical thoughts which are reflected in his vast creative writing were based on religious philosophy, found in **Bhagavata-purana**. The philosophic teaching of this **Purana** had greatly affected him

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and his disciples particularly his great and most favourite disciple Sri Madhavdeva who gave his (Sankardeva) philosophic thoughts a definite form through his **Nam-ghosa**. The great Bengali philologist and thinker Sjt. Suniti kumar Chattopadhyay with his significant observations about the universality of the Sankardeva said:

“ Sankardeva is specially connected with Assam but he belongs to the whole India, and he has also an universal quality as a man of faith and religion, of learning and organisation.”

Conclusion:

To sum up this paper, it can be said that Neo-Vaisnavite movement started by Srimanta Sankardeva had a glorious effect to the people of Assam by helping them on their way to having a better organised life and have spiritual peace and contentment. It not only brought a new and comprehensive outlook on life but also accelerated the pace of Renaissance of literature and fine arts. His Eka-saraniya dharma, with all its philosophy and doctrines as well as rituals and cult has contributed a lot to find out the true spirit to create a vibrant society based on peace, respect, goodwill and honesty.

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