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Srimanta Sankardeva and Neo-Vaishnava Movement in Assam: A Study from Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

As we know that Sankardeva launched the neo-Vaishnavism in Assam during the medieval age. Sankardeva preached a doctrine of universal brotherhood and humanism for improving the condition of Assamese society. Sankardeva created a harmonious living condition for diverse ethnic communities in the Brahmaputra valley. For propagating the neo-Vaishnava principle, Sankardeva believed in the qualified monism. Sankardeva advocated the Dasya attitude of Bhakti. His religion was called Mahapurushia Dharma or Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. Many indigenous people came to join in his neo-Vaishnavism. It was because of Sankardeva's philosophy of equality and universal brotherhood which revealed in his neo-Vaishnavism. Sankardeva also proceed to organizing the Vaishnava society with three cultural institutions like Bhauna, Satra and Namghar. Thus, Sankardeva brought about a great change in the Assamese society.

Keywords: Universal, Brotherhood, Monism, Vaishnavism, Satra, Namghar, Bhauna

1. Introduction

Srimanta Sankardeva was one of the greatest person of Assam as well as of India. He was a great talent, prophet, poet, playwright, above all, he was a great social reformer who contributed a lot to development and progress of our Assamese society. Moreover, Srimanta Sankardeva was a true representative of the socio-cultural and religious renaissance in Assam during the medieval period. It may be noted that Srimanta Sankardeva was not a social reformer but also play a role in making our broader Assamese culture and society. Srimanta Sankardeva made his magical impact on the religion, social, literary and cultural life of the Assamese people. Therefore, Srimanta Sankardeva is called as "the Real Renaissance man of Assam." It is found that Srimanta Sankardeva was born in 1449 A. D in the famous Siromani Bhuyan family at Alipukhuri (Bordowa). From the evidence, it is also found that Sankardeva had a great physical strength, beauty and the attractive personality. He tried to best effort for transforming the Assamese society. He initiated the Neo-Vaishnavism ideology to change the Assamese society. Therefore, in this paper, a humble attempt will be made to highlight his reformist activities with special reference to Neo-vaishnava movement.

2. Objective of the Paper

The objectives of paper are as follows:

1. 1: To find out the religious and social activities of Srimanta Sankardeva.
1. 2: To highlight the growth of the Neo-Vaishnavism movement in Assam.
1. 3: To examine the role of neo-Vaishnavism in bringing about socio-religious change among the backward tribal groups in Assam.
1. 4: To examine the economic philosophy of Sankardeva.

3. Research Question

Such research question has taken for the study:

- (I) What are the perspective of Sankardeva on various socio-religious and cultural aspect?
- (II) Is Srimanta Sankardeva as a reformer?

3 Methodology of the Paper:

To answer of such question, a historical and analytical method has taken. The data have been collected from the secondary sources. Secondary sources were collected from different books written by different scholars, articles published in different journals, internet etc. All of data or sources have been critically analyzed.

4. Review of Literature

1. "Religion and Society in North East India", edited by Dambarudhar Nath and published by DVS publishers, Guwahati, 2011 is a collection of research article. The book discusses the different aspect of Neo-Vaishnavism.

2. "The Comprehensive History of Assam" volume III, edited by H. K. Barpujari and published by Publication Board Assam, 2004 is another books in which the origin and growth of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam discussed. Moreover, the book is also revealed the aspect of neo-Vaishnavism and its impact on the society.
3. "Medieval Assamese Society", written by Sarbeswar Rajguru and published by Asomi Milonpur Hoiborgaon, Nagaon in 1998 is a notable source for study of the folk culture of Assam. The book reveals many folk culture which performed by the indigenous people. The Book has also discussed about the tribal society and the Satriya culture from different angle.
4. "A Comprehensive History of Assam", written by S. L. Boruah and published by Munshiram Manoharlal publishers, 2007, Third Edition is another literacy source which used for preparing this paper. The book deals with the different aspect of the neo-Vaishnavism movement and its relationship with the tribal society.

5. Findings and Discussion

Historically, religion can be the powerful agents for social change. It may be noted that Religion has played a dramatic change in the behavioral pattern of individual as well as in the structure of society. Religion has been the reflex of social conditions its structure where it emerges. The religious practices observed by a particular group of society –the rites and rituals they observe, the god and the goddesses they worship etc. differ from those of another group, because people living in that group have a different socio-economic surrounding. (D. Nath :2011: p. 84). Therefore, it is to be noted that religion has played a significant role in continuous changing process of socio-economic structure. With this general ideas of religion, let us now have a look at the different religious development which had been emerged in the Assam valley since the ancient period. It is found that before emergence of neo-Vaishnavism, there were many religious faith and practices such as saktism, tantric cult etc. which practiced by various tribes. However, neo-Vaishnavism initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva made a deep influence on the tribal society. It may be noted that Srimanta Sankardeva and his followers like Madhavdeva took up the socio-religious agenda to improving the condition of the tribal society. It is due to fact that many tribal people and indigenous people came to join in the neo-Vaishnavism. Therefore, the paper is a humble attempt to analyze the role of neo-Vaishnavism in bringing the socio-religious change among the indigenous and tribal men.

During the medieval period, certain developments took place in the sphere of religion. These were as follows: 1. Consolidation and expansion of puranic Hinduism. 2. conversion of a number of ruling families to by way of divinization of founder of respective dynasties. 3. Introduction of neo-Vaishnavism, which happened to have a higher degree of appeal to the masses and led to a sort of renaissance in all areas of art and culture. 4. a spirit of religious toleration and peaceful co-existence barring minor exception. (H. K. Barpujari:2004: p. 211). In such condition, a socio-religious movement began across Assam between the 15th and 16th century which based on the liberal doctrine of bhakti or devotion. As it is found that neo-Vaishnavism is one of the oldest religion of Assam where Vishnu called as Narayan, Krishna is worshipping as a supreme God. In India, from the 12th to 16th century, Ramanujacharya, Madhavacharya, Nimbakacharyav, Tukaram, Eknath, Namdev, Narasinha Mehta and Shyamal Kavi of Gujarat, Surdas of Uttarpradesh, all contributed to the preaching of Vaishnavism or bhakti philosophy. The bhakti philosophy started a new idea to socio-religious circle even as it gave to birth a new faith which contributed to make shape of a revolution. In Assam, Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva contributed a lot to propagating the neo-Vaishnavism in later part of the 15th century. It may be noted that the neo-Vaishnavism played a significant role in the process of assimilating diverse elements – indigenous and non-indigenous into Assamese culture. Prior to the neo-Vaishnavism, Assam was a meeting ground of various extra Aryan tribes. The majority of people belonged to the non-Aryan tribes and their rituals, religious beliefs were differed from each other. The tribal people or non-Aryan people believed in their own traditional religious believe and rituals. Until the coming of the neo-Vaishnavism, Saivism was very important aspect of Hinduism in Assam. The tribal men used to worship Siva to call the deity by respective tribal names. (H. k. Barpujari: 2004; p.221). Originally, a tribal God, Siva, continued to receive homage from both the ruling families and the tribal communities. The Boro-Kacharis worshipped a god called batho, Bathau, Bathau-Brai or Bathau-siv-Rai who was identified with Siva, according to their tribal rites. (S. L. Boruah:2007: third edition: p.443). The tribal men also used to worship Saktism as female deities. It is found that some tribal people believed in worshipping of Trantism. Therefore, in the light of above theoretical background, Sankardeva used to propagating his neo-Vaishnavism philosophy to bringing out among the tribal people. It may be noted that the neo-Vaishnavism which propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva was based on the egalitarian philosophy. However, point to fact that the neo-Vaishnavism wanted to make a society based on the ideal of caste equality and harmony. Srimanta Sankardeva also vigorously opposed to the untouchability. It may be noted that while Sankardeva wanted to preach his religious – cum-social agenda among the masses, the society of Assam had composed with various heterogeneous tribes and castes. Therefore, the society had been a fertile field for Sankardeva and his Vaishnavism followers to preach their ideology. Moreover, Sankardeva, who preached a doctrine of "universal social brotherhood", created conditions for harmonious living of people of diverse castes, communities, and creeds. (S. L. Boruah:2007: Third Edition: p.447) So, it is interesting to see that the attitude of Sankardeva towards tribal men in Assam is sufficiently not known because the tribal men are quite rare in his writings. However, we find only a single clear mention of them and that is in his Book II of his own rendering of *Srimadbhagavata* (v. 4746) where he speaks of the kirtas, the Khasis, the Garos and others (Kirata Kachari / Khasi garo Miri /Yavana Kanaka Gowala/Assama muluka/dhoba ye Turuka /Kubacha Mleccha Chandala). (D. Nath:2011; p.90). However, whatever be attitude of Srimanta Sankardeva towards the tribal societies, the neo-Vaishnavism in Assam did not come to direct conflict with their religious beliefs. Moreover, the process of assimilation of various Aryan and non-Aryan elements took place under the umbrella of neo-Vaishnavism. Actually, Sankardeva opened his religion to each and everyone, be he a Brahmin or a Chandala, a Kalita or a Khasi, a Hindu or a Muslim. For this purpose, Sankardeva established the Satras and the Namghar as socio-religious prayer hall where each and everyone come to live in perfect peace and harmony. Under such agenda and arrangement of the neo-Vaishnavism, it made possible for neo-Vaishnavism to make its impact on

the non-Aryan tribes. The second important factor that drew sympathetic attention of the tribal masses towards Sankardeva's religion was its simplicity both in theory and practice. His teachings contained no logic chopping jargons, no jejune theological intricacies. (D. Nath:2011: p.91)

However, Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism philosophy towards the tribals. The assimilation of various tribes into the neo-Vaishnavism started from 15th century onwards. Sankardeva took significant steps for this purpose. Many tribal people came to join the neo-Vaishnavism and became disciples, Govinda was a Garo, Joyram was a Bhutiya, Chandarai was a Muslim, Paramananda was a Miri, Narahri was an Ahom and Chilarai, a great military general was a Koches, all came to discipline of Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism. No wonder that in the Namghosaaha, Madhavdeva wrote, "Even the Garos, the Bhutiyas and Yavana chant the name of Hari." (Garo Bhot Yavana Harir nama loy-v. 473)" and "the Miris, the Ahoms and the Kacharis attain salvation by through chanting rama nama." (Miri, Ahom, Kachari attain salvation by pronouncing the name of Rama-v. 531)" (D. Nath:2011: p.92) As we know that the Satras (monasteries) was headed by a guru (Satradhikar). It is found that anyone could enter into the fold of neo-Vaishnavism by taking *sarana* under a guru. Thus, a large number of tribal people entered into the fold of the neo-Vaishnavism. The tribal ethnic groups were known as the *saranies* and still are addressed as such as a community who had over the years been assimilated into the Assamese Society.

Sankardeva was a great economic reformer in Assam during the medieval age. Sankardeva wanted to economic development in all section of people. Sankardeva wanted that every human being must get an occupation or job to earn his livelihood. Sankardeva also mentioned that through his job, everyone must be perform their socio-religious obligation. Chandan Sharma mentions that "Sankardeva always advised his disciples to take Narayan Das ata as their role model, not Madavadeva. Narayan Das (previous name was Bhavanadeva Saud) was a successful business and financially supported the disciples very often. This proved Sankardeva put emphasis on work and livelihood." (Sharma. Chandan, Economic Philosophy of Sankardeva, in Prasanna Kr. Nath and Himangsu Maral, (Ed.), Journal of ACTA, Volume: XXXVII, 2015, p. 203.) Sankardeva always gave emphasis on donations. Everybody should spend a part of his income for the betterment of others. (Ibid, p. 204) Sankardeva also believed in sustainable economic development of human society. He advised to preserve on fifth of the wealth for future generation. (Ibid, p. 204). Thus Sankardeva wanted to give an economic concept for popularizing his neo-Vaishnava ideology among people.

In this context, it is found that these tribal people influenced by Sankardeva's philosophy. The extent of tribal conversion can also be inferred from a verse by Ramanada Dwija, a Vaishnava hagiographer:" Kamarupa is a Mleccha country and Krishna has incarnated here as Sankara. . . The greatly impure Mlecchas now perform nama kirtana, and at ease, attain to Baikuntha. (Guru Charita. v. 1147) (D. Nath:2011: p.92). However, Sankardeva inspired a large number of tribes like the koches, Kacharis, Chutias, Matak, Moran, Rabhas who were brought into the Vaishnavism fold. These process of assimilation, later on, led by the Mahantas of different Satras. Mahapurush Sankardeva also used his literary works for evolution of his neo-Vaishnava philosophy. He knew that people should be understand his religious ideology through his literary activities. He composed many literary works. Among his works, Kirtan Ghosa, Gunamala may be mentionable. Sankardeva wrote many drams like Keli Gopal, Kaliya Daman, Rukmini Haran etc. The dramas written by Mahapurush Sankardeva are known as Ankiya Naats. The first drama composed by Sankardeva is known as Chihnajatra. Sankardeva also created famous Bhauna presentation for perform his dramas before common people. It may be noted that the music and dances which created by Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva are still performed in the Satra institutions. Such song and dances become the integral part of the Assamese folk culture. Amongst songs which are sung in the Satra institutions, the most well-known are the bargeets. It may be noted that the bargaats are a collection of celestial songs which are set to specific ragas. Some 30 ragas have their own peculiarities. They are sung in both anivaddva and nivaddva parts like other Indian classical ragas. (Jogesh Das :2012: p.136). It is to be noted that the bargaats are composed in a new language which called as Brajvali. The first bargeet "mana meri rama caranahi" was composed by Srimanta Sankardeva during his first pilgrimage at Badrikarshram. It is to be mentioned that the bargeet occupy the most sacred place among devotional songs of the Satras. Sankardeva established the Satras and Namghara which became the center of learning and guardians of neo-Vaishnavism. These institutions as well as Sankardeva's literary activities helped to promote the cultural and intellectual activities of Sankardeva. Sankardeva brought about a great change in the religious approach of the masses through his neo-Vaishnavism. Thus Sankardeva contributed a lot to preaching the neo-Vaishnavism in the Assam valley.

6. Conclusion of the Paper

From above discussion on the topic, it is seen that Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism philosophy started the socio-cultural renaissance in the Assam Valley during the 15th century onwards. The neo-Vaishnavism movement contributed to development of vernacular literature, art, architecture and other cultural activities which oriented with the tradition of the indigenous people. The paper is also revealed that the neo-Vaishnavism movement contributed immensely towards the formation of a broader -de-tribalized homogeneous society in Assam. The paper is revealed that the neo-Vaishnava movement played a vital role in reconstruction of the Assamese Society. Sankardeva made some great effort to propagating the neo-Vaishnavism among the depressed class and the tribal people. Sankardeva used his economic and social vision for making the society. The paper is revealed that Srimanta Sankardeva, Madhavdeva worked sincerely towards upliftment of the Assamese society. Thus, the paper is an attempting to reflect Sankardeva role in preaching the neo-Vaishnavism principle among the Assamese society.

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