

## Srimanta Sankaradev and Bhakti Movement in Medieval Assam

Monjurul Hoque

Assistant Professor, Department of History  
N.C.College, Badarpur

### Abstract:

Srimanta Sankardev, the pioneer of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in medieval Assam was not only propagator of a new faith but also the great socio-religious reformer and a man of culture and contributed huge contributions to the socio-religious and the cultural life of medieval Assam. At the time of his birth, the socio-religious condition of Assam was too much deplorable one. To save the situation Sankardev, founded the NeoVaishnavite religion in Assam which is commonly known as the Ek Sharan Naam Dharma and undertook the steps to remove the social evils and religious anomalies, prevailing in the society. The main principle of his religion is that there is one God in the earth i.e. Vishnu which is invisible, invincible, almighty and omnipotent, and the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. The people could attain salvation through the process of Bhakti i.e. devotion to the God which could be derived by chanting the songs that composed narrating the virtues and the activities of the God. He was accepted as the guru (spiritual preceptor) by all sections of people and took sharana under him. Sankardev was not only a religious propagator; he was a great social reformer, a reputed scholar, a man of arts and culture and many more. He is regarded as the pioneer of the socio-religious movement of Medieval Assam. The objective of this paper is to highlight the contribution of the great saint in the Bhakti Movement. The study is based on secondary sources.

**Keywords:** *Neo-Vaishnavite movement, propagator, Ek Sharan Naam Dharma, sharana etc.*

### I. Introduction:

Srimanta Sankardev was the propagator of the Neo-Vaishnavism and the social reformer of Medieval Assam. Srimanta Sankardev was born in Sak 1371 (1449 A.D.) at Alipukhuri of Bardoa in present Nagaon district of Assam. His father was Kusumbar Siromani Bhuyan and mother was Satyasandhya. Both the father and mother of Sankardev died in his infancy, so he was brought up by his grandmother Khersuti in great care. He started his education in the age of 12 in the tol of Pandit Mahendra Kandali and within a short time he was able to show his scholarly quality. He flourished when the NeoVaishnavite movement was developed in different places of India during the period from 12th to 16th century A.D. Vaihnnavism which means—the particular theistic religion in which Vishnu is the object of worship and devotion as the supreme God is as old as Rigveda where it is mentioned that Vishnu was identical with god Sun . The Satapatha Brahmana, the Aitereya Brahamana, Pancharatra Samhita also refer to God Vishnu and the procedure of the worship of the deity was as like the Sakti cult . The Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Puarna indicate the followers of the cult as Bhagavata . The Puranas uphold the doctrine of avataras

(incarnations) and identified Vishnu in the form of Rama and Krishna. The archaeological sources like the rock inscription of Vidisapur (2nd century B. C.), the Rajyul inscription of Mathura ( 1st century A.D.), the Sculptural remains of Tuman city of central Asia (1st century A.D.) indicate the existence of the creed. The sources of the Gupta rulers indicate that the Vaishnavism widely developed in India and the idea of the incarnation of Vishnu (avatar bad) was popularized under the Gupta monarch. However from the time of Harsavardhana of Kanouj, who was the great follower of Mahayana Buddhism the Vaishnavism lost its royal patronage and shifted its influence towards the Southern India.

## **II. Objectives:**

The objectives of this study are

- i. In this paper it tried to focus on the contribution of the great saint on the religious and social life of medieval Assam.
- ii. To highlight the contribution of the great saint in the Bhakti Movement.

## **III. Methodology:**

The study is based on descriptive and historical method. The study secondary sources

## **IV. Discussion**

Srimanta Sankaradeva, the Vaishnavite Guru of Assam is not only the greatest religious preacher, but also the greatest radical social reformer ever born on the soil of Assam. As a matter of fact, all great religious prophets of the world, Jesus Christ, Hazarat Muhammad, Gautama Buddha, are essentially great social reformers. And Srimanta Sankaradeva of Assam is also no exception. All these great prophets and preachers were born into societies full of religio-social evils that were about to axe at the super-structure of society. When chaos became the order of the day and all irreligious practices predominated in the name of religion, these supermen raised their heads with the message of new faith and social justice. What is said by Lord Krishna in the Gita regarding His incarnation has proved axiomatic in the case of every prophet and preacher of the world. And Lord Krishna's famous saying, "*O Bharata! Whenever there is a blemish on the Truth, and untruth comes to predominate, I have an incarnation to protect the truthful, to destroy the evil-doer and to establish the rule of dharma in the world*". The dharma or religion of the Gita is a force that binds all together for a pure and harmonious social living. So anything that mars the purity of living can never be termed as religion, whatsoever be the claim of its votary. Srimanta Sankaradeva was born into a society, where all sorts of evil practices, resulting from Saktism, Tantricism and decadent Buddhism, were rampant. And the so-called 'priests', guided by their own extremely selfish motive of loaves and fishes exercised their dominance over the politics and sociology of the time. Not to speak of countless evil practices justifying their selfish ends, these Judases had brought about such degradation in human dignity and status that men could be butchered just like goats and buffaloes at the altars of gods and goddesses. And a reign of terror prevailed in Assam in the name of religion. The most tragic outcome of the Vedic heritage was the ugly concept of casteism in which the so-called 'upper' castes closed all doors of

wisdom and devotion to the so-called 'lower' castes. The 'lower-caste' people were deprived of all prestigious positions in the society; even their very presence in religious institutions or ceremonials was an act of pollution leading to sin. Being deprived of social justice, the downtrodden were awaiting the coming of a Messiah. And the Messiah came in the person of Srimanta Sankaradeva, to rescue the downtrodden and to establish truth and social justice in (the form of) a new socio-religious order. Clearly therefore, the task before Sankaradeva was simply revolutionary.

The greatest of social reforms ushered in by Srimanta Sankaradeva is the equal recognition of man irrespective of caste, creed and status through the propagation of his neo-Vaishnavite faith. The 'lower caste' people got due recognition for the first time in the social history through the heart-searching message of the Great Guru. When there was thus a call for social justice and equality of man, Sankaradeva became the Savior of the Masses. But the Savior was not tolerated in his own soil by the corrupt socio-political system of the time and the great revolutionary had to shift base from Assam to Koch Behar for the propagation of his new faith, under the sheltering wing of the great king Naranarayana. It is interesting to note in this connection that although there is the remnant of casteism in Assam, it is not in the same criminal proportion as in other parts of India. The social evil of untouchability against which Mahatma Gandhi had to wage a crusade in the twentieth century India was severed at the root by Sankaradeva in the fifteenth century Assam. The great Vaishnavite preacher had in his religious fold bhaktas (disciples) from all sections of the society including the Muslims, and class distinction was fully and finally abolished in his monotheistic faith of Eka-Sarana-Hari-Nama-Dharma. In the present day India where atrocities on the Harijans are going on, there is a very great need of spreading the message of Srimanta Sankaradeva among the misguided sections of the society.

Srimanta Sankaradeva established a new democratic social order with the Namghar (the Prayer House) at the base and the Satra (central monastery) at the top. His preachings and messages were conveyed to the masses through this democratic channel. The Namghar has become the solid base of the Assamese society in many a respect. It is the common meeting-place of the villagers not only for the congregational prayer or kirtana (singing of the Lord's Name), but also for the maintenance of social justice. And the foundation of this social order is so firm and deep that it has withstood all political upheavals like the removal of the age-old monarchies and the establishment of the colonial rule of the British imperialists. In fact, this democratic edifice of the Assamese society, with its base laid deep down in the village community, has been so designed that it has got absolutely nothing to do with any political changeover of the land.

Srimanta Sankaradeva kept his neo-Vaisnava faith aloof from the pull of politics of the time. His avowed principle was that he would never be the Guru of a king. Although Sankaradeva received patronage from King Naranarayana of Koch Behar, he refused to accept the king as his disciple. When the king gave him an ultimatum, Sankaradeva, it is said, preferred breathing his last to his acting as guru of a king. Had

Sankaradeva willed to dominate over the politics of his time, he could have done it quite easily, and Naranarayana would have acted as the propagator of his new faith as Asoka or Harsavardhana did in the case of Buddhism. But Sankaradeva kept his religion away from the political order; he did not realize any immediate gain but his greatest gain is that his democratic religion has remained pure and unshaken, withstanding all political storms that swept over Assam.

Srimanta Sankaradeva's religion is most liberal and tolerant. It is also the simplest and easiest way of attaining God. Economically, it is the most viable. It may be called the religion of the common man. Moreover, there is no room for any hostility between different 'classes' of people in the name of religion. Even the Saktism and Tantricism learnt the lesson of humanism from Sankaradeva's faith and these decadent Hindu faiths have been considerably modified. Cultural Revolution Srimanta Sankaradeva had also brought about a Cultural Revolution in Assam. He had opened not only the door of religion for the laity but also that of literature, art and culture, for all. It is the tremendous fortune of the Assamese that Sankaradeva was born in Assam to lay the firm foundation of their language, literature, dance, drama, music, art and culture as media for propagating his faith. And for this widespread socio-religio-cultural appeal, he has become ultimately the Common Guru of the entire Assamese.

To popularize his faith, Sankardev took different steps so as to spread it towards all nooks and corners of Assam and its adjoining territories. As a part of this mission many Sanskrit works related to the Vaishnavism as like Bhagavata and the Ramayana, the Mahabharata etc were translated to Assamese, the people's language. He also composed number of works like Kirtan-Ghosa, Gunamala, Bhakti Pradeep, Bhakti Ratnakar, Bargeets, Bhatimas, and the Kabyas like Harichandra Upakhyan, Rukmini Haran etc in local vernacular. He also wrote numbers of Dramas namely Patni Prasad, Kaliya Daman, Rukmini Haran, Keli Gopal, Parijat Haran and Ram Vijay so as to exhibit the activities God Vishnu among the people. In this respect a mentionable aspect is that like other Vaishnava saints of other parts of India Sankardev and his followers used the local language vernacular for their writings. Srimanta Sankardev was a versatile genius. Along with the propagation of Neo-Vaishnavite and literary creation he left numerous contributions to the Assamese culture. The most mentionable among these was the creation of Namghar, which he used for praying and chanting the God Vishnu. He practiced Bhaona observation and religious discussion in the Namghar. Gradually it became the nerve centre of the rural culture of Assam. He also started the Satra institution in Assam which later became the main centre for the religious discourse in Assam. Sankardev was the pioneer in the social reforms of medieval Assam. The great saint knew it very well that Assam was a land where people of different tribes, castes, and sub-castes were living and so without having the harmony among the inhabitants belonging to different tribes, castes the prosperity of the land was impossible. So along with the propagation of his new faith Srimanta Sankardev took up the measures to remove the social barriers and restrictions that were prevailing at his times, and thereby to form the social harmony and unity of the people of Assam. He had the full beliefs in the principles of equality and humanism and allowed the people of all castes, community, tribes and sex to become his bhakat

(disciples). Thus all the inhabitants, high or low born including the kiratas, kacharis, khasis, miris, yavanas (muslims ?) cowherds, washer men, koches, mlecchas etc could attain salvation after accepting the religion of Sankara . To show the example of this equality of castes and community Sankardev included Govinda from the Garo community, Paramananda from Miri, Narahari from Ahoms, Jayram from the Bhot, Ramai from Kachari, Purnananda from Keot, Chandsai from Yavan, Haridas from Bania and Bhattadev from Brahman community in the religious assembly. Sankardev was even sympathetic towards the untouchables and the unsocial elements and criminals and thereby tried to give the chance to have their pure life. Thus the unsocial elements like killers of the Brahmins, killers of preceptors, the matricide, patricide and the outcastes' people who had the habit of taking the discarded foods could have the pure life becoming the followers of his faith.

#### **V. Conclusion:**

Ideology of Sankardev was not confined within the humanitarian activities; it included the activities of universalism. According to him all living beings were equal and God was dwelling in the heart of them and so one should show respect to all . From the above discussion it is seen that the contributions of Srimanta Sankardev and his followers towards the socio-religious and cultural life of medieval Assam is noteworthy one. Their activities determined a new direction to the society of medieval Assam. It will not exaggeration to say that the contributions of Sankardev and his followers in respect of social, religion, language, literature and culture is incomparable one. In a sense Sankardev started a new era in the religious and social movement of Assam. No doubt Srimanta Sankardev was the pioneer of the Bhakti movement of the Medieval Assam.

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