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Contextualising Sankaradeva and the Egalitarian Nature of Neo-Vaishnavism in Medieval Assam

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ABSTRACT

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Sankaradeva had played a very significant role in building the social and cultural life of the people of Assam. This new creed of Sankaradeva, adhering to main principles of *Bhakti*, revolutionize the entire face of the life of the people of Assam and lead to the formation of broader civil society. This movement of Sankaradeva had cut deep into the fabrics of the Assamese society and transcending all barriers of caste and tribe. It had united the diverse tribal communities of the region and gave it a culture, later to be identified as Assamese. Sankaradeva spread the ides of “*EksaranaNam Dharma*” which means taking shelter in one God and that is Krishna form of Vishnu, and dispelled the darkness of ignorance, superstition and irrational belief and practices. Moreover, religious institutions of the movement like *Namghars* (prayer hall) and *Satras* (monasteries) which were the product of the movement had a very influencing role in the social life of the people in the medieval period because these institutions worked both as a common platform and a democratic platform for the people. This paper is an attempt to study the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Sankaradeva and its contribution in the formation of an egalitarian society.

KEYWORDS: Neo-Vaishnavism, Bhakti, Satra, Namghar

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, India during the fifteenth century was in the throes of a religious upheaval. The pervasion and debaucheries in the name of religion, was an all pervading phenomenon in Indian society of the period, where the rigidity of the caste system eating to its vitals, had been reducing the bulk of the population to depressed classes and putting barriers to their trade pursuits.¹ It was at this time when religious leaders and social reformers from different parts of the country came out trying to break the orthodox Brahmanical dominancy and to put an end to the traditional religious ceremonies and the social discrimination in the society.² The leaders promoted a feeling of universal brotherhood among the different communities and voiced for equality in the field of religion. They also worked for the removal of superstitious belief in the existing belief system through a movement which is very popularly known as *Bhakti* Movement. This reformative seed of equality in the field of religion was first sown in Assam by a great philosopher and a social reformer named Sankaradeva. He initiated a religious reform movement called *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement in the sixteenth century of medieval Assam. This movement is very popularly known in Assam as *Eka-Sharana-Nam Dharma* which meant 'shelter in single God'. The movement spread tremendously to different parts of Assam under different religious leaders and it has a great impact in reforming and developing the religious aspects of the medieval Assamese society.

RELIGIOUS CONDITION OF MEDIEVAL ASSAM

Assam was originally a land of different heterogeneous tribes, who were believers in animism.³ Hinduism, though now very general throughout the land is not indigenous in Assam.⁴ Although it is very difficult to place the exact date of the origin of Hinduism but it was undoubtedly in vogue at about 830.⁵ However, with the arrival of the Aryans, particularly of the Brahmins, Brahmanical rites and rituals emerged in Assam.⁶ At the same time, the land was dominated by the majority of the indigenous tribes and they could not completely reject the tribal beliefs and practices. In many cases, they adopted and fitted them in their religion. There was an intermingling of Brahmanical rites and tribal beliefs and practices in Assam.⁷ The Brahmins were the priestly class and enjoyed a privileged life in the society. They maintained the schools of Sanskrit learning and enjoyed important offices in the administration.

However, the most dominant cult of Assam from the ancient period was *Shaktism* and it turned to be very powerful during the medieval period up to the advent of the *Neo-Vaishnavism*. The two Sanskrit texts, namely, *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* that were most probably composed in Assam dealt with the *Shakt* cult of medieval Assam. The *Devi Purana* which was probably composed at the end of the seventh century or the beginning of the eighth century stated that *Devi*

(mother Goddess) was worshipped in her different forms and in different parts of India including Kamarupa.⁸ However, it was from the tenth century, the Goddess Kamakhya emerged as one of the most popular deity and Kamarupa became the main centre for worship of the *Shakti* cult.⁹ The sect came to be the most powerful one in Assam by the twelfth century and the temple of Kamakhya at Guwahati and Dikkaravasini became the important centres of *Shaktism*. The deity of Dikkaravasini was identified with the goddess *Tamesvari* and *Kechai-khati* (eaters of raw flesh).¹⁰

The chief scriptures of Assam *Shaktism* i.e. the *Kalika purana* and the *Yogini tantra* belonged to the 'left-hand' school of *Shaktism*, which mentioned several types of blood sacrifices and various esoteric rites. The account of *Brihat-Rajavansavali*, a work compiled under King Harendra Narayana of Koch-Bihar gives a brief description about the Hindu society of Kamarupa. It stated that the good-looking Brahmins of Kamarupa lived merrily at home performing the customary rites as prescribed in the Vedas. They performed the Vedic ceremonies like the *Pumsavana* and many others and remained very attentive to their time-honoured customs. There was no obligation to them partaking of fish and flesh. In the land of Kamarupa, *Brahmacharya* had not to be practised through life and no vows of *Ekadasi*¹¹ had to be observed. By the single vow of *Sukhlashdami*, they used to enjoy as much as religious merit as by observing a millions of *Ekadasivows*.¹² The account provided an easy understanding that the Brahmins had become the staunch *Shaktas* and they were at the topmost position in the Hindu society and became the custodian of the Hindu faith.

The religious life of the other section of the people in the society began depending completely on them for performing any kind of religious rites and practices. The priestly class became the guardian of the Hindu society and instead of making religion for the spiritual satisfaction and dynamic force in the life of the people; they made it convenient and benefitted themselves by introducing many elaborate and costly ceremonialism.¹³ Throughout the history, this sect is seemed to have been allied with the kings and aristocracy. Until the sixteenth century, *Shaktism* was considered as the main form of Hinduism in Assam and it was confined only to the upper section of the people in the society.¹⁴

EARLY LIFE OF SANKARADEVA

Sankaradeva was born in the middle of the fifteenth century in a *Bhuva* family of Kayastha caste at a place called Alipukhuri. This place is about sixteen miles far from the present district of Nagaon in Assam. The earliest biographies of Sankaradeva have not mentioned the date of his birth. Daityari Thakur, the earliest and most authentic biographer of Sankaradeva, is silent about the exact date of birth of Sankaradeva. However, he mentioned that Sankaradeva was born in the month of *Asvina* in 1449 C.E. The later biographies from the eighteenth century onwards have recorded two

dates i.e. 1449 C.E and 1463 C.E. as the birth anniversary of Sankaradeva. The tradition, as well as the majority of the later biographers supported the former date.¹⁵

The genealogy of Sankaradeva is traced from the old hagiographies. A long pedigree of Sankaradeva was connecting his ancestry to a mythical character that was starting right from *Krnsa*¹⁶ However, among all of them, the man who claims undisputed historicity was his Great great grandfather, Candivara, who had been a resident of Gauda, presently situated at West Bengal. He came, or was rather sent to Assam by Dharmanarayana, the king of Gauda, as a member of the 'seven families of Brahmins and seven families of Kayasthas', at the request of Durlabhnarayan, the ruler of Kamata Kingdom in the thirteenth century.¹⁷ Sankaradeva's family was called 'SiromaniBhuyan', those who were the chief among the *Bhuyan* clan. His father's name was Kusumbara and his mother was Satyasandhya Devi. His mother died within three days of his birth and later he was brought up by his grandmother, Khersuti. The child was sent to a village school at the age of twelve years. The school was maintained by MahendraKandali, who was an erudite scholar.¹⁸

SANKARADEVA AND *EK-SHARANA NAMA DHARMA*

Sankaradeva had travelled different parts of India and noticed the spirit of *Bhakti* movement that was spreading tremendously in different parts of India during the fifteenth century. After his return from the first pilgrimage, Sankaradeva constructed a small *Namghar*(prayer hall) at Bardowa with his friend Ramarama. There he composed and placed the work, *Gopi-uddhava-samvad*¹⁹ in the altar, which is referred as *simhasana* or *thapana*.²⁰ This institution (*Nam-ghar*) became the nucleus of the *Vaisnava* organisation, which later on spread throughout different places of Assam in the form of regional establishments called *Satra*, and numerous village temples known as *Nam-ghar*.²¹

In general, Sankaradeva combined three elements to form the main tenets of his creed. *Satsanga*, the association of the good, that is, *bhaktas* taken from the *Bhagavata*; *Nama*, the chanting of the Lord, taken from the *Padma-purana*, *Uttara-khanda*, and *Eksarana*, the undivided devotion to one and the same god as enunciated by the *Bhagavat-Gita*. Sankaradeva collected a group of devout disciples, and started holding daily devotional recitations known as *Namakirtana* and religious discourses at these institutions (*Nam-ghar*).

The official name of Sankaradeva's *Vaishnavism* is *Eksarana Nam dharma*; the religion of supreme surrender to one; and that One is Vishnu who in the form of Narayana assumes incarnations from age to age. The most favourite incarnation in which Vishnu is to be worshipped is that of Krsna.²² Sankaradeva taught the idea of equality in all human beings and accepted his disciples from different communities including the tribal people and the Muslims and placed all of them in equal

footing. Some of his chief disciples were Chandsai, a Muslim; Govinda, among the *Garo* tribe; Paramananda, among the *Miri* tribe; Jayananda, among the *Bhutia* tribe; Narahari, among the *Ahoms*; Srirama, a Kaivarta²³; Madhava of *Jayantia*, a potter; and Damodara, a *Baniya* or trader.²⁴ He took upon himself the task of propagating the doctrines of *bhakti* or the religion of love in simple verses of various metres in the language of people and of propagating them through congregations. He found that the people were attracted almost readily towards this new creed, and he took to regular proselytising.²⁵ BanikantaKakati, a historian, said that the *Eka-Saharan* system of Sankaradeva is not a religion of bargain and barter between God and men or of sacrifice and easy recompense; it is one with exclusive emphasis on slow spiritual regeneration, on growth of a new spiritual outlook by laying flesh and spirit in the hands of the Lord.²⁶

SANKARADEVA AND CASTE QUESTION

Sankaradeva, throughout his life worked to wipe out the caste differentiation and established equal rights for all castes and communities. He voiced for a society in which every individual irrespective of any caste or creed would get equal opportunities without any discrimination in the field of religion. However, it has to be noted that Sankaradeva focussed on the idea of egalitarian society in the spiritual domain. The idea of equality in the philosophical views of Sankaradeva towards the caste system varies while compared to the other medieval *bhakti* saints of India. The religious leaders and social reformers like Kabir, Nanak and Dadu in the other parts of India challenged the caste ladder strictly which was not a strong point of Assamese Neo-*Vaishnavism*. Sankaradeva never tried to do away or interfere with caste regulation and his sole concern was to see that the social difference did not take place unnecessarily putting restriction upon one's inherent right to spiritual development.²⁷

“The service of humanity is the service of God”²⁸ had been the motto of the *Vaishnava* reformers. Sankaradeva questioned the Brahmanical dominancy in the religious activities and wrote many verses in support of the backward caste people and in improving their religious status. The literary works of Sankaradeva repleted in breaking the Brahmanical religious dominancy. In the popular work *Prahada- Carita*, Sankaradeva mentioned that every individual in the universe including the Candala by caste, is better than a Brahman if he meditates in the name of Hari (God).

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*“Yitocandalra kaya vakya mane, sadayasumarehari
Ache bahravratayitobrahmanara, sisisresthatatokari.”*

He further mentioned in his *Vaikuntha-Prayana* that those who do not discriminate any person on the grounds of caste are recognised as a scholar.³⁰

“*Brahmanaracandalaranivicarikula, datatacoratayarabhailaekajnana
Nicasadhutayarabhailaekajnana, tahakesepanditabuliyasarvajana*”

NEO-VAISHNAVISM AND ITS EGALITARIAN INSTITUTIONS

The Neo-*Vaishnavism* of Sankaradeva gave birth to the foundation of the religious institutions which were one of the most essential features of this movement. These institutions could be divided into two categories, firstly, *Namghar*, which means prayer hall and secondly, *Satras*, which means the *Vaishnava* monasteries.

***Namghar* (Prayer Hall)**

The *Namghars* were set up as central institutions of the village that served the purpose of spreading the intellectual and the cultural activities in the village, and in course of time this prayer halls become the nerve-centre of the village and came to co-ordinate all the aspects of social, political as well as the economic life of the Assamese people.³¹ This institutions not only serve as a place for reciting prayers but various cultural activities like singing *bargitas* (devotional songs) with proper melodies and dramatic performances were also held here. These institutions worked as a repository of cultural activities that helped the Assamese society till to the modern times to hold it's a strong and charming cultural image. The *Namghar*'s does not differentiates any individuals on the basis of caste or creed and worked as a democratic platform. It also played a judicial role where villagers from different communities gathered at this place to have discussions and solve their problems related to their day to day life.

***Satras* (Vaishnava Monasteries)**

While the *Namghar* worked at the base level, *Satras* i.e. central monasteries were at the top. The word *Satra* is a Sanskrit word. The term “*Satra*” was mentioned in the *Rig Veda* and its etymological meaning is that which protects the good and the honest.³² In the initial stage of the *Vaishnavite* movement, *Satra* was used as a religious sitting or association where the *Bhagavata* was recited or explained and not as a systemized institution.³³ Inside the *satras*, there was a prayer hall where the main activities were performed. The structure of these *Satra*'s gradually changed with the later development of the movement. However, from the biographical literature of the *Vaishnava* Saints it can be known that each *Satras* contains a prayer hall and the Shrine.

The *Satra* institutions gave an expression to the social organisations of Assam. In the *Vaishnava Satra*, every individual was treated as equal without any discrimination on the basis of caste or classes. All the devotees, disciples and followers were considered as equal and they performed all kinds of works, whether social, moral or religious. In the gathering of worshippers, people from all ranks and orders had the same privilege and equal status. It was based on egalitarian

ideals. There was no restriction even in reading the sacred books. The doors of the *Satras* were kept open to all classes of people in the society.³⁴ There were many instances in the *Guru-carita-katha* where the egalitarian nature of this institution could be noticed.

The biographical literatures presented many instances which supported the egalitarian nature of these institutions. The very common incidence in the life of the Sankaradeva's spiritual disciple Madhavadeva was mentioned in almost all the biographical work of the *Vaishnava* saints. Madhavadeva, while his stay at Bhela Satra, presently situated in the district of Koch Behar, disliked the action of an old nurse of King Lakhminarayan, whom he considered as his own mother. The reason was the unequal distribution of cloths among the monks. Madhavadeva, is said to have calm down only when she agreed to distribute the same quality of cloths equally to all the monks.³⁵ There are also many other instances that were put forward by the biographers which reflected the egalitarian equalities of these institutions. However, it had to be mentioned here that these *Satras* which were at its initial stage worked on a democratic plane could not retain its original character for long. Sankaradeva, who gave the foundation to this religious institution to bring the simplicity and equality among his followers, itself, took the form of a new class of society and giving its way in the formation of a parallel empire of its own.

Towards the later part of the medieval period, the spirituals leaders of the *Satras* moved to the royal court seeking favour and patronage to increase their power and affluence. The egalitarian nature of the institution which was based on the simplicity and austerity gradually took the form of holding powers and prestige in the hands of the spiritual leaders. As a natural corollary to these acquisitions of power and wealth, courtly formalities and customs began to gain ground in the dealings of the affluent *Satras*. The power of the *Satradhikar* increases on the political plane along with the standard of their living. The increase of power and wealth created a huge gap between the Guru (Spiritual leader) and their disciples. The exchange of philosophical ideas, which helped in widening the intellectual and imaginative horizon of the common mind gradually, disappeared with this gap.³⁶

CONCLUSION

Thus, Sankaradeva with his philosophy of *Bhakti* provided the sixteenth century Assam a new face of religion that was based on democratic principles. In contrast to the orthodox Brahmanical model of Hinduism, Sankaradeva provided a very simpler and easier way of worshipping that does not require any external agency for performing any kind of rites and rituals. The movement opened up a new dimension for an inclusive society with its flexible and easy going

ideology. It reformed the religious life of the people of medieval Assam and provided them an institutional democratic platform in the form of *Satras* and *Namghars*.

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