



NEO-VAISHNAVISM MOVEMENT OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA IN ASSAM: ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPRINTS

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ABSTRACT

The propagator of Neo-Vaishnavism was Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568). When he was born, the socio-cultural situations of Assam were too much lamentable. Around then different misbehaviours were submitted for the sake of religion, which vitiated the social structure. There were individuals who approximately clung to Saivism or Vaishnavism and other people who rehearsed Saktism. The supporters of these factions enjoyed malicious practices like animal and human sacrifices, mystical ceremonies and so forth. Furthermore, the outcomes were poor people and oppressed individuals became survivors of these horrendous practices. To spare this circumstance Sankardeva, established the Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam, which is normally known as the Eksarana-Nam-Dharma. Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism has given birth of new a social and social life for Assamese individuals and zeroed in on a public character moulded by social conventions and language through Cultural Nationalism, which presented to the Indigenous individuals with the assistance of Sattras and Namghar. Sankardeva was not only a religious propagator, but also a great social reformer and the pioneer of the socio-religious or cultural movement of medieval Assam in the Sixteenth Century.

Key words: Neo-Vaishnavism, Saivism, Saktism, Assamese, Sattras, Namghar

Cite this Article: Dipankar Das and Chinmoy Raj Saikia, Neo-Vaishnavism Movement of Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam: Its Socio-Cultural Imprints, *International Journal of Management*, 11(10), 2020, pp 1395-1399.

<http://iaeme.com/Home/issue/IJM?Volume=11&Issue=10>

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement, spearheaded by saint Sankaradeva is a great socio-cultural revolution in Assam (R. Borah, 2016). During the fifteenth and sixteenth century, *Neo-Vaishnavism* has brought a large spectrum of changes in almost all aspects of life including socio-cultural and religious dimensions. Sankaradeva was born in a place called Alipukhuri, a place close to Bardowa. He was the protagonist of *Neo-Vaishnavism*, later known as *Eksarana-Nam-Dharma*. This philosophical thought mainly follows the religious teachings of Lord Krishna (Sarma, 1996). It is well said in *Bhagavata-purana* and *Gita* that Lord Vishnu from time to time assumes incarnations in various forms to redeem the world and to graze his devotees. One such incarnation is *Narayana*. When a devotee completely surrenders his/her mind, body and ego in the feet of omnipotent Lord Krishna, then it is called as *Eksarana* (B. Borah, 2015). *Nama*, which comes under the act *Eksarana-nam-dharma* is nothing but the recitation and singing of the glorious acts of Lord Krishna. Moreover, this can appropriately be termed as *Nam-dharma*. This Neo-Vaishnavite movement is a landmark change which has entirely altered the societal socio-cultural tradition prevailed in the Assamese society. There are several key aspects of this movement which is yet to be explored and learned.

1.2. Religious background of Neo-Vaishnavism

An alternate sort of society existed before the presence of Srimanta Sankardeva's *Neo-Vaishnavism* ideology. Before *Neo-Vaishnavism*, various tribal religious beliefs, hindu cults, *saktism* and *saivism* dominated the Assamese social system. Furthermore, common people were exploited by the then dominated Assamese society. Individuals were confused or because of absence of appropriate information or knowledge, they were constrained to superstitious beliefs and practices and sacrificed animals like birds, at a number of temples, even human beings to satisfy unknown forces. This tradition of sacrificing living being was considered to be a part of religious rituals of the society or a way to worship god. Some peoples believe in *saivism* and others believe in *saktism*. Indeed, even *sati-jowa pratha* (according to hinduism, a widow burns herself upon her husband's funeral pyre) was a praxis predominant in the society. Seeing all these evil practices in society, several social reformers tried to establish new rituals, religious beliefs and a neoteric trend based on *Vaishnavism*. In Assam, under the initiative of Srimanta Sankardeva the *neo-vaishnavism* movement began, which brought about awakening changes in the Assamese society (B. Borah, 2015).

2. POPULAR BELIEFS- SAIVISM

From the seventh to twelfth century (7th to 12th century), *Saivism* enjoyed royal patronage in ancient Kamrupa. It is said that, in the ancient kings of Kamrupa Shiva was the tutelary God and the patron of the land. During the sixteenth century A.D., at the point when it was the period of the Koch rulers, the *Saivism* was noticeable so much that it turned out to be the most famous confidence between the individuals. Indeed, Sankadeva's father was an aficionado of *Saivism*; he named his child Sankardeva as he viewed as brought into the world in the wake of appeasing Siva. Around then the Ahoms Kings were the supporters of *Saivism* and set up numerous a noticeable Saiva temple for the love of Shiva. *Saivism* is one of the significant traditions inside Hinduism, believes that the Supreme Being of the universe is Shiva. The adherents of *Saivism* are designated "Saivities". It is perhaps the largest sects, which accepts that Shiva is the maker or creator, destroyer and preserver of the world. The beginning of *Saivism* might be followed to the origination of Rudra (which is mentioned in the Rig Veda). Siva in a real sense implies kind, friendly, generous or auspicious and 'The Auspicious One'.

2.1. Beliefs and practices of Saivism

Saivism revolves in all directions of Shiva. However, *Saivism* has many sub-traditions of whose theological practices and beliefs are different with one another. One gathering or group, which is called Vedic-Puranic, who used the terms, for example, Mahadeva, Shiva and Maheshvara, and they use iconography, for example, the Nandi, Linga and Trishula, also in Shiva temples there were anthropomorphic statue of Shiva to help focus their practices. There is another sub-group, which is called esoteric, where in theology coordinates the god (Shiva) and the goddess (Shakti) side by side Agama teaching and Tantra practices which fuses it with or Sivata (Neuter abstraction) or abstract Shiva (Feminine Shiva) (Sarma, 1996).

2.2. Tantra Diksha traditions of Saivism

The principle component of all Shiva Tantra is the act of diksha, a stylized inception wherein supernaturally uncovered mantras which are given to the start by a teacher (Guru). A striking element of some 'left tantra' religious devotees was their quest for siddhis (Extraordinary capacities or supernatural abilities) and bala (Powers), for example, turning away risk (Santih) and that the capacity of harm enemies (Abhicarah). The ceremonial festival 'Ganachakras', would in some cases be held in graveyards and incineration grounds which included belonging by incredible female divinities (Deities) called Yoginis. The religion of Yoginis planned to increase extraordinary forces through obscure love of the Shakti or the female parts of the perfect. The groups conjoined sisterhoods that partook in the customs.

3. IDEOLOGY OF SAKTISM

Saktism was commonly prevalent medieval and ancient Assam alongside with *Saivism* up to the emergence of *Neo-Vaishnavism*. Ahom Kings and their nobles supported the ideology of *Neo-Vaishnavism* so that they had an impact on the socio-political and cultural life of the individuals (Mousumi, 2013). *Saktism* was essentially under the proclaiming of the Brahmins that the Kings and the nobles became passionate (Devout) *Sakta* (Devotees of *Saktism*), admires with the end goal of accomplishing high situations by prudence of the favors of mother Goddess. The remodels of the Kamakhya temple which is situated at Nilachal hills by the incomparable Koch ruler Naranarayana (1565 A.D.) is a proof of the royal patronage in the western region (in Assam). Despite the fact that at that time the *Saktism* was the state religion of the Koch kingdom, *Vaishnavism* appreciated an incredible place of honor from King Naranarayana and his sibling Generalissimo Cilaraya by prudence of the unfit grant and dedication of Sankardeva, who was at long last positioned among the nine gems of the royal court of Naranarayana. It was recorded in the set of history that the progenitors of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva were *Saktas*. In fact, Madhavdeva himself was a *Sakta* and the contentions he given for *Saktism* with Sankardeva at Dhuwahat in Majuli (present of Jorhat district in Assam) bears marvelous significance throughout the entire history of *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement in Assam (Mousumi, 2013). To the extent that it was Madhavdeva who headed the whole movement after the death of Sankardeva (Gitanjali, 2015). The principal teachings and precepts of *Neo-Vaishnavism* were clarified by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in their incredible works, 'Kirtan-Ghosa' and 'Nam Ghosa' individually (Borah 2016).

4. SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE IN ASSAM AFTER NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT

In the pre *neo-vaishnavite* period in the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was a time of crumbling and classes among the various tribes and ethnic groups for which harmony could barely be set up. At that time, there were the laws of the Kacharis, the Chutias and the BaroBhuyans in the eastern regions of Lakhimpur and Sivsagar, other than the Ahom kingdom which delighted in

the differentiation of the kingdom of this part of the land (Gitanjali, 2015). What's more, the western region involving the advanced regions of Kamrupa, Goalpara, Bapeta, Nalbari and Kokrajhar, was an indispensable part of Koch-Bihar and it was known as Kamatapu, which saw the ascent and fall of a few lines of regal force (royal power). *Trantism* and *Saktism* were predominant in this part of the land no uncertainty, yet the adjustment in the political situation with the accession of Naranarayana or Malladeva to the throne of Koch Kingdom had a synchronous change in the social counterpart. When the new Koch ruler supported *Vaishnavism* because of the endeavors Cilaraya, being instructed and taught in the customary framework at Kachi, had procured incredible knowledge in Sanskrit and came into contact with the mainstream of Hinduism for which it turned out to be extremely simple for Cilaraya to understand the significance and essentialness of the lessons of Sankardeva (Sarma, 1996). And it is at his influence that king Narayana slowly began considering moving once again to *Vaishnavism* instead of *Sakti* worship. Under the straightforward principle of *Nama-Kirtana*, for example presentation of songs in glorification of Lord Krishna or Vishnu for which *Neo-Vaishnavism* rose like a cleaning storm. Sankardeva proliferated his regulation of Bhakti dependent on the principle of universal brotherhood to the caste-ridden society. While likewise disposing of the caste codes, Sankardeva, gave more accentuation in the matter of individual neatness both internal and outward and right social conduct to build up social concordance in the society. His Bhakti movement asserted the dignity of man in society independent of birth and social rank, and established the spiritual equality amongst all men. It is not only fostered unity and brotherhood, but also work towards abolition of the *Trantic* practices like animal and human sacrifices, appeasement of the priest. Sankardeva was a practical initiator (Guru) who has inserted the service to 'Bhakat' (devotee) in his religious faith (R. Borah, 2016).

4.1. Emergence of Sattrra and Namghar as the place of worship

In the Assamese society Vaishnava Sattrra comprises of a huge petition corridor (large assembly) or get together lobby (prayer hall) which is called Kirtanghar, Namghar is supported by the two rows of pillars. By and large, Sattras which are situated on quadrangles secured by dividers or walls. Every fundamental Sattrra is set apart by the presence of a manikuta, namghar and two or four lines of hatis (Elephants). Holy person Sankardeva established two kinds of religious institutions— Sattrra and Namghar. The word Sattrra did not suggest the feeling of efficient organization, which was created after the downfall of Sankardeva. For Sankardeva, the Sattrra is a more focal institution, while Namghar is an institution of village level. Both Sattrra and Namghar play a significant part as a specialist of socio-cultural control. The Namghar is a middle part of Sattras activities. In the eastern end of the namghar opens into Manikuta (place of jewels), where the sacred book 'Kirtana' is set on a multitier wooden seat (thapana) alongside the icon and other paraphernalia are kept. Once in a while the entire thing is alluded as Kirtanghar. In a Sattrra, the entrance, which is prompting the inside by a little house is called batchara or korapat (like an entryway house). The focusing round the namghar and the manikuta of the Sattrra exist four or two rows of private huts proposed for administrative devotees (Bhaktas). There are numerous Sattras which is situated in Assam, for example Auniati, Kamalabari, Dakshinpat, Barpeta, Patbausi (near Barpeta, one of old Sattrra of Sankardeva's time). One of the important Sattrra is Sundaridia, which got the royal patronage for Koch and Ahom kings (Neog-1988).

5. CONCLUSION

Through the *Vaishnavite* movement the individuals of various castes, creed, races and different social groups which lived in various circumstances, their religious beliefs, practices and execution were likewise unique. Individuals were by degrees were changed over into one

regular religious faith dependent on devotional principles. It was the primary accomplishment of the *neo-vaishnavite* movement which turn towards the place, where there is Kamrupa, renowned from the previous period as the fortress of *Saktism* and *Tantricism*, into a prevalently *vaishnavite* land halfway. The Sattrā is viewed as the fundamental religious part of *Neo-Vaishnavism*. In a society, there are different religions, among them it is more complex to keep up and maintain and manage of morality and discipline. In such manner, the Namghar (prayer hall), in Assam, where all socio-cultural activities of a village are commonly performed following this religious institution called Sattrā. From the above discussion, it has been discovered that the *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement is a great social and cultural revolution to blend the people of Assam. At the point, when the society or people in Assam was unrest, divided and group ridden around then *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement spread the possibility of universal brotherhood. It assists with spreading this thought as there was no any idea of caste, class and racial division. The uniqueness of the religion lay in the way that the practice of *Ek-Saran-Hari-Naam-Dharma* achieved an ethnic joining and otherworldly or spiritual upliftment through an innovative mode of religious conduct dependent on indigenous components of the locale (Neog 1978). Through these different institutions, Srimanta Sankardeva attempted to eliminate different superstitious believes and practices from Assamese society and it enormously impacts on social conditions of the individuals of Assam. And finally, we can say that, his religion is most liberal, lenient, least difficult furthermore simplest way of attaining God and ready to keeping everything under control. In a word, we can term Sankardeva as an incredible social scholar, philosopher and thinker who achieved an equity of presence among all segments of individuals.

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