

Sankaradeva and *Ek-Sharan-Nam Dharma* in Medieval Assam: A Historical Overview

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Abstract

Neo-*Vaishnavism* is a religious movement, popularly known as *Ek-Sharan Nam Dharma*. It was founded and propagated in Assam by Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century. It had a significant impact in the social formation of medieval Assam. The movement helped in the promotion of universal brotherhood breaking the barriers of caste and tribe. It established a new social order in the society by removing the age old tradition of superstitions, corruption, irrational beliefs and practices. It also worked as a pervasive cultural movement, which appeared in various forms of cultural expression including philosophy, language, art and literature.

Keywords: Assam, *Ek-Sharan Nam Dharma*, Medieval, Neo-*Vaishnavism*, Social Formation.

Introduction

Social change is an essential feature for the growth and development of any society. In this process, religion is often considered as the strongest force. Religious beliefs and ideas had influenced the life of the Indian people and its culture to a great extent. In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand a religious movement of Assam known as Neo-*Vaishnavism* and its impact in medieval Assam.

Neo-*Vaishnavism* was a pantheistic religious tradition founded and propagated by Sankaradeva in the sixteenth century. This creed is popularly known in Assam as *Ek-Sharan Nam Dharma* which means 'Shelter-in-one-religion'. Assam from its ancient times had a history of Vishnu worship in various forms and it is evident from the archeological and literary sources. However, Sankaradeva's new creed differed from the earlier patterns of

Vishnu worship. He popularized the cult of Krishna worship in a very simple way of devotion called *Bhakti*.

Historical Background of Medieval Assam

The medieval period of Assam begins with the advent of the Ahoms¹ in the first half of the thirteenth century². Geographically, the entire Brahmaputra valley and the modern districts of Koch Behar and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal came under the periphery regions of the medieval Assam³. During this period, the political power of the land was distributed among different independent principalities of the land.⁴

Religion, on the other hand was also divided among the people on the grounds of their indigenous faith, beliefs and culture. Thus, it can be assumed that the medieval Assam was in a state of political turmoil, religious bigotry and cultural stagnation. It is during this juncture, Sankaradeva, a great scholar and a social reformer, after completing twelve years of pilgrimage in different holy places of India, introduced a creed which is based on the principles of *Bhakti*. It revolutionized the entire face of the life of the Assamese people leading to the formation of a broader civil society. It had united the diverse tribal communities of the region and gave it a culture which later came to be identified as Assamese.⁵

Importance of the Study

Neo-*Vaishnavism* played significant role in the formation of Assamese society. It transcended all barriers of caste and tribe. It encouraged the use of vernacular language and gave it a perfect shape. Further, it accelerated the pace of a renaissance of literature and fine arts. The *Census Report of 1901*⁶ could reveal the relevant of the movement in the modern context. According to the report, the number of the followers of *Shakti* cult was 702,185 and on the other side, the followers of the *Vaishnavism* were 3,500,000. This report justifies the importance of the movement and its influence into the life of the Assamese people.

Literature Review and Research Gap

There are good numbers of secondary sources which have studied the medieval Assam but dealt little with the Neo-*Vaishnavite* movement of Sankaradeva. Melville Kennedy in his book *Caitanya Movement* has treated the Assamese *Vaisnavism* as the branch of Bengal *Vaishnavism*, although the two schools were completely independent of their own. J. Hastings⁷ who edited J.D. Andersen's 'Assam', *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Vol.2) also mistakenly states that Sankaradeva probably was inspired by the Caitanya of Bengal, although there is neither any historical record nor any tradition to support it. Again in the work of Wilson's *Religious Sect of the Hindus*, Bhandarkar's *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems of the Hindus* and even in the Farquhar's *Outlines of the Religious Literatures of India* which contains the history of the different sects of the medieval India, unfortunately did not covered the *bhakti* movement of Assam.

Objectives

This paper will try to explore the role of Sankaradeva and his religious movement Neo-*Vaishnavism* in medieval Assam.

Methodology

This paper uses historical methodology and critically studies the literature on social, religious and cultural developments brought by the movement along with the political history of the time.

Sankaradeva and *Ek-Sharan Nam dharma*

Sankaradeva had travelled different parts of India and noticed the spirit of *Bhakti* movement all over the place. He introduced his new creed during the sixteenth century in Assam and started preaching qualified monotheism, of absolute surrender to one supreme God. He advocated the *Dasya* attitude of *Bhakti*, which means a votary, is to consider himself as the servant of God. Sankaradeva combined four principles in his creed. Firstly, the comprehension of *Param Brahma*, the all-pervasive Supreme Being in the form of Vishnu as extolled in the *Vedas*, secondly, *Eka-Sharan* or absolute and undivided devotion to the Supreme Being in the form of Sri Krishna as extolled in *Geeta*, thirdly, *Sat-Sanga* or

fraternity in the pious divine as enjoined by the *Bhagavat Purana* and lastly, *Nam-Kirtana* which means divine services in the form of prayers.⁸

Sankaradeva constructed the first *Namghar* (prayer hall) at Bardowa with his friend Ramarama. There he composed and placed the work, *Gopi-uddhava-samvad*⁹ in the altar, which is referred as *simhasana* or *thapana*.¹⁰ This institution became the nucleus of the *Vaisnava* organization, which later on spread throughout different places of Assam in the form of regional establishments called *Satra*, and numerous village temples known as *Namghar*.¹¹

Sankaradeva taught the idea of equality in all human beings and accepted his disciples from different communities including the tribal people and Muslims.¹² He questioned the Brahmanical dominancy in the religious discourses. In his work, *Prahrada- Carita*¹³ he mentioned every life in the universe including the people from the lower caste like *Chandal* is a better than a Brahman if he meditates in the name of *Hari* (God)¹⁴. He voiced for a society where every individual would get equal rights in the spiritual domain.

Sankaradeva spoke the doctrines of *bhakti* in simple verses and propagating them through congregations. Kabir, a *bhakti* saint, remarked that Sanskrit was water in a well whereas language is running water.¹⁵ Likewise, *Vaishnava* saints of Assam popularized the movement in the vernacular language.

Sankaradeva translated *Bhagavata-purana* into Assamese language. He himself undertook the rendering of the major portion namely, Books *I, II, III, VIII, IX, X* and the Book *XII*.¹⁶ Sankaradeva's rendering of the *Bhagavata* was not a simple translation with that of original. It marked an era of renaissance in Assamese poetry. Moreover, Sankaradeva translated the *Bhagavata* not only into Assamese words, but also into Assamese idioms.¹⁷ The most popular work of Sankaradeva was the *Kirtana-Ghosha*. It holds a very important place in the minds and thoughts of the Assamese society

Sankaradeva introduced many methods and techniques for the propagation of faith and it was appealing to the masses. *Bardowa-Carita*¹⁸ mentioned about a dramatic performance which is popularly known in Assam as *Ankiya Nat*. It was organized by Sankaradeva after his first pilgrimage. This dramatic performance named as *Cihna-Yatra* was represented with

paintings. It is said that Sankaradeva composed this drama by interpreting the tenth book of the *Bagavata-Purana*.¹⁹ Sankaradeva also introduced new form of devotional songs called *Bargita* and many other types of poetry which had a great contribution in the literature of Assam.²⁰

Conclusion

The political condition of medieval Assam was de-centralized and the religious life of the people was scattered due to absence of any common religious code. *Tantricism*, both Hindu and the Buddhist branch was widely prevalent along with the worshipped of numerous God and Goddesses, which included elaborate ceremonial rites and practices both the esoteric and exoteric. The society was threatened and it was in an urgent need of something new which is convenient and acceptable for all sections of the people. This need was supplied by *Ek-Sharan Nam Dharma* of Sankaradeva which offered a very simple mode of worship and establish a new order in the society by removing irrational beliefs, superstitions and inhuman practices associated with some faiths. It promoted the feeling of oneness breaking all barriers of caste and tribe and accelerated the pace of a renaissance of literature and fine arts which helps in the formation of a broader civil society. It also played a significant role in centralizing the political power under the Ahoms in the sixteenth century by providing an ideological support to the ruling authority which needs to be examined properly in further research.

¹ The Ahoms are the members of the Shan branch of great Tai or Thai family of South-East Asia.

² H.K. Barpujari. *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol.II., 3rd edition. Publication Board of Assam, 2007: 1.

³ S. Rajguru. *Medieval Assamese Society*. Nagaon press, 1988: 4.

⁴ S.L.Baruah. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. Munsiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1986: 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 447.

⁶ Charles N.E Eliot. "Hinduism in Assam." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of the Great Britain and Ireland* Vol.10, (1910): 1155-1186.

⁷ J.D.Anderson. *Assam, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. Hastings, J. (Ed.) Vol.2. Edinburgh, 1967: 135-137.

⁸ Baruah, " ACHA", 448.

⁹ It is a text on the life of Krishna.

¹⁰ Kesavananda Dev Goswami. *Life and Teachings of Mahapurusa Sankaradeva*. Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, 1982:13.

¹¹ Maheswar Neog. "The Vaishnava Renaissance of Assam in Aspects of the Heritage of Assam." *Souvenir of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 22, (1959): 32.

¹² Baruah, " ACHA", 448.

¹³ "Yito candalra kaya vakya mane, sadaya sumare hari

Ache bahra vrata yito brahmanara, si si srestha tato kari."

¹⁴ Goswami, " LTMS", 37.

¹⁵ R.C.Majumder. *The History of Culture and the Indian People*. Vol. VIII. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1972: 572.

¹⁶ B.K. Barua. *Sankaradeva Vaisnava Saint of Assam*. Assam Academy for Cultural Relations, 1960: 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ It is a biographical account of Sankaradeva.

¹⁹ Maheswar Neog. *Sankaradeva and His Times*. LBS publications, 1998: 107.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.