

NEO- VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT; A SOCIAL RENAISSANCE TO ENLIGHTEN THE EGALITARIAN OUTLOOK OF ASSAMESE SOCIETY

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Abstract: Indian society has determined on basis of birth and gender and the caste system represents identity an individual. The contemporary medieval Assam, practised a semi-feudal society was remarkably free from the scourge of virulent casteism that afflicted in the Pan Indian society. But with the passage of time the caste linked privileges and prohibitions were introduced in Assam in a fewer and much milder way. During 15th century Sankardeva propagated social renaissance in Assamese society against semi-feudalistic caste based stratification with the help of Neo-vaishnavite movement. Through the philosophy of humanism, Sankardeva tried to unify different castes, creeds of contemporary Assam under a single umbrella and brought the society in close touch with the best spiritual as well humanistic values that India had stood for. Sankardeva established the concept of Global Universal Brotherhood through Satras and Namghars. Sankardeva had shown clear and broad strategies of kindness, brotherhood and universalism by propagating bhakti among the backward classes of contemporary society like Garo, Mikir, Naga, Kachari and Mising. This paper has made an attempt to establish how far Sankardeva's was able to abolish casteism in medieval Assam and uplift the status of down trodden sections. The paper also highlights egalitarian and democratic outlook of Neo-vashnavism.

Key Words: Sankardeva, Neo-vaishnavite, Global Universal Brotherhood.

1. INTRODUCTION:

MK Gandhi said "A great Vaishnava revival under Sankardeva in the 16th century has made Assamese people kind, tolerant and humane...."

The cult of Vaishnavism relates with the Suktas used for the worship of Lord Vishnu. In the Brahmanas, Upanishadas and Aranyakas, Lord Vishnu is described as the Supreme God. So far, the history of the Vaishnavite movement is concerned, the Alwars of Deccan had started the movement that gradually spread to the North then to the East and finally spread whole of India.

In Tamil region the Brahmins were said to be the highest strata of the society had the right to worship God for the welfare of the society. In such a period, the Alwars came forward to provide the common men the right of worshipping. This was the beginning of actual Vaishnavite movement which brought peace and solace to the down-trodden. In between 4th to 9th century AD the teachings of the Alwars brought a sense of renaissance that swept away all the differences of castes, creeds and races. This movement gained momentum in the hands of numbers of saints like Sri Ramanujacharya, Maddhacharya, Nimbarkacharya (South), Ramanuja, Ramananda, Tulsidas, Kabirdas (North) and Namdeva of Maharashtra. All these saint philosophers tried to popularise the cult of Vaishnavism in entire country.

1.1. RATIONAL OF THE TOPIC:

In Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa the existence of Vaishnavism was not unknown. The literary works like Kalika Purana, Banbhata's Harchacharita (where Bhaskarvama was found mentioned as the progeny of Lord Vishnu) and the land grant inscriptions of the early rulers of Kamarupa mentioned about the presence of Vaishnavism, Whatever it is, the wave of neo-Vaishnavite movement was bringing into medieval Assam by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568 A.D.). Sankardeva propagated the principle of *Eka Sarana Nam Dharma* (i.e. complete submission to one supreme God) among the diverse people who were caught in a labyrinth of cults and faiths over laden with rituals. Sankardeva's mode of religious worshipping was free from ritualistic complexities and was the most simple, liberal, tolerant and

easiest way of attaining God. *Eka Sarana Nam Dharma* or the religion of seeking refuge in one God, with all its philosophy, doctrines, rituals and cult is something which is unique for Assam, and it has its pan-Indian quality and characterⁱ. [1] The organizing capacity of Sankardeva manifested itself in the way he placed the doctrines of his faith on a firm soil in the teeth of bitterest oppositionⁱⁱ [2]. The contemporary socio-political situation of Srimanta Sankardeva was chaotic. Different political powers were at daggers drawn. In the name of religion the regressive custom of animal and even human sacrificing before the mother goddess was prevalentⁱⁱⁱ[3]. There was not any religion of Bhakti prevalent in Assam. There was only an ad-mixture of Saivism, Saktism, Buddhism, and Hinduism in a degraded form^{iv}[4]. At that critical juncture Sankardeva appeared in the sense to redeem the society from the deep morasses of the socio-religious disorder by restoring Bhakti. Sankardeva also remoulded and consolidated the fabric of the society with the concept of universal brotherhood. That concept argues monotheism, liberalism, love and greatness. Marching above casteism and communalism Sankardev could declare as:

*'Jati-kul bichariya bairio nindaya
Pancham patoki huya narake paraya'
(Kirtana Gosha)*

(He falls into the hell, who rebukes even an enemy considering his caste)

In this regard Neo-vaishnavism initiated a socio-cultural renaissance in medieval Assam. Neo-vaishnavism was based on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti or devotion opened to all castes and classes. Neo-vaishnavism initiated a new change in the socio-religious sphere of contemporary Assamese society and consequential changes in its values, system and equality of relationship. The main motto of Neo-vaishnavism was to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared value of fraternity, humanism, equality and democracy. Through Neo-vaishnavism Sankardeva made people conscious about the dignity of women, removal of untouchability and unity among various tribes. Sankardeva could understand the diversity of the varied ethnic groups of contemporary Assam. Assam is regarded as 'Terra incognita' or a land of anthropology. Contemporary Assamese medieval society, a semi-feudal, was remarkably free from the scourge of virulent casteism that afflicts the Hindu social corpus elsewhere in the country. The caste related ideas of purity and pollution were unknown in contemporary Assam. The question of caste is perhaps the oldest and most persistent cause of dispute between Brahmans and their opponents^v[5]. Sankardeva, being a member of the *kayastha* or writer caste was ranked as a *sudra varna*, tried to culminate different ethnic groups including various castes and creeds came under the common shelter of his ideology of Neo-vaishnavism. Among his disciples, Norottam of the Nagas, Gobindo Atoi of the Garoes, Rama a Kachari, Narayana a Missing, Bolai a Mikir, Srirama a Kaivarta, Damudar a Bhutia and Chandchai a Muslim showed the kaleidoscopic format among the disciples. In this regard Sankardeva could declare:

*'Kirata Kachari Khashi Garo Miri yavana kanaka Goala
Asama Muluka Dhovage Turuka Mlecha Chandala
Ana papi Nara Krishna sevakara Sangata pabitra haya'
(Kirtana Gosha)*

This pattern tied up different groups, irrespective of any caste, high or low was treated as equal and liberate the down-trodden into a new socio-religious order. It is noteworthy that among the disciples of Sankardeva, his teacher Mahendra Kandali and his family priest Ramram Guru were initiated. So, in Kirtana Gosha Sankardeva could say as:

*'Brahmanara chandalara nibichari kula,
Datat chorat yena dristi eketula.
Nichata sadhuta yar bhaila eka jyan;
Tahakese pandit buliya sarvajan'*

(No discrimination is to be made among the different castes, whether Brahmans or Chandalas; the same is to be paid to the donor and the thief, He who has the same regards for the mean and the pious, is to be considered as a really learned and wise person.) Truly speaking Sankardeva's new-religion was only a revival of the 'truth' which was kept hidden by a section of upper class. Sankardeva's new faith has come into being to make a man full-fledged with all round personality and humanities for making Assam a refined, finished and developed society.

1.2. OBJECTIVES:

- To discuss about the progress of Neo-Vaishnavism in contemporary Assam.
- To study about the importance of the teachings of Sankardeva to motivate the backward section of the society.
- To discuss the impact of the teachings of Shankardeva in present scenario.

2. METHODOLOGY:

The present paper is descriptive in nature. In regard to methodology secondary data and information are extensively explored in the study. These are collected from various sources like books and journals.

2.1. MAIN BODY OF THE TOPIC:

As per the Great philosopher and man of learning Dr. Sarbapalli Radhakrishnan once observed: "All religions require us to look upon life as an opportunity for self-realisation- '*Atmostukamaya*'. They call upon us to strive incessantly and wrest the immortal from mortal. God is the universal reality, wisdom and love and we are his children irrespective of race or religious belief. Within each incarnate soul dwells the God- consciousness which we must seek out and awaken. When mankind awakes to the truth, universal brotherhood will follow the atonement with the great fountain head of all creation. One whose life is rooted in the experience of the supreme spontaneously develops love for all creation. He will be free from hatred for any man. He will not look upon human being as though they were look upon human beings as though they were irresponsible things, means to other peoples an interest. He will boldly work for a society in which man can be free and fearless as a subject not or object. He will oppose terror and cruelty and stand by the out caste and refuge. He will give voice to those who have no voice." The whole idea contained in the paragraph corresponds to those of Sankardeva's views which were already propagated before 500 years of Radhakrishnan's writing in 1968 in his work '*Religion and Culture*'.

Sankardeva professes that the inherent goodness in man must find its expression in social behaviour and to spreading his ideology Sankardeva established social institutions like *Satras* and *Namghars*. These two institutions contributed immensely to the socio- religious development of Assamese society by spreading three great values, viz. Freedom, equality and fraternity. In the words of Dr. B. Kakoti, the *satras* and the village *namghars* combined the functions of a village parliament, village court, a village school and a village church. These institutions create moral and social value, promotion of ethnic integration and contribution to other social activities. Mostly the *namghars* are closely accustomed with the village identity. The ideals of Sankardeva of an equal society, where members from all sections irrespective to caste, creed, tribe and community will able to sit together for the prayer of God reflects in the premises of *Namghars* and *Satras*. It means that under a single roof everyone could enjoy the right of equality. Besides, it is a centre to protect the common, ignorant people against falling into confusion and doubt while following the varied rites and rituals of the traditional methods of worshipping in the pluralistic faith. *Satras* and *namghars* are said to be a common platform for all oppressed, downtrodden people and united them under the banner of Neo-vaishnavism. The Neo-vaishnavite movement gave a social reorganization to the common men. It stood against the contemporary stigma of casteism and untouchability in Assam. There is a profound sense of service to humanity in Neo-vaishnavism. Sankardeva galvanized the different elements in the society into an inspired mass with the lofty ideals of service to God through service to humanity. Human equality is a mark of civil society where respect for human right and right to equality is a fundamental right. In contemporary Assam, Sankardeva built a duty- based society. A social setup based on duty is naturally more harmonious and peaceful than the one based on rights. It is so because in duty consciousness, there is a feeling of sacrifice and co-operation. In a sustainable society, there is inevitable need for mutual care, regard and consideration.

Justifying the position of women in the contemporary Assamese society, their position was gradually downwards. For example the evil custom like *devadasi* was prominent in certain parts of Assam and had been deprived of all rights they deserve. But Sankardeva projected the Assamese women as a conscious section through his literary works. In *Uttarakanda Ramayana* of Sankardeva, Sita was depicted as revolutionary figure against the male dominant society after she had been exiled by Rama and degraded her image in the society. Comparing the scene with Valmiki's *Ramayana*, we see that Valmiki's Sita was looked externally calm and quiet. But Sankardeva's Sita is more touching, self-conscious, protesting and eloquent against the decision of her husband Rama. The emancipation of women or empowerment has vividly described through the works of Sankardeva. As far the Concept of woman emancipation in nineteenth century literature is concerned, Mr. Henric Ibsen is acclaimed as the upholder of woman emancipation in the nineteenth century world through the medium of his famous lady 'Nora' in the 'A Doll's House'. In this respect Sankardeva was far advance by about 314 years when he described the protest of Sita against the authority of her husband Ram. Moreover, in Sankardeva's religious propaganda women received equal status with men. Sankardeva accorded equal importance to the so-called low castes. The most important example of that was Radhika, the first volunteer in the construction work of dam on *Tembuwani* (a local stream). Radhika was a *Kaivarta* lady. The *kaivarta* caste was considered as a low caste in those days. That Sankardeva selected her as the leader of the volunteers showed his egalitarian ideology. It may be mentioned that Sankardeva's younger brother Banganya married a *kaivarta* lady. Sankardeva was there in that wedding. That Sankardeva blessed the inter caste marriage was another sign of his progressive attitude. Thus Sankardeva tried his utmost to build up a casteless society. Sankardeva was engaged in formulating a new pattern of music and dance, which he distanced carefully from other schools^{vi}[6] with a democratic social outlook Sankardeva tried to propagate the Neo-vaishnavite movement among the illiterate and

downtrodden people of medieval Assam. To make the process became easier Sankardeva introduced dramatic performance, *Cihna-yatra* (Opera in Scenes). It may be regarded as the preamble to the first regular Assamese drama, stage and music ^{vii}[7]. Sankardeva did this *Cihna-yatra* in 1468 AD, as many as 128 years before the theatre hall 'The Swan Theatre' was built in London with a five feet high stage. Sankardeva also used drop-scenes in the *Cihna-yatra*, which is yet another world record ^{viii}[8]. Sankardeva rendered the sacred *Bhagavata-purana* into simple Assamese songs and verses, which even the illiterate, could sing or recite or enjoy. Sankardeva's growing popularity caused serious concern amongst the Brahmanical priesthood. The Brahmana priests approached to the Ahom king Suhungmung with the allegation that Sankardeva had tempered with their traditional religious practices. Sankardeva was immediately summoned to a trial, which however was summary.

Moreover, the literature was written in the contemporary period was only under the patronage of the monarch. But as Sankardeva's tenets spread among the masses, the common man got access to his writings. Sankardeva thus made knowledge available to all and sundry. Thus, a great democratic tradition of involving the common man in the discussion and analysis of religious scripts was started by him. It must be admitted that Sankardeva's compositions are free from complexity and devoid of pedantry. The indigenous atmosphere depicted in Sankardeva's writings in another evidence of the originality of his work. Sankardeva used local local phases and idioms in his writings. Actually the purpose of his writing was to enlighten the common masses, not to teach the elite class, the strategy hitherto maintained by the religious preachers in and outside Assam.

Sankardeva launched the Neo-vaishnavite movement as an open revolt against the old intellectualism of the Brahmanic philosophy. Therefore he was vehemently opposed by the privileged priestly class. On the other hand, Sankardeva's religion was marked by a sense of broad humanism, equality and wide democratic sentiment with a universal appeal. It didn't accept any distinction of caste or creed or any class hierarchy. Sankardeva embraced thousands of members of the tribal people of Assam into his new socio-religious order, initiated of their spontaneous appeal and gave them places of honour as "*Ata*". They in turn, gave initiation to hundreds of their tribes ^{ix}[9].

3. CONCLUSION:

Sankardeva's Neo-vaishnavite movement was a people's religion without any expensive or laborious ritual. People irrespective of their financial position could observe this religion. For this reason, it has become popular. Like the French revolution the motto of Liberty, Equality and fraternity were flourished by the Neo-vaishnavite movement in a spiritual measure. Everyman is free, and not subordinate to any class of people, by his birth. He is equal to any other man in capacities and many be superior or inferior only by his good or evil deed. Men are all brothers being children of one God these are the ideals that pervade the whole Vaishnavite literature that stimulated the society and stirred it into action. The depressed and the downtroddens now felt their infinite goodness and greatness. Self-confidence and courage were aroused in every soul, and each felt a stirring of new life. The *Vaishnavite* learning emphasizes on "*mukhe Ram nam, hate kartakam*", That is to say, use the mouth for singing the glories of 'Ram and the hands for work'. It asks man to live in the world like the lotus leaf that lives in water, but is never wet by it. In a word, it urges man to be dutiful both to the world and God. The *Vaishnavite* period proper was a period of peace and plenty. The evils of untouchability are unknown in this part of the country- thanks to the teachings of Sankardeva. Gandhiji had also appreciated this aspect of Assamese culture. For that, people of humble birth could feel elevated and they could take equal part in religious-social activities. Even the women were given due place of honour, and this enabled them to acquire sufficient knowledge in scripture matters. Use of vernacular language made it easy to understand the context of the scriptures and the teachings contained therein. The movement of Sankardeva thus reformed the society, established equal justice to all; and laid the stony foundation of unity and integration ^x[10]. The concept of Sustainable development first came into view as a result of 'World Commission on Environment and Development' known as Brandtland Report 1987. The Commission formulated the principle that the present generation should leave to its ensuing generations a legacy of natural and humanly produced assets which is no more depleted than the one it received from its parents. But within a few years it failed to achieve its goal. Later 'UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) 2005' and still runs was launched. But long before the Brandtland Report, 1987 and launching of DESD, Sankardeva conceived almost same ideas five centuries back. Sankardeva formulated the infrastructure of a more valid sustainable society. Religious communities may come forward to educate for sustainable development within their communities and outside of them because, religious belief offers a powerful tool for individual and social transformation. The area of sustainable development encompasses environment protection, management science, global economic development, inter-religious co-operation, human equality, secular attitude in a multi religio-linguistic society and all other areas of human concerns. Sankardeva was concerned almost all the faculties necessary for a sustainable society. Sankardeva taught us how to live in a society of people of diverse faiths and religions with a peaceful and harmonious outlook.

Sankardeva's endeavours for social reforms and mass upliftment succeeded greatly. Enlightened by his teachings, his followers addressed each other with respect forgetting the earlier social divisions based on caste. They bridged the gap of caste and status among the people in the Brahmaputra valley.

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