

Philosophical Traits of Sankaradeva's Great Socio-Cultural Revolution And Emergence of Vaishnavite Monasteries in Assam

Sonica Hazarika

Research Scholar
Department of Performing Arts
Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya
Guwahati Unit, Assam

Abstract- During the middle ages, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva founded the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, Neo-Vaishnavism experienced a strong wave of transformation and renaissance that brought about enormous changes in all facets of life. A multifaceted mind, Sankaradeva helped bring about an Assamese socio-cultural revolution. During that time, Sankaradeva served as Assam's socio-cultural and religious renaissance's spokesperson. With his Neo-Vaishnavite movement, the great saint Sankaradeva helped to establish the identity of the Assamese people. He had a very remarkable influence on Assamese society, religion, literature, and culture. Sankaradeva did not worship idols and he believed in just one God. This movement was hence also referred to as "Ek Sarana Hari Naama Dharma" and "Mahapurushia Dharma." This movement helped create a new social order by eradicating untouchability, injustice, and inequality while also disseminating the bhakti cult's philosophy to the broader population. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement, which was instrumental in fostering racial harmony and brotherhood in Assamese society, gave birth to the Sattras institution-the vaishnavite monastery, an Assamese socio-religious and cultural organization. Through a variety of activities that constantly represent an Assamese diverse society, the Sattras institutions gave the Assamese community a new dimension.

Key words: Neo- Vaishnavism, Bhakti, Sankaradeva, Eka Sarana, Sattras

INTRODUCTION:

The most significant trend-setter in Assamese literature and culture during the middle ages was Srimanta Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva was just another incarnation of the Godhead; then after he was seen as a religious reformer, Guru who has been seen as a 'Mahapurusha' and then he has been made subject to critical acclamation by the modern educated nobility on his poetry and erudite style, his artistic innovation, values and above all, he played the role of a reformer of semi-civilized Assamese society. People in this area lived under conflicts, socio-political segregation, illiteracy, tantrism, and caste inequality. Culture, society, faith and the prospect of a future of a greater integrated nation were in a chaos. Sankaradeva not only popularised the Bhakti Movement in Assam but also improved the social and cultural standing of the people and provided the groundwork for a stronger Assamese nation. Sankaradeva's primary goal was to reform and rebuild society along democratic and humanitarian lines. He said as-

*Kukura srigala gardabharo atmaram
Janiya savako pari kariba pranam
(kirttanghosh: 1823)*

(We should respect dogs, foxes, asses and all the creatures as God residing in them as souls)

OBJECTIVES:

- i) This paper endeavours to understand Sankaradeva's influence on Assamese society and how it benefited Neo-vaishnavism.
- ii) To focus the role of Sankaradeva and his Vaisnavism in resurrection the Assamese people's faith, culture, conscience and nation building.
- iii) To study the Sattras' cultural organisation and growth, as well as the influence of the Neo-vaishnavite movement and the Sattras Institute of the Assamese Society.

METHODOLOGY:

This research paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. The majority of the information was gathered through books, journals, souvenirs, magazines, as well as oral interviews, in-depth research, and group discussions. This paper is qualitative nature and is based on historical method to reach the goal.

SANKARADEVA & NEO-VAISHNAVISM:

Sankaradeva, one of the greatest vaisnava saints of Neo-vaishnavism, played a significant role in ushering in a socio-cultural and religious movement in northeast India. In fact, Sankaradeva is a celebrated name in this great religious movement of the late medieval India. Sankaradeva propounded the philosophy and faith of Neo-vaishnavism and, through his unique teachings, propagated it among

the people in Assam and northeastern region. Sankaradeva emerged as a religious reformer, a social reformer, a force for integrating people, and a beacon of light in a time of social and political breakdown.

Mahapurushia Dharma:

In Assam during the last years of the Christian era, Sankaradeva started the Vaishnva movement. Sankaradeva was not a systematic or scholarly philosopher, but the Bhagavata and the Gita, in particular, provided the ideological foundation for his ideas. The name of the religion that Sankaradeva promoted is "Mahapurushia Dharma." The following is an explanation of the term's meaning: "Mahapurushia" is a name for God *Narayana*. Bhagavata prescribed the method of worshipping Lord Krishna with *kirtana* and to address him as 'Mahapurusha'. As well as Sankaradeva, whose followers referred to him as "Mahan" or the "great being," and whose religion came to be known as "Mahapurushia Dharma," the name "Mahapurusha" is frequently used to refer to him.

Eka-Sarana Dharma: The Vashnavite Faith

The "Srimat Bhagavata and Gita" served as the foundation for Sankaradeva's faith. As he declared the eternal dharma based on truth and love, he presented the new message of a new religion of love. His teachings centered round morals and ideals. These include 'Atmavat Sarva Bhuteshu', 'Ahimsa Param Dharma', 'Bahujana Hitaya' and others. His "Eka Sarana Nama Dharma" only support the worship of Lord Krishna, the supreme soul and the object of all adoration. Democratic ideals and tolerant spirits served as the foundation of Sankaradeva's religion. He did not distinguish between races or religious beliefs, between the wealthy and the poor, or between the high and the low. In this way he aimed to eliminate all classes from society. Men from different social classes made up his pupils. There were a number of Brahmin and Sudra pupils of Sankaradeva, including fishermen, Garo, Bhutia, Naga, and Mikir. Additionally, it is known through *Gurucarits* that Sankaradeva had pupils from several regions of contemporary India.

*kirata kachari khasi garo miri
yavana kankana govala
asama muluka rajaka taruka
kuvaca mlechcha candala
ana jata nara krsna seva kara
sangata pavitra haya
(Bhagavata :53)*

(Kirat, Kachari, Khasi, Garo, Miri, Yavana, Kanka, Gowala, Asama, Muluka, Rajaka, Turaka, Kuvaca, Mlecca, Candala and other sinners become chaste by associating themselves with the devotees of Krishna and they are relieved of the agonies of life. They become fit for the attainment of divine peace.)

Bhakti Dharma:

The Neo-Vaishnavism contributed much to the Assamese society and culture and tried to remove the untouchability from the society. The Assamese people's eating habits have changed in some ways, and as a result, the Hindus have ceased eating the meat of some birds and animals. In North-Eastern India, Sankaradeva brought about "social, religious, cultural, and democratic" transformation that helped to unite a portion of the community and "spread the message of Bhakti-Cult". The mediaeval Bhakti movement which was maintained the notion that everyone was capable of attaining salvation. Early in the 15th century, many areas of our nation saw a loss of socioeconomic and religious activity. Superstitions and wrongdoing on many different sides committed in the name of religion tainted the entire civilization. Sankaradeva travelled on two pilgrimages and to many holy locations in northern India. He met numerous saints and smart intellectuals there, where he made the connection to the Bhakti Movement. He believed that Bhakti was the primary force behind all human conduct. He regarded it as being his mother, father, brother, and other members of his immediate family as mentioned in the "Bhagavata." By extending the Vaishnava Cult's ideology and philosophy beyond the straightforward teaching and practise of "Eksarana-Nama-Dharma," Sankaradeva's new Vaishnavite Bhakti Movement was able to gain popularity. He had a disciplined quality that pervaded an Assamese civilisation "Golden Age" through the usage of art, culture, and literature. The Bhakti Dharma that Sankaradeva propagated is completely monotheistic: *Eka Deva Eka Seva Eka Bine Nahi Keva* (One God, one shelter, none else but one). Vishnu or *Narayana* is the only God to be worshipped. Sankaradeva says-

*Anya devi deva nakariba seva
Nakhaiba prasada tara /
Murtiko nacaiba grho napasiba
Bhakti haiba byabhicara
(Bhagavata : 2 – 124)*

(Avoid making bows to other deities. Do not eat the offerings that have been made to them. Please refrain from going inside to look at their idols. Otherwise, Bhakti will become corrupt.)

Emergence of Sattrra Institution (Vaishnavite Monastery):

Sankaradeva, the great spiritual and cultural leader of Assam, was deeply influenced by the unique spirit of Indian culture. The vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva was a part of the pan-Indian religious movement in medieval times, although it has its own distinct features in the principles. It is Sankaradeva who introduced pan-Indian cultural heritage to Assamese people through the bhakti movement and greatly contributed to cultural renaissance. Through his insightful teachings, Sankaradeva significantly altered the Assamese people's religious attitude. Additionally, he fostered a sense of camaraderie among his pupils. With a sense of community, he also brought his pupils together. Using the three components- *Nama-Kirtana*, *Sattrra*, and *Namghar*, he organised the Vaishnavite community. Many Sattrras were set up in many parts of Assam with the progress of Neo-vaishnavism. The organised

and structural elements of the *Sattras* institutions were given a clear shape by his two disciples Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva. After the death of Sankaradeva, during the reigns of Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva, *Sattras* and *Namghars* reached their full potential for expansion and development. For the final time, Sankaradeva used *Sattras* and *Namghars* to spread his religion. As a result, they became the spiritual centers of the people, where their intellectual and cultural activities were given a new inspiration for development. The Assamese people's secular well-being and humanism were greatly aided by Sankaradeva's philosophy, which also benefited the common people's social and religious upliftment.

Massive religious reforms brought about by the Neo-vaishnavite movement in Assam ultimately changed the social and cultural landscape of the state. As the movement expanded, people created *sattras* in various locations. Some controversies are there regarding the first establishment of *sattras*. The movement popularized the congregation form of religious practice, institutionalized by the establishment of the *Sattras* (Vaishnava monastery) and *Namghars* (prayer hall cum socio-religious and cultural centre in a village). The term "*sattras*" has historically been used to refer to both an almshouse and a sacrifice that could endure anywhere from a few days to a year or more. By reciting and explaining stories from the *Bhagavata-purana* to a group of disciples, Sankaradeva started the movement.. The act of reciting the *Bhagavata* and hearing its explanation gave the word "*sattras*" currency in Assam.

Some scholars asserted that *sattras* was first established during the time of Sankaradeva. However, other researchers asserted that Madhavadeva, one of Sankaradeva's top disciples, founded the *sattras* first. The Patbaowshi *Sattras* was started by Damodaradeva, and the renowned Barpeta *Sattras* was started by Madhavadeva. Later, many *sattras* were founded in various parts of Assam by the disciples of Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva. The Vaishnavite faith divided into four sects known as "Sari Samhati" (also known as "Four Samhati") after Sankaradeva. There were a few Sankaradeva disciples leading these samhatas, and there were some differences in their ideologies.. The four *Samhatas* are *Brahma Samhati*, *Purusha Samhati*, *Kaala samhati* and *Nika Samhati*. *Brahma Samhati* includes the *sattras* established by Damodaradeva and Harideva, whereas *Purusha Samhati* includes the *sattras* built by Purusuttam Thakur and Chatrabhuja Thakur. The *Sattras* set up by Gopal Atta are included in *Kaala Samhati*, whereas the *Sattras* established by Mathura Atta are contained in *Nika Samhati*. Thus the *Sattras* played a great role in the socio-religious and cultural life of the people.

CONCLUSION:

The Neo-vaishnavite movement is a significant socio-cultural revolution that has been proven to unite the Assamese people. Neo-vaishnavite movement disseminated the concept of global brotherhood during a time when Assamese society was in turmoil, was divided, and was full of with conflicts. The practise of *Ek-Saran-Hari-Naam-Dharma*, a novel way of religious conduct based on indigenous components of the region, led to an ethnic integration and spiritual upliftment. This was what made the religion distinctive. The removal of numerous superstitious beliefs and practises from Assamese society by Srimanta Sankaradeva through the various institutions had a significant impact on the social situations of the Assamese people. His faith is the most liberal, tolerant, straightforward, and capable of upholding social order. In a single sentence, we can characterise Sankaradeva as a renowned social philosopher and thinker who promoted equality of existence for all societal groups.

REFERENCES:

1. Baruah, D. G. (2008). *Srimanta Sankaradeva and His Philosophy*. Guwahati: Hari Prasad Hazarika, General Secretary, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha.
2. Borkakoti, D. S. (2000). *Sarvagunakara Srimanta Sankaradeva*. Nagaon, Assam: Dr. Sanjib Kr. Borkakoti.
3. Borua, D. B. (1960). *Sankaradeva: Vaishnava Saint of Assam*. Guwahati: Sri Santiranjan Dey, Bina Library, College Hostel Road, Panbazar.
4. Chaliha, B. P. (1978). *Sankaradeva: Studies in Culture*. Guwahati, Assam: Hari Prasad Hazarika, General Secretary, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha.
5. Girish, B. (2014). *Sankaradeva: A critical Appraisal of his Philosophy and Religion*. Guwahati: Purbanchal Prakash.
6. Goswami, K. D. (2007). *Mahapurusha Sankaradeva*. Guwahati: Dr. Rafiqz Zaman, I.A.S, Secretary, Publication Board Assam.
7. Hazarika, B. (2013). *Neo- Vaishnavite Sattras of Assam in 21st Century(problems and Prospects)*. Guwahati: Jagaran Press.
8. Nath, D. (2012). *Satra Society and Culture*. Guwahati: DVS Publisgers.
9. Neog, M. (1965). *Sankaradeva and His Times*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.
10. Neog, M. (1998). *The Contribution of the Sankaradeva Movement to the Culture and Civilisation*. Guwahati: Forum of Sankaradeva Studies.
11. Pathak, N. C. (2019). *Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva: The Paradigm On Synchronization And Reinstatement*. *Historicity Research Journal*.
12. Sarma, S. (1966). *The Neo-vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. Guwahati: Gauhati University Press.
13. Viswavidyalaya, M. S. (2018). *Sankaradeva Glimpses on His Contributions*. Nagaon: Registrar, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya.