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SOCIAL ASPECT OF SANKARDEVA'S NEO-VAISHNAVISM AS A FACTOR OF ASSIMILATION AND INTEGRATION OF ASSAMESE SOCIETY

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Abstract:

In Hinduism it is believed that in needs of time and situation God comes to the earth as an incarnation. There are ten incarnations described in Bhagavad. Besides these ten forms there are some other great personalities who were born in some situations which were marked as extremely social and religiously critical. Every society has been facing some bleak situations and society becomes fragmented in different small groups in respect of religious belief. The religious life in medieval Assam before the rise of the Neo-vaishnavite movement was disintegrated and diversified one. But emergence of Sankardeva (1449-1568 AD) seemed to have mesmerized the people as a result of his Neo-vaishnavism and created conditions for harmonious living of people of diverse caste, communities and creeds. Sankardeva preached a very simple mode of religion which is absolutely free from ritualistic complexities and consisted of the easiest way of attaining liberation. He brought about a change in the religious outlook of the people through his teachings; he also generated a strong community feeling among his disciples, which satisfied the feudal requirement of the time. He appointed persons of different caste to spread his religion in their respective societies. Thus Assamese society got unified under the umbrella of one dominating culture, which paved the way for the formation of the greater Assamese society of which we are a part. In this paper, we shall try to highlight the social aspect of Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism as a factor of assimilation and integration of Assamese society. In doing so analytical method will be used in the light of available materials which include published and unpublished manuscripts of the Buranji's, the Charit Puthis or the biography's of Vaishnava saints and Assamese religious work.

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavism, Bhakti movement, Assimilation, Integration, Namghar, Bhaona, Satra.

Introduction:

The religious life in medieval Assam before the rise of the Neo-vaishnavite movement was disintegrated and diversified one. But emergence of Sankardeva (1449-1568 AD) seemed to have mesmerized the people as a result of his Neo-vaishnavism and created conditions for harmonious living of people of diverse caste, communities and creeds. Sankardeva Vaishnavism was a strong current of Indian Bhakti movement. He did not confine himself only to preaching the Bhakti cult and upholding the ethical virtues, but also established a new social order in Assam by removing superstitions, corruption, ignorance, untouchability, inequalities and other social evils.

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outlook of the people through his teachings; he also generated a strong community feeling among his disciples, which satisfied the feudal requirement of the time. Thus Assamese society got unified under the umbrella of one dominating culture, which paved the way for the formation of the greater Assamese society of which we are a part.

The doctrine of Vaishnavism as propounded by Sankardeva is well known as the doctrine of Bhakti which denotes devotion to one supreme God (Eksaraniya Dharma). Since the sects derive its roots from Bhagavata Purana, it is also known as 'Bhagavatism'. The practice of the cult is simple; it involves simply to devotion to God by chanting his name called Nam which has given it another name 'Nam Dharma'.

Objective of the study:

To highlight the social aspect of Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism as a factor of assimilation and integration of Assamese society.

Methodology:

The facts presented in this paper are mainly collected from secondary sources like books, journals etc and an analytical approach is followed.

The Background:

Sankardeva visited most of the major shrines and sacred places of India and stayed at Jagannath temple of Puri for a long time. During his pilgrimages he was acquainted with the philosophy of various Bhakti movements. He learnt not only the theoretical lessons but also the technique of publicity and the way how people can be made attractive to the philosophy of Hinduism. He learnt there the recitation of the devotional songs, music and acting of the events described in the religious books like Bhagavata purana etc. With such wide knowledge and experience he started his new Bhakti movement in Assam after returning from the pilgrimage. One important point is to be noted that though he learned many things regarding publicity and extending religious theology and ideas among people, he studied the situation of the state properly and innovated new techniques which are found and proved suitable for the situation prevailed in Assam. He recomposed the old Sanskrit text in Assamese and stories were reconstructed to make suitable and adjustable to the Assamese society. Keeping the original ideas intact, it was seemed to be incidents of Assam and the people started to realize that the play and stories were saying their own facts. Sankardeva composed some lyrics chanting prayers and **Kirtan Ghosa** for the purpose. The use of Assamese and Indo-Aryan tongue, as the medium for the propagation of the Neo-Vaishnava faith laid to its emergence as the language of all the people. The ancient kingdom of Kamarupa was now undergoing a huge change, and it was having almost a regeneration, political and social and which timed well with the cultural resurgence initiated by Sankardeva: and the first possibilities of a united and modern Assam was now evidence.

Factors of Assimilation:

Namghar:

Bordowa is the place in which he started his venture of Bhakti movement¹ and renaissance in the cultural sphere. There he translated a lot of Sanskrit text into Assamese² and first Namghar was established in Bordowa.³ In **Namghar** he started some religious discussions and began some literary and cultural activities as well as nucleus for dissemination of his message of Bhakti. Many people came and receive ordination from

Sankardeva. Those who had no livelihood used to stay in the campus of Namghar after their initiation and Sankardeva provided the means and expenditure for their maintenance. The presentations offered by the people were distributed among the **Bhakats**. This also attracted people to the Namghar and stay there to hear the lesson of Sankardeva. Namghar played an important role in unifying the Assamese society and assimilating them. In the Namghar Bhakat assembled and did prayer and arranged discussions. In times Namghar became the cultural center in the sense that all the times in Namghar some cultural activities took place such as Harikirtana and other recitation of religious verses like Borgeet. He utilized the Namghar as one of the important way of organizing the society. If anybody visited Namghar, he could not decline to come next. In Namghar one could get to hear the devotional songs, recitation, music of Tal, Khol, Mridonga, got to enjoy the acting and dance, got to see colourful dresses and musk of different characters shown in the Bhaona.⁴ The Namghar further serves as Panchayat hall, where people gathered to discuss and solve many of their day to day problems. The community centers have been found even to play political and judicial role. Thus Namghar played a vital role for unifying the Assamese society and assimilating it.

Bhaona:

One of the instruments that was used by Sankardeva was the **Bhaona**⁵. In the Bhaona, through acting, dance and dialogues he demonstrated the stories of Bhagavada and Puran. To make it more attractive he prepared many Musks⁶ of different characters including human character and characters like birds, animals etc. **Cinha Yatra** was the first of this kind which was first stayed at Bordowa. The Katha Guru Charit⁷ says that after return from the first pilgrimage, he organized a dramatic performance of Cinha Yatra. He started this historic and dramatic presentation to attract people and to learn the lesson of the story. According to B. K. Baruah, unlike the Sanskrit play which demand a cultivated, critical and experienced audience and which did not admit the ignorant men heretics and those belong to the lower strata of society, the Assamese Bhaona is a type by itself and entirely a popular representation that breaks all social barriers and not only provides enjoyments to the village community with occasional recreation and diversion, but also acquaints them with the episodes from the epics and Purans⁸. He did a lot to stage the play such as he himself composed introducing orchestral music called Dhemali⁹ and introduced Khol¹⁰ (a form of Mridonga) and Tal¹¹(cymbal) and manufactured many musks of various characters. He performed a play in three stages. First the story was described by Sutradhar through acting (whole story) with music. Secondly such art of the event described by the Sutradhara with music and in the third stage the characters act the scene¹². It is done to make repetition and make the act attractive. Illiterate people were attracted by the technique. This technique was a great success and people rushed to the Namghar to enjoy the Bhaona. Therefore, Bhaona performance played a strong role in the field of assimilation where there was no distinction of caste. On the basis of aptitude a person belonging to any caste can take part in different activities of Bhaona performance.

The act of assimilating the Assamese fragmented races into one united Assamese society he did a lot and these all were done with these instruments like religious philosophy and theology. He did it by establishing Namghar, reciting spiritual devotional songs and staging the play in the form of Bhaona. The quality of his religion in respect of performance and maintenance also could attract people and thus numbers of people to follow the Vaishnavism increased day by day.

The economic condition of the people was not sound at that time. People generally followed the religion of the king. Performing the religious activities was most expensive. People have to offer many costly things to the God like goat, duck etc. For common people these were considered as unbearable burden. Individual could not construct temple themselves which is considered to be essential for prayer and in the temple costly idols containing gold or silver are required to install was also a difficult task for the common people. Thus all the offers required to the god of those religions were costly and so it was going out of reach of the common people of that time. Only king could do these things and thus the religious activities became the function of the king only. For performing the religious activity in playing the role of priest the Brahman demanded a lot of costly things from the host and for which people tried to avoid the religious functions. In such a situation, Sankardeva introduced Vaishnavism and looking its simplicity and costless prayer system. People participated in it and a large number of followers showed enthusiasm to it. People belonging to different caste and communities joined in the fraternity of Sankardeva faith. On the whole Sankardeva Vaishnavism played a vital role in the field of assimilation.

Satra:

Satra¹³ like Namghar are some important tools used by Sankardeva to propagate his Vaishnavism and philosophy in the society, which also played strong role in the assimilation. Satra were the main center of extending initiation and given Sarana to the new members of the vaishnava sects. Satra have been playing a vital role in propagating the Vaishnavism till its establishment. The Satra during the time of Sankardeva and little later also, were in the words of a Vaishnava saint of Assam, the place, “where as soon as one enters human sufferings run away and where transcending worldly concerns, one can go to Vaikuntha or Heaven”¹⁴. A large number of Satras were established by his leading disciple Madhavadeva. One of the notable contributions of the Satras is their work towards the uplift and betterment of the backward classes and the bordering tribes of Assam. Sankardeva from the very beginning exhibited deep sympathetic for the lower castes and down-trodden classes. Following his principles Gopaldeva of Bhabanipur Satra made all efforts to introduce the message of Bhakti among the Barahis, Morans, Kacharis and Chutias of upper Assam¹⁵. The Mayamara Satra which originated from Gopaldeva did a great lot to educate and uplift many tribes of upper Assam and it not only admitted converts from the non-Hindu tribes but placed them on equal footing with the disciples of the higher castes¹⁶. The missionaries deputed by these Satras no doubt brought the cult of devotion and universal love and opened the doors of salvation to all tribes irrespective of their caste and character. Furthermore the Satras maintained the institution for general education, taught the people to lead a pious life and employed persons in their field of interests to cultivate their skill. In this sense, Satra as a part of Vaishnavism played a strong role in the field of assimilation of Assamese society.

Sankardeva preached equality in the spiritual domain. At the time of Sankardeva Neo-Vaishnavism the higher caste like Brahmans and Kayastha as well as high officials like Choudhury, Hazarika and Phukan etc. soon evolved their own hierarchy and each class has ruthlessly trampled down the lower one. The lower one comprised besides peasants, of lauguwas and lickhows, bandhas and bahatiyas, bandis and betis¹⁷. At the same time in one general Assamese society they had no better status. Sankardeva, from the very beginning of his missionary zeal led a crusade against caste exclusiveness, untouchability, for a recognized equality of all

man irrespective of caste and character in the eyes of God, and exhibited deep sympathy for the lower caste and down-trodden classes. People belonging to different caste and communities joined in the fraternity of Sankardeva Vaishnavism. He proclaimed that the Kirats, the Kacharies, the Khasis, the Garos, the Miris(Mishings), the Yavanas, the Kankas, the Govalas, the Asamas(Ahoms), the Malikas, the Rajakas, the turukas, the Mechas, the Chandals and all others become pure in the company of servants(devotees) of Krishna. In one text he wrote:

Kirata kachari khasi garo miri
Yavana kanka govala
Asama muluka rajuka turuka
Kuvaca mlechecha candala
Ano jata nara krsne sevakara
Sangata pavitra haya¹⁸

Again according to Sankardeva a Candala if he is a devotee, is superior to a Brahmin without devotion. "A Chandala who remembers Hari heart and soul is much superior to a Brahmin, observing various religious vows."¹⁹ So he accepted and not only accepted, but also invited the people lived surrounding to him. He gave Sarana and included in his religion to all. Among those notable disciples were Candsai (a Musalman), Govinda (a Garo), Jayatahari (a Bhutia), Shriram (a Kaivarta) and Madhava (a Potter)²⁰. It is interesting to note that Sankardeva used to take food in the house of his disciples. It is to be noted here that Cilarai married Kamlapriya, the daughter of Sankar's cousin Ramaraya²¹. Like these there are thousand of examples of assimilation through Sankardeva's Neo-Vaishnavism, thoughts, ideas and his philosophy.

Conclusion:

Sankardeva basically a saint is rightly regarded as the father of Assamese society. He is still continued to be regarded as one of the incarnation of god by a large section of his followers of Assam. He was a multi faced genius- a profounder of religion, a social reformer and a maestro in the world of performing art, music and devotional songs.

Neo-Vaishnavism as a factor of assimilation and integration is an important theme. The Namghar and the Satra institution established by him played the major role in transforming the Assamese society to such an extent that nothing parallel to it can be found in the entire Indian society. The Bhaona performance played an strong role in the field of assimilation, where there is no distinction of caste. Paramananda, Candsai, Govinda etc. were given equal status with the high class. Approval of inter-caste marriage was another liberal out look of him. Prof. Vasudeva Sarma Agarwala has compared the genius of Sankardeva with the glorious sun under whose warmth of mind Assam blossomed like a lotus of thousands petals (Sahasradala kamala). In his word, "it is difficult to imagine how deep and widespread was the influence of Sankardeva on the cultural renaissance that burst forth in medieval Assam. There are poets and composers, there are saint and religious teachers, there are musical masters, there are preachers, but Sankardeva was a genius in whom all these qualities were rolled to one."²²

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