

A STUDY OF SANKARDEVA'S IDEAS AND DEMOCRATIC THOUGHTS IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

At the time when 'the governed' didn't have any position or voice in the ruling structure, a group of saints, scholars set the basis of democratic ideas via their religious preaching's. There were lot of efforts aiming at social reformation in which a healthy atmosphere was established for the people irrespective of any class of life on equal terms. Sankardeva, the great Neo-Vaisnavite scholar, reformer of Assam, an state located in the north-eastern direction of India promoted a style of Bhakti known as eka-sharana-naam-dhrama, which means "eka-sharana-naam-drama." In his dharma, the four components of deva (god), naam (prayer), bhakats (devotees), and guru were combined to form the word "deva" (teacher). For him, equality and fraternity were fundamental values, as were freedom from caste divisions, conventional Brahmanical ceremonies, and animal sacrifices. The caste system, as well as traditional Brahmanical rituals and sacrifices, were all rejected in favour of a society founded on equality and brotherhood. The authors try to focus on democratic ideals and ideas found in the literature and culture of the Vaisnavite tradition of Assam, propagated by Sankardeva in the 15th century.

KEYWORDS *Sankardeva, Neo-Vaisnavite ideas, Bhaktism, Democratic thoughts.*

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 14th and 15th century, the world was wracked by religious strife, conflict and division. Attempts at reformation in the Catholic church began in the early 14th century, paving the way for the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Protestantism emerged in Germany and expanded across Europe. Reformers like Martin Luther and Jean Calvin studied Bible and translated into common languages, and they also taught, preached, and wrote about it. Their theological views expanded and prompted battles, leading to a reconstructed Europe in the following century. In India also, Many Sanskrit writings were translated into different languages during the reformation. At that time, the predominant spiritual path was bhakti. The south Indian bhakti culture, focused on devotion to Krishna and Siva, spread northward from there. When Sankardeva, the incredibly gifted genius scholar, versatile religious leader and reformer of Assamese society, was born and reared in a social milieu of upheaval and chaos, with ordinary people having no democratic rights. A strong class forced them to be silent and subservient. "The socio-cultural phenomena, namely, power-cult, feudalistic culture, tantric culture, magical practises, animal sacrifices, even to the extent of human sacrifice, religious materialism, hunting community mentality—in short, all those religious traditions and customs associated with an excessive love of power, had already eaten up to the core the vitality of the then society, and it is against these trends that Sankardeva gave birth to an ideal of love, wisdom and tenderness.¹" Daitayri Thakur, who was a biographer(*caritakār*) rightly elaborates the situation of that society in this way :

*E Deshot Purbokale Nasil Bhokoti
Nana Dhormo-kam Sobe Korila Sampriti
Nana Dev Pujoy karay Bolidan
Hansho Saag Paar Kate Sahashro Praman
Top-Jop- Jagyo -Dan Tirtho Snan Kore*

¹ Bai, B.N. Sumitra. "Bhakti as an Instrument of Social Transformation with special refence to Madhava and Sankardeva" in *Pracya-Prajna*. Vol-III, 2000. Ed. Dr. Amalendu Chakrabarty. The Sakardeva Institute of Culture International. Guwahati. Assam.

In the late 15th century, Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) launched the Bhakti Movement in Assam. A path to paradise, which is complete submission to God, may be observed in this spiritual movement, also known as Bhakti or devotional practises. By chanting the name of the one true God (Vishnu in his incarnation as Krishna), *Eksarana Namadharma* signifies worshipping the one true God (nama). There is only one religious obligation, according to Sankardev in his 'Bhaktiratnakara.' The only mantra that may be chanted is the name of God. Vishnu is the only deity in *Eksarana Namadharma*. A fundamental difference between the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and other branches of Vaishnavism is that it promoted bhakti, or devotion to Krishna in its purest form. Within two centuries, the Vaishnava faith became the dominant religious organisation in the Brahmaputra Valley.

According to our Puranas, rebirth was achieved by knowledge in the Golden Age, sacrifice in the Silver Age, ceremonies in the Copper Age, and Kirtan in the Iron Age³. An outstanding bhakti tradition of Sankardeva places a focus on God's slave mentality, the dasya mind-set. That may be his way of surrendering to God in the end. In this bhakti movement, God's name is chanted, prayers are offered, and naam-kirtan is sung (singing). At the time, naam-kirtan was the most strong part of the religion. A simple, straightforward, and acceptable form of worship was regarded to be singing and remembering God throughout the Kaliyuga.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- a) To understand the Democratic thoughts of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva within the sphere of Assamese literature and culture .
- b) To review the tutorial significance of the Contribution of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva to uplift the society.

METHODOLOGY

The study involves the qualitative and analytical method of research on the basis of both primary and secondary sources which contains the official records, proceedings, related books and journals, published papers , unpublished works and web pages.

DEMOCRATIC THOUGHTS AND IDEAS OF SANKARDEVA

Sankardeva envisioned a world in which people from all walks of life might pray and eat together, regardless of caste, tribe, or group. A new society was born when proselytised members of the valley's tribal communities united to form an egalitarian community. He stated that bhakti has no sense of caste. Soon the Koch, Ahom, Kachari, Chutiya, and Naga tribes joined Vaishnavism (Kalita, 2016). Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavite movement aimed to teach people non-violence, non-sacrificing sentient beings in the name of religion, and simple ways of living. At the time Sankardeva , the state of Assam was divided among tribes with differing political and religious beliefs. There was no unity in all aspects of society. During this time, the common people had to struggle everywhere. They were not treated equally socially, politically, or religiously after the brahmonical elements entered their community. Sankardeva took the privilege of Brahmaputra Valley's socio-political circumstances and started harvesting new socio-religious seedlings.

The Neo-Vaisnavite ideas were addressed in Satras, where Brahmins and Non-Brahmins had equal rights. So the Neo-Vaisnavite plays about the Namghars and Satras began democratic principles. No Sudra was forbidden from giving nama-mantra to anyone. The Varnasrama dharma assigned tasks to

² Daityari's description appears to be more in line with Sankara's reference to the Vedic sacrificial dharma in his rendering of the first book of the Bhagavata (Vyasa Narada Samvada)

³ <https://www.indictoday.com/long-reads/neo-vaishnavism-in-assam/>

each social order, but there were no biblical prohibitions against saying and proclaiming the Lord's Name. Sankaradeva opposed male superiority based on caste. In his words-

*Brahmana Chandala Chor Data Krur Santa.
Sabate Amaka Tumi Dakhiba Nitanta.
Taji Laj Garba mane huya Upasam.
Samastake Dandavate Kariba Pranam⁴,*

Also he Sankaradeva mentions-

*'Kukur Srigal Gardhavoro Aatmaram
Janiba Sabako Pari Kariab Pranam⁵'*

That means everybody should be given the opportunity to live with honour and respect in society, It asserts that in a free society, everyone should have the opportunity to live their lives in decency and honour. Sankaradeva's religion restored and united Assamese society by challenging social divisions like caste and religion. He changed Assamese culture by creating genres like Bhaona ("drama"), Satriya Dance ("dance"), and Bargeet ("holy melodies of high standard").

The society of Sankaradeva's time was hierarchical, with distinct duties (dharma) for different groups and classes. They wanted to replicate the material components of the microcosm, which they considered as a part of matter rather than a spiritual entity. But Sankaradeva's philosophy is one of essential equality, not difference. In fact, perfect devotion requires the existence of a transcendental society whose members are all of one kind. They are all puruṣas, or pure personalities, and hence cannot be placed at different levels on a material scale. So the bhaktic philosophy envisions a society modelled on Vaikuntha, the transcendental society, where equality is the guiding ideal. Sankaradeva's acceptance and extensive spreading of such a philosophy put the dharmic society concept in jeopardy, if not extinction⁶. Dr. Banikanta Kakati who was an eminent linguist and critic, has discussed a lot about Sankaradeva's life and works as a saint. Dr. Kakati writes Sankaradeva gives Assam fresh life, letters, and a state. Sankara's state persists "and broad in the general hearts of men his power survives."⁷ Srimanta Sankaradeva made bhakti movement as an instrument of social cohesion. It has no doubt that the upliftment of backward castes and classes was one of the remarkable aim of Sattrā institution. A group of Sattras (monasteries) was set up in each region as a place where people could learn about the new way of being and give their minds and souls over to them. These regional institutions made moral rules and kept an eye on what people did. As small replicas of the Sattras, village Namghars were built. The namghars served as a village parliament, a village court, a village school, and a village church. There were always new political situations in Assamese society, but these institutions were like "sheet anchors" for the people there and it is an institution to disseminate secular and democratic views. The Kirtanghar or Namghar (village congregation hall) is a vital part of Assamese society, serving as a hub for spiritual, intellectual, and cultural activity. Sankaradeva tried to build law, justice, and peace in the hamlet through this organisation. Almost every Assamese village has this institution. In a friendly and cooperative atmosphere, the 'Namghar' has served as the village public hall for over 500 years. Dr. Rinku Borah in her article writes that the village Namghar is democratically controlled institution. Since Srimanta Sankaradeva's time, the Namghar has been built so that people of all races and tribes can readily join and participate in religious activities and festivities. It enriched Assamese social, educational, and artistic life. Moreover, an open wallless Namghar is a sign of flexibility, an institution that embraces all people without discrimination⁸. The Great Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva

⁴ Sankaradeva: Bhaktiratnakara, verse 495

⁵ Sankaradeva: Kirtanghosa

⁶ <http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/Sankaradeva.htm>

⁷ B. K. Kakati, "A New life, letters and a state" in Sankaradeva –Studies in Culture, B. P. Chaliha, (ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Nagaon, 1978. Pg-12

⁸ Baruah, Dr. Rinku "THE NEO-VAISHNAVISM OF SRIMANTA SANKARADEVA: A GREAT SOCIO-CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN ASSAM" MSSV JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES".

founded Local Self Government in the 15th century. The Namghar recognises the value of collective wisdom and social growth via participation of all for community restoration and stability. Srimanta Sankaradeva conceived community development and Panchayati Raj long before the British Raj. The Raj is a general body made up of the village's senior residents. The Raj decides on issues such as the reconstruction of the Namghar or the development of educational institutions. The Namghar thus serves as a decentralised planning and decision-making forum. The Namghar ensures development of the people, by the people, and for the people by promoting village-wide participation in decision-making for social goods and resource allocation (Rao, 1967). Sankaradeva's Bhakti ideology gave 16th century Assam a new face of religion based on democratic values. Comparatively, Sankaradeva's worship was far simpler and easier than the traditional Brahmanical Hinduism, which required external agencies for all ceremonies and rituals. With its flexible and open-minded ethos, the movement gave a new dimension to inclusiveness. It gave the people of mediaeval Assam an institutional democratic forum in the form of Satras and Namghars⁹. Sumana Paul in her writings rightly elaborates how the twin institutions of satra and namghar organised the entire Assamese community, keeping the people of Assam united. The institution of satra was a powerful social force in Assamese society. The Ahom Kings and other nobles accepting the Vaishnava faith enhanced this. The Hindu Assamese had two social affiliations: temporal connection to the King's state, and spiritual obedience to the guru, who was the head of a satra, through Neo-Vaishnavism. The institution of satra developed a smaller scale distributed counterpart called namghar, which enhanced the Neo-Vaishnava social organisational network. The namghar were institutionalised at the village level and governed all village activities through spiritual supervision. The namghar was a democratic village court that dealt with minor offences. It also considered land and property issues. Only tough situations were referred to the satra for decision¹⁰.

Maheswar Neog was a famous historian who studied Sankaradeva mentions how the Neo-Vaishnavite movement brought the religion of love to the people and showed them that their voice could only be heard by god if it came from a pure and sincere heart. A new and complete outlook on life, as well as a distinct healthy tone to social interaction, were brought about by Sankaradeva's religious activities. Vaisnavism's tenets were propagated and maintained by sankaradeva through the creation of Ankiya Nata and the writing of numerous successful plays. There are many Vaisnavite festivals in India that are similar to Ankiya nata. At that time, Sankaradeva's plays became a delicacy for everyone and were a hit. This transcended any distinctions based on race or religion. These plays denounced the discriminatory attitude toward women prevalent in mediaeval social structures. Women and slaves had no citizenship privileges in most ancient democracies. As in modern democracy, women were equally influential and favoured in Shankaradeva's religious government. Men and women might enjoy camel heights in the same way, sitting together. People of all castes and statuses sat together to see the plays¹¹. It was the primary goal of Sankaradeva's playwrights to instil bhakti-bhava in their audiences. The saint authors' bhakti cult enlightened a society that had been mired in conflict and political unrest for some time. The eminent writer and Indologist, Professor Dr. Dashrath Ojha writes about Sankaradeva and his contemporary dramatists in this way-

"Keeping out of politics, they aimed to regain the eastern part of the country for India on a cultural and religious basis. Their attempts enthralled the public with lovely songs of Rama and Krishna, Sita and Rukmini. Eastern India's cultural and religious activities so merged with the main river of this vast country. Thus, Assamese dramatists helped to unite the country by instilling nationalist values such as purity, character, and loyalty to God. They were a lighthouse in a period of instability and

*darkness for the country. They improved morals and lifted the spirits of the common people. They were the true harbingers of peace and quiet in India, and hence the country owed them.*¹²”

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva, could be described as a democrat who tried his best to end discrimination against the oppressed and marginalised groups by granting them access to education and other forms of empowerment. He spearheaded a universal movement reforming the society from the darkness of prejudice, tantricism with a scientific attitude. With the spirit of liberal ideology he united the Assamese society. There are lot of instances of his personal life also which depicts his attitude of a democrat. According to Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, many people are unaware of Assamese culture; yet, the broadness of Assamese society has been established by none other than Mahapurush Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva himself included all tribes of people regardless for their religious beliefs. As a result, Assamese society evolved into a liberal one. According to the Commissioner of Scheduled Casts and Scheduled Tribes' report, untouchability, which is becoming a serious concern in other regions of India, is not extensively noticeable in Assamese society.

It is clear from Srimanta Sankaradeva's writings that he held progressive views. In his first work, 'Harishchandra Upakhyaana,' he started a revolt against the traditionalists. People who abuse women are sternly rebuked. Srimanta Sankaradeva's account of King Harishchandra asking his wife Saibya for an apology is an acknowledgement of women's rights and self-respect. Feminist ideas can be traced back to these. Srimanta Sankaradeva saw women as equal intellectual partners, as evidenced in this text¹³. In 'Uttarakanda,' Sankaradeva's final work, there is an explanation of Ram rescuing Sita from Ravana and abandoning her in the forest because he feared public ridicule. After that, she was subjected to a fire test to ensure her innocence. As a defenceless woman in the original Ramayana, she is shown in the Sankaradeva's version of Ramayana depicts Sita as a defiant lady who rejects her husband's treatment of her¹⁴. Sita does not utter a word to her husband in Valmiki's account of the closing scene. She declares her innocence, imploring Madhavi, her mother, the Earth goddess, to open a rift in the ground and admit her, since she has never had thoughts of a man other than Rama. As a result, Sita joyfully vanishes into the earth's depths. Sita has a great deal more to say in Sankaradeva's translation. She feels humiliated and outraged by the prospect of being subjected to a second public examination of her chastity, and her fury is evident to the audience assembled to see the show.

Sankaradeva realised that society's progress depended on people's education and active engagement in problems that affected them. His major goal was to shape people's character and lives and his goal of social progress contains specific features. Sankaradeva valued the dignity of work and individuality. Sankaradeva realised that Brahmanical pretensions stood between man and God, thus he worked to dismantle all biases of caste, creed, and status. His teachings include the most despised. In order to communicate with the uneducated and even children, he employed paintings as a popular form of communication.

Writing about the lasting Values of Sankaradeva's Teachings, HV Sreenivasa Murthy observes that Sankaradeva's message reminds us of current notions like Community Development, Adult Education, and the Panchayati Raj in this regard. Prior to the British rule, education in Assam was not a state issue. There were private institutions such as tols, chhatra-sals, and pathsalas run by Brahman academics here and there, but they were a drop in the ocean. The vast majority of the people had no

¹² Ojha, Dashrath (1999) 'The Impact of Sankaradeva's Dramas on the Literatures of Northern India' *Mahāpurusa Jyoti*, Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Vol II.

¹³ Borkakoti, Dr Sanjib Kumar, 'Srimanta Sankaradeva as a Feminist' Reproduced from the Facebook Group 'Followers of Srimanta Sankaradeva', launched by Dr.

Sanjib Kr Borkakoti, http://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_183678848341109

¹⁴ Borthakur, Dr. Satyakam, 'DEMOCRATIC THOUGHTS AND IDEAS IN THE NEO-VAISNAVITE LITERATURE OF INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAMESE'

access to education and remained illiterate. With the advent of the Sankaradeva Movement, education became its duty. The Satra institution volunteered to educate the people through their own *tols*. Every prominent Satra had a regular band of academics whose task was to teach old wisdom and texts. Other disciplines of study such as Vyakarana, Nyaya, and Kavya were not overlooked along with the Vaisnavite scriptures and Vedic and Puranic literature. The Satras imparted both formal and informal education. Informal education consisted of sermons, exposition of scriptures and discussions on philosophical and theological matters during the prayer services. The medieval *caritas* record many instances to show that the Vaisnavite teachers were greatly responsible for diffusing knowledge among the masses. Every Satra possessed a library consisting of manuscripts to the extent of a few thousand copies. There was great care taken to preserve books on a wide range of subjects, including music and dance, medicine, literature, and philosophy. A number of rare Sanskrit manuscripts, including the *Srihastamuktavali*, the *Satvata-tantra*, and the *Hastividyarnava*, have been found in the Satra Institutions¹⁵.

CONCLUSION

It was not an easy task to spread Neo- Vaishnavism and establish a democratic society in an inaccessible region like the most remote part of India in 15th century. But What Sankaradeva did in his time was not only remarkable but also commendable. Sankaradeva and his Neo-Vaisnavite literature that began in 15th century gave rise to democratic awareness in the social life of Assam. Despite the Ahom dynasty's efforts to lay the foundation for a successful nation, the country's social system was plagued by a variety of problems. By promoting a purely liberal vision of universal fraternity, he was able to shatter the shackles of religious inequality in society and bring about social change. The fact has been established that Srimantan Sankaradeva was neither a trained academic researcher or instructor. However, he gave up his entire life in order to pursue knowledge and teach others. In the end, he was an outstanding researcher. The sanctity and purity of his knowledge, as well as his pure desire to use it to build a better society, contributed not just to the spiritual upliftment of society but also to its cultural and economic development.

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¹⁵ For details see http://www.atributetosankaradeva.org/movement_edu.htm