



NEO VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT IN ASSAM AND SATRA INSTITUTION: A STUDY

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Abstract

Sri Sankardeva introduced the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam during the medieval period. Sri Sankardeva was a versatile genius who was a socio-cultural revolution of Assam. The identity of Assamese people was initiated by the great saint Sri Sankardeva with his Neo-Vaishnavite movement. Sri Sankardeva was believed in one God and he was not idol worshiper. So, this movement was also known as 'Ek Sarana Naam Dharma' and 'Mahapurushya Dharma'. This movement was responsible for spreading the message of bhakti cult to the masses and to establishing a new social order by ruining untouchability, inequalities and injustice. The Satra institution was the product of Neo-Vaishnavite movement which has played a vital role in Assamese society to spread the communal harmony and brotherhood. Thus, Sri Sankardeva brought about a revolutionary change in the Assamese society.

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavite, Satra, Brotherhood.

Introduction

The Neo-Vaishnavism had a powerful wave of transformation and renaissance in Assam during the 15th and 16th century, achieving significant changes in all prospects of life. Sri Sankardeva was the representative of socio-cultural and religious renaissance in Assam during that period. He made his phenomenal impact on the social, religious, literary and cultural life of the Assamese people. The Satra institution is a socio-religious and cultural organization of Assam which is a product of neo-vaihnavite movement initiative by Sri Sankardeva. Sri Sankardeva tried to his best moral effort for transforming the Assamese society.

Neo-Vaishnavite Movement

Sri Sankardeva was the greatest Vaishnavite saint of the 15th and 16th centuries. He was the mentoring soul for the growth and development of the Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. He was born in the middle of the 15th century in a Kayastha family at Alipukhuri near Bardowa of the present Nagaon district of Assam. Originally his father Kusumbara Bhuya was a landlord called "Bhuyas".

He was schooled in a 'Sanskrit tol' and set up as a representative of the Baro Bhuyan family of his legacy. He went for his first religious journey in all parts of India for a time of 14 years after the demise of his first spouse. It had a long impact on his mind and thoughts. His effort was drawn towards Vaishnava faith during his visiting duration of the celebrated holy places of India. He was unable to rest in comfort without dedicating himself to the spread of the Vaishnava faith which he thought suitable in the effective situation of Assam. It was a period of resurgence in India overall as Vaishnavism prospered nearly all through the country, even in its Southern part, particularly under the spread of Ramanujan. Sankaradeva started a remarkable sect of religion which became recognize in history as Neo-Vaishnavism. The extraordinary nature of his faith lies in his long-lasting faith on Lord Krishna, the God of the universe and it was very not normal for the pantheistic way of thinking of the Western world. This ideology of Neo-Vaishnavism came to be known as 'Ek Sarana-Naam-Dharma', the principle preaching of which is none other than Lord Krishna. As it is said in the Bhagavata-Purana and Gita, Lord Vishnu accepts manifestations in different structures occasionally with the end goal of reclaiming the world just as to brush his followers. Narayana is one such Avatar that is hailed in the Bhagavata-Purana just as in the Gita. Eksarana-Nam-Dharma is the universal acceptance to one in particular who is in all honesty Krishna and it includes in the presentation of nama, i.e., the performance or singing of the acts of Lord Krishna and tuning in to his fame. It is celebrated by two parts of presentation of and tuning in to the wonder of Lord Krishna for which it is suitably called Nam-dharma.

Ek-Sarana-Naam-Dharma, as the very term expounds ultimate acquiescence to one, does not permit the worship of any other Gods or Goddess. Such worship is strongly prohibited and it has been undoubtedly mentioned by Sri Sankaradeva in his Kirtana, "A vaishnavite should not worship any other God with the except of Vishnu, he should not enter any other God's temple, nor should the part take of the offerings made to any other God. In so doing Bhakti would be vitiated".

In evangelizing the doctrines of Vaishnavism, Sri Sankaradeva put together his origination with respect to the writings of the Bhagavata-Gita and Bhagavata-Purana which were translated into Assamese verses by the learned holy person for simple access of the public. Sankaradeva's Eka-Sarana-Nam-Dharma evangelizes the path of perfect faith to Vishnu or Lord Krishna in complete avoidance of Idol worship which he suspended the Vaisnavas to go far. Among all founders of the religious groups in India,



Sankaradeva appreciates a remarkable and most noteworthy place for his inadequate grant and the yeoman's task of translating the sacred writings into Assamese for the regular advantage of the unskilled mass of his time. His cult or order is prominently known as Mahapurusya.

Religious Background

The political imbalance contributed to carry about a disorganized condition in the religious environment. Dr. S. N. Sarma said that "The cementing force that binds together the heterogeneous elements in a society is, no doubt, the uniformity of religion and language. A strong and unified political power with a clear religious policy can, however, help towards achieving that uniformity."ⁱ The religious situation of Assam in the time of the advent of Neo Vaishnavism is set variegated with two remarkable religious creeds Saivism and Saktism which were established solid rooted in the society.

Saivism

Saivism appreciated eminence in ancient Kamrupa from the 5th century to the 12th century appreciating imperial support. During the 16th century A.D. when it was the period of the rule of the kings of Koch, Saivism was eminent to such an expand that it may be happened to be the utmost famous faith among society. Sankaradeva's father also was a follower of Saivism and he named his child Sankaradeva as he believed his child to be birth into the world after propitiating Siva. The Ahom rulers were the disciples of Saivism and established numerous noticeable Saiva monastery for the prayer of Siva.ⁱⁱ According to Dr.S.N. Sarma "The Kalika-Purana and the Yogini-tantra have mentioned several places sacred to God Siva and there still exist many Saiva temples in Darrang and Kamrup districts, some of which have been in existence at least since the time of the composition of the Kalika-Purana. The Saiva temples at Hajo (Kedaresvara and Kamalesvara), Bisvanath, Singari (Gopesvara), Negheriting and Dobi (Pariharesvara) are famous from ancient times. Moreover, attached to evry Devi temple we invariably find a temple dedicated to Siva in the form of Bhairava. Siva is worshipped in these temples in two forms, viz Bhogi Siva, and Yogi Siva."ⁱⁱⁱ

Saktism

Saktism was a remarkable worship in ancient and medieval Assam side by side with Saivism till the advent of the Neo-Vaishnavism. It additionally appreciated the support of the Ahom lords and their aristocrats so the training had an effect upon the social and political existence of society. It was mostly under the evangelizing of the Brahmins that the rulers and the aristocrats became devotee Sakta admirers with the end goal of achieving high situations by prudence of the endowments of mother Goddess. It is recorded in history that the predecessors of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva were Saktas, and Sankaradeva's father bore a Sakta name Candibara. Madhavadeva himself was also a Sakta and the debates he offered for Saktism with Sankaradeva at Dhuwahat in Majuli of Jorhat bears awesome significance throughout in the history of Neo Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Madhavadeva was headed the entire movement after the death of Sankaradeva. The renovation of the Kamakhya temple at Nilachal hills by the prominent king of Koch, Naranarayana in 1565 A.D. is a proof of the imperial support in the Western part of Assam. King Naranarayana made awards of land to the temple for support of the holy place. It had an effective impact upon the personalities of the society during the period. Although Saktism was the state religion of the Koch Empire, Vaishnavism appreciated an extraordinary position from lord Naranarayana and his sibling Generalissimo Cilaraya by piety of the unfit grant and faith of Sankaradeva who was at long last positioned among the nine gems of the dynastic court of Naranarayana.

Dr. S.N. Sarma said on his book that "The worship of the snake-goddess Manasa, who is considered as a manifestation of Sakti in Assamese kavyas, was very popular, especially in western parts of Assam. Goats, pigeons and ducks were killed to propitiate her. The Padma-Purana and the Beula-Upakhyana, the two Assamese kavyas composed by Mankar and Durgabara during the closing decades of the fifteenth century definitely prove the existence and popularity of this cult on the eve of the neo-vaishnavite movement. Besides Kamakhya, Sakti in her different forms like Ugratara, Mangalchadi, Siddheswari, Bhairavi, Camunda, Burhi Gosani, Dirgheswari etc. were worshipped in different places."^{iv}

Satra Institution

The beginning stage of Sattra institution can be remarkable in the time of Sankaradeva. The opening of such organization was clear with the structure of a religious sitting around him. At that time the sitting of the monks and devotees were possessed in the open air or under the shades of big trees. This was the starting of the Sattra institution. During the starting period of Sankaradeva, there was no arrangement of fixed Sattra institution. Conventionally followers and the disciples felt the need of a permanent Namghar or a Kirtanghar for religious desire. It was also known as a holy place or Deva Mandir or Devagriha. There was no Sattradhikar office at that time.



There was no regular income source at that period. In the beginning stage of Sattru institution, there was no reference identifying with the presence of Chari-hati (four lines of residential huts around the Namghar). The economic source of the administration was simple and most possibly the administration of the Sattru was directed with the help of inhabitant devotees.

Later on, with the beginning of the system of Guru Kar (fee to the religious leader) by Sri Madhavadeva and Sidha-bhojani (donation of cash or kind goods) the institution interestingly came to be co-operated with normal kind of income source. The Guru Kar is a type of simple tax assigned by the Sattru on its pupils. The Sidha bhojani is a type of indirect tax; whereas each house holder pupils needs to contribute food stuff to the Sattru as per his ability at whenever he arrives the Sattru.

Sri Sankardeva was started the first Sattru institution at Batadrawa in the present Nagaon district of Assam after his return from first pilgrimage. After that he converted Batadrawa to Patbausi with his school masters, his school mates, his family members and some of his followers. Batadruwa sattru didn't have a permanent structure and this sattru ceased to exist for a more than one hundred years after the demise of Sri Sankardeva from Batadrawa to Patbausi via Gangmou and Dhuwahat. The Batadrawa sattru was recognised as the significant of sacred place towards the midst of 17th century after the trace of Batadrawa by Kanaklata, who was daughter-in-law of Sri Sankardeva.

After leaving Batadrawa Sattru, Sri Sankaradeva settled at several places and at last he settled at Patbausi, present Barpeta district of Assam with his family members and loyal followers where a power of movement of religious social reclamation happened. During his visit at Patbausi his chief pupils were Sri Madhavadeva, Sri Damodardeva, Sri Harideva and Sri Narayan das Thakur Ata. These three close pupils of Sri Sankaradeva founded the separate Sattras. At first, Sri Damodardeva founded the Patbausi Sattru during the time of 1560-1590 A.D. Sri Madhavadeva founded the Sundaridha Sattru in 1570 A.D. and the Barpeta Sattru in 1583 A.D. Sri Harideva founded the foremost Sattru at Maneri (present Kamrup district of Assam) during 1560-1580 A.D. The early Sattras of Assam were arranged in the Koch kingdom. After the foundation of the early Sattras of Koch Kingdom, the Koch rulers of Eastern and Western Assam (Kamrup) took pleasant to the Vaishnava saint and supported and helped them in an unexpected way.

Sri Madhavadeva played an important role during growth and development of Sattru institution. After death of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Sri Madhavadeva engaged an enormous number of pupils for preaching the Neo-Vaishnavism thoughts among the society. The commitment of Vamsigopaldeva, Gopaldeva and Padma Ata were admirable in respect of making a Vaishnavite atmosphere in Eastern Assam among the 12 pupils engaged by Sri Madhavadeva.

The elder grandson of Sri Sankaradeva, Purusottam Thakur (1561-1619 A.D.) got mindful of need and significance for spreading the Sattras. He firstly founded the Jania Sattru (About 10 k.m. a far away from Barpeta Town). In this Sattru he appointed 12 followers, (6 Brahmins and 6 non-Brahmins) to build up Sattras in different places of Assam in order to spread Vaishnaivite faith and doctrains. Chaturbhuj Thakur the youthful sibling of Purusottam Thakur likewise engaged 12 followers. After the demise of Chaturbhuj Thakur (1648 A.D.) his first spouse Kanaklata was named as a religious head and she had 12 pupils. The women's role in the foundation of the Sattras for the historical backdrop of Assam is noteworthy. She played a effective and vital role to propagate the Neo-Vaishnavism.

Structure and Division in Neo-Vaishnavism

There is a natural way of religious order to get divided. In neo-vaishnavism there are some systematical and divisional methods in religious order. After the death of Sankaradeva, the orthodox Mahapurusa faith had gone through changes which caused in particular four samhatis (groups or association) for example Brahma samhati, Kala samhati, Purusa samhati and Nika samhati.

The term samhati is a synonym of the term sangha which means an association. The term is also used as sanghati (Sk. Sanghuttana joing, cohesion). The term has been in vogue at least from the eighteenth century, if not earlier, for, Katha-guru-carita uses the terms to mean the above sub-sects.^v During the reign of King Rudra Sigha santa- samorada by Govindadasa alludes to the samhatis. Katha-guru-charita and Santa-samprada are known to be works of the 18th century.

The renowned and influential imperial Sattras of Assam are commonly known as Chari-Sattras (four Sattras) which are Kuruwabahi Sattru (1600-1625 A.D.), Dakhinpat Sattru (1653 A.D.), Auniati Sattru (1654 A.D.), and Gormur Sattru (1715 A.D.). These four Sattras are belonging to Brahma Samhati which are trace their genealogy to Vamsigopaladeva who was main disciple of Sri Damodardeva and Dakhinpat Sattru to Vanamalideva, who was another noteworthy disciple of Sri Damodardeva.



Damodaradeva and Harideva established and developed the Brahma Samhati. According to the disciples, Brahma Samhati originated from Brahma, the creator; so, it is known as Barahma Samhati. S.N. Sarma wrote on his book that “Because of the predominance of Brahminical elements, the sub sects of Damodaradeva and Harideva have been known as Brahma Samhati. The origin of this term has nothing to do with Brahma Sampadaya of Madhvavarya. Brahminical rites and rituals flourished side by side with devotional rites and practices in this Samhati”.^{vi} The disciples of this samhati place Sri Damodaradeva in the top position among the Gurus. Brahma Samhati is also popularly known as Damodariya after demise of Sri Damodaradeva. The Auniati, Gadamur, Dakhinpat and Kuruwabahi Satras belong to this samhati. These Satras are the richest and most powerful Satras who enjoyed patronage of the Ahom kings from their outset.

After the death of Sri Madhvavadeva, the Mahapurusa branch again took three distinct sectarian forms. The reason of further sub-division regard to be the dispute over sequence to the office of the Guru among Gopaladeva, Mathuradas Burha Ata and Purusottam Thakur. Thereafter three more sub-sects in particular Purusa, Kala and Nika became greater inside the chief body of the order under the leading of Purusottam Thakur, Gopaladeva and Mathuradas Burha Ata consequently.

The Purusa Samhati regarded Sri Sankaradeva as their only one Guru. The glory of Sri Sankaradeva was faded away due to the over eager works of few pupils of Sri Madhvavadeva. The Purusa Samhati announced that other religious heads that pursued after Sankaradeva just his representatives. That is the reason they were uninterested to warble Sri Madhvavadeva as the second Guru. The name of Purusa samhati began from Purusottam Thakur the grandson of Sri Sankaradeva. They took a passionate and contradictory attitude towards the idol worship and Brahminical customs by rehearsing Pal-Nam (recitation in shifts) and Utha-Nam (chanting of prayers accompanied by rhythmic body movements).

The third sub-sect viz, Kala samhati was started by Gopal Ata. It was named after the locality of his headquarters Kaljhar. The chief of this Samhati was viewed as the actual embodiment of Deva. The sub-sect put especial emphasis on the philosophy and doctrine of Guruvada. The pupils and devotees of this Samhati were not permitted to pay curtsey to any other person. This Samhati prevailing with regards to starting numerous tribal and mostly of backward classes into the Mahapurusa fold. The devotees of this Samhati were mostly bounded for the Moamoria antagonism to the Ahom kingdom.

The fourth sub-sect Nika Samhati focused on the significance of association (bhakta sangha) and adhered cautiously to the standards of Sri Madhvavadeva. The origin of this sub-sect is erroneously ascribed to Madhvavadeva though he had nothing to do with its formation. The founders of this sub-sect are Mathuradas Ata and Padma Ata alias Badala Ata, two of the most faithful and prominent disciples of Madhvavadeva.^{vii} A few rules were produced to purify the body and mind of Vaishnavas. They laid stress on handsome food, dress and tidiness of manners and habits. Sri Madhvavadeva is considered as their religious Guru and Sri Sankaradeva as the religious Guru of their Guru. The Nika samhati is accepted as clean and pure Samhati.

The Sattra institution is an institution of Assamese civilization. It served as a place of multiple cultural activities like dance, music, drama, poetry, painting etc. The Sattra institution has a remarkable contribution to the spread of learning, education, culture and economy of Assamese society.

Conclusion

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement contributed to growth and development of Assamese language, literature, culture, art and other cultural activities. The Sattra institutions also influence on the socio-cultural, education, religious and economic condition of the Assamese common people. This institution became the centre stage of all activities in the rural and interior areas. The Sattra institutions provided a new dimension to the Assamese society through the multiple activities which is always represent of Assamese pluralistic society.

References

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