



THE EXPLORATION OF HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH NEO-VAISHNAVIT BHAKTI CULT IN ASSAM OF 16TH CENTURY AND IDEOLOGIES OF SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA

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ABSTRACT :

Bhakti means devotion to ultimate God or supreme deity by whose grace salvation may be attained by all regardless of sex, caste, or class. The Bhakti movement of India in 16th century was a very remarkable time of the religious and cultural life of human history . This was the times when social division , superstition and mal habits in the name of religion hampered intellectual and socio cultural development of society. The social reforms for human freedom and respect became utmost necessity . When everywhere some types of mal practices, chaos and confusion ,worst ideologies had miss leded people towards the most darkest part of life then some type exceptional people born in this world who with their extraordinary intellectual foresight , superior efficiency became instrumental in such a way that his every activity moulded a reformative society. Those people of that time contributed the path of moral way of living and founded a peaceful cultured civilization. The saint and teachers of the Bhakti movement i.e. Tulsidas, Chaitanya,Surdas, Meera Biai, Mahadevi Acca, Ramenanda Kabir, Guru Nanak, Srimanta Sankardeva etc emerged as mere religious saint to popular social reformer with philosophical and ideological teaching based on religious equality, social reformation. In Assam Bhakti Cult developed with a strong religious concept of bhakti among different sections of the society irrespective of caste and sex during the period of Bhakti Movement of 16 th century. The preacher of Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam of medieval time was Srimanta Sankaradeva , the



real builder of a united Assamese society with holistic development in 16th century

Keywords: Sankardeva , New – Vaisnavite movement , Culture and Religion, Holistic Development.

I. Introduction:

Sri Sankardeva was not only a religious guru and social reformer of 16th century but was the real founder of the cultural foundation of Assamese society. The objective of this paper is to know the multi- faceted ideologies and contribution of the great reformer saint of Assam leading holistic development of Assamese Society. Mahapurush Sri Sankardeva brought to Assamese society the neo – Vaishnavite movement in sixteen century . Neo -Vaishnavite movement was introduced in Assam during that time when democratic religious ideologies of bhakti movement influenced whole of India .

Neo Vaisnavite movement based on monotheistic bhakti cult that means believe on one God . This ideology was not new in Assam as before the time of Sri Sankardeva , the Vasudeva cult which believe one Narayana Dvija was followed by Assamese society mainly the non- Brahmana caste society ‘ The forefather Gopal Ata living in the Kalita Rajya as mentioned by the Katha – Gurucharita signify the popularity of Vasudeva cult in the North eastern region of Assam .’¹ Sankardeva brought this monotheistic Bhakti cult with a new far – reaching artistic and literary perspective.

Sankardeva was born in 1449 A.D. in Siromoni Bhuyan family at Alipukhuri (Bardowa) who ushered in the neo – Vaishnavite movement in Assam and KochBehar . But there was confusion of the date of his birth. As Vaisnavite



tradition accepted that Sankardeva lived for 120 years and there was no confusion that the year of his demise at saka 1490 (1568 A. D) .Gait in his “ History of Assam ”, says that his birth is “ possibly thirty or forty years too early of the mention year ,”

Sankardeva ushered Neo -vaisnavite movement in Assam which was not easy to initiate in early stage and he had to face many hardship for it . Undoubtedly Sankardevas’s new vashnavite cult derived from the inspiration from Bhagabata Purana and Gita . Sankardeva came out of the Sanskrit tol (residencial Sanskrit school) of Mahendra Kandali as an erudite scholar in all branches of Sanskrit learning . After the death of his wife and disposal of his daughter he sat out for pilgrimage throughout India for twelve years in course of which must have met many saintly and scholarly persons 2. After his return from his long pilgrimage and having obtained a copy of the Bhagavata – Purana , Sankardeva engaged himself seriously to the tusk of propagating the new faith based on Bhagavat – Purana and the Gita and succeeded in procuring a band of followers with whose help he constructed a deva – griha (prayer hall) where prayers composed by him, recitations from the Bhagavata and religious discussion where regularly held . The first spectacular step for attracting people and popularising the cult was taken through a pantomimic show know as Chihna- yatra which was enacted against the backdrop of painted scenes of seven Vaikunthas with a presiding Visnu over each .3 The movement was well received in his native place at Bardowa but the Bhuyans to which clan Sanskardeva belong, had to migrate to the north bank of the Brahmaputra to avoid frequent clashes with the Kacharis , a Mongoloid tribe . They temporarily settled at Rowta and thence to Gangamukh or Ahataguri in eastern Assam . Finally they migrated to the Dhuahata – Belaguri within the Ahom territory . The simplicity and purity of the new faith in contrast to the ritual



dominated Brahmanical cult was the prime factor in attracting unsophisticated masses to the devotional path . 3 The portal of his new faith was kept open to all communities and no discrimination whatever was made basis of castes and status while conferring initiation or ordination . The most important achievement of Sankaradeva at Belaguri was the acquisition of Madhavadeva to his fold who after his conversion from the Sakta faith prove himself the ablest and the most faithful disciple .4 Madhav's unflicking devotion to God and deep allegiance to his Guru prompted Sankaradeve to nominate him as his successor as the head of the Vasnavite community . Having stayed at Dhuwahata – Belaguri peacefully for nearly fifteen years , the Bhuyans headed by Sankaradeva shifted to Kamrupa due to the hostile attitude of the Ahoms . Having settled temporarily at various territory in 1546 the Bhuyans and some of the followers of Sankara migrated to western Assam under Koch Rule and having settled temporarily at various places , Sankara established himself permanently at Patbousi near Barpeta along with his kinsmen .

II. Objectives:

The main objectives in this study are -

To know about the ideologies and meaning of neo- Vaishnavit movement brought by the great saint Sankaradeva in Assam.

To know about the principles of Bhakti movement of Sankaradeva and how it helped in the construction of holistic developed Assamese society.

III. Methodology:

The method used in this paper is mainly descriptive and based on secondary data. Information have been collected from historical books and evidences of that time .



IV. Discussion:

Sankaradeva the great saint reformer of Assam initiated a new religious faith based on the main principle of Bhagabat Purana that was believing one God that is the Narayana or Lord Krishna . That means the new vaisnavite reformer Sankaradeva brought the religious faith for the society that is the monotheistic bhakti cult means believing one God . The ideology of Sankaradev’s New Vaishnavit movement is very simple that is following simplicity in life with a very discipline manner by following peaceful path with acquiring knowledge or Gyan from the teaching of Bhagavat Purana and also the Karma (action) philosophy of Vedanta Gita . The cult is reinforced by the teaching of the Gita which enjoins complete self surrender to God . It was announced by the reformer that a true vaisnava should not enter any temple other than Visnu nor should be partake of the offering made to any other deity .The work and ideology of Lord Krishna should be followed by the devotees of the new religion of Sankaradeva the great saint . According to him knowledge should be the base of every work and without proper knowledge everything is futile and that knowledge without Bhakti is like husking seedless paddy . “ Absolute self – surrender at the feet of the Lord Visnu – Narayana represented by Vasudeva – Krishana and the feeling of ecstatic joy and happiness is serving and worshipping him are the two main characteristics of Bhakti and both as a means of human existence . It has been said that in Kaliyuga there is no better mode of serving God than Bhakti “.5 “Knowledge is considered essential in the process of self realisation, but any separate effort is unnecessary for it . It comes automatically after a certain stage of the devotion process is reached .” 6 According to Sankaradeva devotees should perform three type of Karma (action) for their daily life which is based on the pattern of Gita, which praise enthusiastically the desire less action performed in the name of God . Of the three



types ceremonial action , viz . Nitya(daily) , Naimittik (occasional) and Kamyā (motivated or having attachment) , among the three of which the reformer vehemently oppose the third one . The other two are tolerated but both should be conducive to the devotional Bhakti .

“ Devotional works mention nine modes practising Bhakti . They are Sravana the love of listening to the names , glories and sports (lila) of the Lord (ii) Kirtana , the act of chanting prayers , (iii) Samarana, the act remembering the beautiful form , sports and name of God (iv) padasevana , the act of serving the feet of the adorable deity , (v) Arcane or the rite of the ceremonial worship of the image of the deity, (vi) the salutation or prostration at the feet of the Lord . The next three elements of Bhakti can not strictly be called ways or modes of devotion , rather they are devotional relationship between the worshipper and the worshiped . Thus Dasya consists in serving God as a faithful and ever – obliging servant , (viii) Sakhya is based on the relationship of friend between the adorer and the adored, and finally (ix) Atmanivedana signifies complete self surrender. Of these nine fold Bhakti , Assamese Vaisnavism especially extolled the first two , viz , Sravana and Kirtana as highly efficacious for the inculcation of the devotional attitude of mind .”⁷

Sankaradeva ‘s attitude towards the relation between God (supreme universal self) and individual self (jivatma) should be like the selfless and faithful slave towards his master . According to Sankaradeva’s ultimate analysis “4 Jiva may partake of the nature of God, but as long as it forms as part of the creation whether illusory or real, it is preserved and sustained by God . 8” Sankaradeva thought himself servant of the servant of the Lord .



The Hindu religious faith which believe varieties of God and Goddesses with highly ritualistic and priest – ridden rites of Brahmanical religion was considered very tough and unsuitable for the majority of non- Aryans ethnic tribal people . The common people of that time had little or no knowledge of Sanskrit religion in which Brahmanical rites and rituals were conducted .

Sankardeva in his new religious faith gave a special place for the spiritual guide for every disciple . Though we are unable to find any mention of the spiritual guide of Sankardeva but it was seen that he never failed to pay obeisance to his Guru in the opening lines of some of his compositions . Sankardeva was a religious reformer of the 16 th century’s Vakti Movement of India from Assam and before his initiation of new Vaishnava cult in Assam he set out for pilgrimage throughout India . He stayed twelve years and must have met many scholarly and saintly personality . “ It is likely that he had witnessed neo – Vaisnavite movement led by his predecessors in different regions of India like Madhavacharya , Nilambaracharya, Visnusvami – Vallabhacharya, Ramananda and Kabir . Sankardeva’s reference to the popularity of Kavir’s doha in place like Puri and Varanasi in his Kirtan-Ghosa be speak of his contact with the religious movement that were gaining ground at his age 9.” “For awakening and development of devotional sensibility, Assamese Vaisnavism lays stress on the indispensibility of four principles : Nama (name and glories of deity Visnu) , Deva (God) , Guru(spiritual guide) and Bhakti (holy association) .”¹⁰

Sankardeva did not formulate a clear –cut philosophical system. He seems, however, to have followed consistently the commentary of Sridharasvami, an ascetic of the monastic order of Sri Sankaracarya.Sridhara has interpreted the philosophical aspects of Bhagavata and the Gita in the light of ‘ Advaita ’ school



tempered by loving devotion and faith . In the Bhagavata Purana God has been described as immanent and transcendental having both ‘nirguna’ and ‘saguna’ aspect. Sankara in his doctrinal work, ‘ Bhakti ratnakara’, without denying the indeterminate and attribute less aspects of God, however has more emphasis on the ‘ saguna’ aspect because loving devotion demand a personal God . In his celebrated work ‘Kirtana ghosa’ he describes the twofold aspects of God and says that as the indeterminate God (Brahman) is not comprehensible, devotees worship and adore his beautiful form in the ‘ saguna’ form of Narayana . 11

Three Brahmana scholars , Viz., Harideva , Damodaradeva and Ananta Kandali came forward at this time to join his movement , which helped him in spreading and popularising the neo – Vaisnavite movement and to extend the sphere of his activities to the Brahmanical section .

Sankaradeva’s new Vaisnavite cult is very simple religious ideologies and most important nature is its democratic rule regulation that without any strict restriction and bar for creed and communities all people can participate in it . “He preached equality in the spiritual domain . To him a candala who remembered God with heart and soul is superior to a Brahmana observing religious vows.”¹² Against the Brahmanical dominion and strict ritual rites of Hinduism, the very simple new- Vaisnavite movement of Sankaradeva became so popular in sixteen century that in a very short time institution like Namghara and Satra constructed in both the valley of upper and lower Assam under the dominion of Ahom and Koch kingdom respectively . In Koch kingdom king Naranarayana and his brother Sukladhvaja welcomed with royal respect to Sankaradeva and his new religious cult got its utmost popularity, but in Upper Assam the movement had to face severe problem as the royal Ahom dynasty was believer of Hinduism and Saktism



faith which did not support the new religious cult which was based on equality and simplicity. Sankaradeva was instrumental in establishing namaghara (congregational prayer hall) which now characterise every Assamese villages and community prayer hall not only for the mass prayers at different times of the day, but also for religious discussion, teachings and occasional dramatic performance. It developed in to a well-organised religious institution in the centuries and this well-organized institution later came to be known as the ‘ Satra ‘ the notable religious and cultural institution of Assamese society. The mushroom growth of Vaishnavite Satras and its power led such type division between King and the Vaishnavite Guru which led the Moa-maria rebellion in 17th century Ahom kingdom.

“Renunciation of life for the sake of religion is not extolled by Sankara. Several instances narrated in his medieval biographies point to the inevitable conclusion that he was not personally in favour of accepting sanyasa to seek religious or spiritual advancement. Even Madhavadeva who was a life-long celibate, advised his followers not to adopt celibacy taking him as a model. Sankaradeva also had liberal view about the participation of women in the devotional works of his religion. “ Though Sankaradeva describe the evil effect of bewitching charm of woman and wealth, yet in practice, the great saint did not bar the door of the devotional temple to the women. He did not refrain from initiating woman to the devotional cult. In fact, his grand – daughter- in – law Kanaklata and Harideva’s daughter Bhubaneswari successfully guided the destiny of Purusa-samhati and the the Harideva sub- sect being the heads of their sub –sects .”¹³

“Sankaradeva was primarily a religious and social reformer and a speculative thinker. His purpose was not to propound a philosophy based on religion supported



by discursive reasoning and abstract thinking, but to propagate a simple system of faith based on devotion. He could rightly perceive that the society of his times was in need of a reformed religion rather than a well- formulated philosophical system.”¹⁴ So by following the ideologies of bhakti cult of Sankadeva followers could attained holistic livings by taking care of entire self ; healthy mind ,healthy body, emotions, and soul.

V. Conclusion:

Sankaradeva, a prominent saint and reformer in Assam, introduced a new religious faith rooted in monotheistic Bhakti cult, centered around Narayana or Lord Krishna as depicted in the Bhagavat Purana. His ideology emphasized simplicity, discipline, and peaceful living, drawing from the teachings of Bhagavat Purana and the Karma philosophy of Vedanta Gita. Sankaradeva advocated complete surrender to God, rejecting worship of other deities and emphasizing devotion to Lord Krishna. He stressed the importance of knowledge, coupled with Bhakti, for spiritual realization, and outlined nine modes of Bhakti, with emphasis on Sravana and Kirtana.

Sankaradeva's attitude towards the relationship between God and the individual self was akin to that of a selfless and faithful servant towards his master. His reformist approach challenged the complex rituals and priest-dominated Brahmanical religion, offering a more accessible and democratic path to spirituality. Sankaradeva's movement gained popularity across Assam, with the establishment of Namgharas and Satras, serving as centers for prayer, discussion, and cultural activities.



Despite facing opposition from some quarters, including the Ahom dynasty, Sankaradeva's movement thrived, promoting equality and simplicity in religious practice. He welcomed women into the fold of his devotional cult and did not advocate renunciation of worldly life for spiritual advancement. His legacy lies in his role as a religious and social reformer, propagating a simple system of faith based on devotion rather than a rigid philosophical doctrine.

Through Sankaradeva's Bhakti cult, followers could attain holistic living, addressing the needs of mind, body, emotions, and soul. His teachings continue to influence Assamese society, emphasizing the importance of devotion, simplicity, and surrender to God as the path to spiritual fulfillment.

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