



Neo-Vaishnavism : Its Influence on the Religious Culture of Assam with Special Reference to Barpeta

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ABSTRACT :

Assam, a state of India and a beautiful gateway of North-East has a rich cultural heritage that goes back to the days of the Epic. The word 'Assam' brings to one's mind the delightful blend of culture, heritage, faiths and beliefs of the innumerable ethnic tribes and sub-tribes in this region. Srimanta Sankaradeva propounded a religious system in the light of the Bhakti cult of India, based on the Bhagavata Purana. It is known as the 'Neo-Vaishnavism', the Bhakti cult of Assam or 'Assam Vaishnavism'. The reformative movement initiated by the saint reached out to all the different fields of cultured and developed life in North-Eastern India, enriched them and brought about a unifying and glorifying vitality to that part of the great land of Bharatavarsa. Religion is a part of culture as religion is definitely acquired by a human as a member of society. Sankaradeva revolutionized the whole religious world. He preached the cult of 'Bhakti'. Every important part of a man's social and economic life finds accommodation in his Bhakti culture Sankaradeva adapted the Sri-Krishna culture as a powerful base to create an integrated Assamese Society which was discriminated with all sides of spiritual, cultural and worldly conditions. The religious history of Barpeta is related with the coming of Sankaradeva to this place from the Ahom Kingdom and setting permanently at Patbausi. Barpeta has rightly been called the 'Satra Nagari of Assam' as Barpeta turned into a religious place dotted with numerous Satras. The Satras or Vaishnava monasteries are the repositories of Cultural activities.

Keywords: Neo-Vaishnavism, Religion, Culture, Satra, Bhakti, Ahom Kingdom.

I. Introduction:

Assam, a state of India and a beautiful gateway of North-East, has a rich cultural heritage that goes back to the days of the Epic. The word 'Assam' brings to one's mind the delightful blend of culture, heritage, faiths and beliefs of the innumerable ethnic tribes and sub-tribes in this region. Culture itself is such a vast and comprehensive thing that to define it is to define life. Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts. B. Taylor, a famous English anthropologist has defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law and custom and any other capabilities habit acquired by



man as a member of society.” Religion is the combination of blind faiths, beliefs, traditions, attitudes, customs, norms, values, principles, procedures and processes. Religion is a part of culture as religion is definitely acquired by a human as a member of society. The Alvar saints of the South who belonged to the period between the 7th the 9th century A.D. initiated the Bhakti cult in India. The sweet and scattered utterances of the mystical experiences of the Alvar saints were systematised and codified by the great Archarya Nathmuni in the 9th century. After his Yamunacharya preserved the tradition of Vaishnavism. It was Ramanuja with great pain shaped Vaishnavism and gave it a strong basis. Gradually through the pioneering works of Kabir, Nanak, Ekanath, Mirabai, Chaitanya and others, the doctrine of Bhakti had permeated the Indian society. In Assam too, the great saint poet Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.) initiated the Bhakti movement. Sankaradeva propounded a religious system in the light of the Bhakti cult of India, based on the Bhagavata Purana. It is known as the ‘Neo-Vaishnavism’- the Bhakti cult of Assam or ‘Assam Vaishnavism’. Madhavadeva, the disciple of Sankaradeva assisted him in preaching the Bhakti cult. The Renaissance initiated by Sankaradeva continues to echo throughout the length and breadth of Assam. He propounded the Dasya Bhakti or total surrender to Hari or Rama. Sankaradevas faith has come to be known as Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma, as it teaches devotion to one God only. The reigning period of Koch dynasty in the history of Barpeta regarded as golden period. During this period Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva, Sri Sri Harideva, Sri Sri Damodardeva and their followers preached the Eka Sarana Bhagavati Vaishnava Dharma in the Barpeta region.

II. Objectives of the Study:

The main objective in this paper is to study the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism on the religious culture of Assam, especially on the Barpeta district.

III. Significance of the Study:

Simanta Sankaradeva, the father of Assamese Nation was an extra ordinary personality who have influence in all the sphere of Assamese society. Sankaradeva wanted to change the culture of the society with Bhakti as his tool. The saint simplified the modes of religious



practices with great emphasis on Bhakti which was made- accessible even to the lowest in the society by rendering the holy scriptures into the language of the people.

The study is significant because it focuses on the influence of Neo-Vaisnavism on the religious culture of Barpeta. With the advent of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Barpeta turned into a religious place dotted with numerous Satras and infact Barpeta town to be called 'Baikunthapuri Dham'.

IV. Methodology:

The methodology of the study is descriptive in nature. The data is collected from various primary and secondary sources. To collect the primary data the researcher made field trips to the satras of Barpeta district and interview schedule is used as technique of data collection. The secondary source is collected from books, various articles in different journals and magazines. Materials from various websites are also used.

V. Results and Discussion:

During independence era, Assam had 13 districts. But at presents there are 34 districts. Out of these Barpeta district in one of the major cities in Western Assam. The Barpeta district was carved out of erstwhile Kamrup District of Assam in July 1983. Barpeta has been a place of great religious importance. Before the arrival of Sankaradeva to Barpeta it was not a famous place but there was a number of small villages and bils in the area. These villages and bils that later come to institute present Barpeta were Palengdi, Tatikuchi, Icchakuchi, Golaya Bil and Barpeta Bil within the jurisdiction of Bansi paragana under Koc Kingdom. Other neighbouring villages like Sundaridiya, Baradi, Kamarkuchi and Baralchung were so no important as there are today. But soon after the dissemination of Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Sankaradeva rapid changes of socio-religious aspects took place throughout the whole region specially in the Bausi paragana.

Barpeta has rightly been called the 'Satra- Nagari of Assam' as Barpeta turned into a religious place dotted with numerous Satras. Barpeta is divided into 22 Hatis which are run by the families of the Gurus administered by the Satra administration. According to the Satradhikar of Sundaridiya Satra, there are total 935 Satras in Assam at present. The Barpeta



district comprised of 35 Satras. The preservation of Satras is a matter of great importance, as they contain manuscripts, artifacts and antiques of immense historical value. The museum of Patbausi Than, has preserved the rich Satriya cultural as it contains the valuable manuscripts, masks, utensil used for Mah-Prasad by the saint and the footprints of the saint Sankaradeva. The Satras of Barpeta still observe the festivals like lord Krisnas birthday, birth or death anniversary of the Vaishnavite leadership, Holi, As a result, this represents the rich religious culture of Barpeta.

Sankaradeva went on pilgrimage to different shrines and Vaishnava culture centres of India in 1483 and came back in 1495. Returning to Assam, he devoted himself to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. He revolutionized the whole, religious world. He preached the cult of 'Bhakti'. His doctrine is known as the Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma the religion of taking sole refuge in the Lotus feet of Krishna. He removed the practice of idol worshipping and elaborate ritualistic activities in worshipping God, propounded the doctrine of self surrender through Dasya-Bhakti.

Sankaradeva laid down utmost emphasis of Sravana and Kirtana of the prayer or nama. For Sankaradeva the religious part of an individual's life cannot exist in isolation. A hungry man or a socially exploited person cannot be expected to grow spiritually. So, he wanted a balanced growth of man. Every important part of an man's social and economic life finds accommodation in his Bhakti culture.

Sankaradeva was the great unifier of Assamese society. His Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma embraces the people of various religion, race, caste and tribe. In this context, the names of some of his followers i.e. Candasai a Muslim, Gobinda- a Garu, Sriana- a Kaivarta and Madhabdeva- a potter may be mentioned. He unified the diverse racial, social and cultural elements with his outstanding capacity for synthesis.

Atfirst Srimanta Sankaradeva at Patbausi, Madhavadeva at Sundaridiya and Barpeta Satra introduced the system of prayer thrice daily. Krishna Katha or the messages of Krishna was listened and read Sravan-Kirtan there from the Gita. After this Mathura Das Burha Ata



introduced the rites of fourteen 'Prasangas' (Prayer) in place of three Prasamgas. These were the devotional songs of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva from their composed books.

Mathura Das Burha Ata met young men of sweet tone to Belbari near Sarthebari named Kajalananda and the other at Khatkhathi ghat of Barpeta Than names Basudeva. He took them, trained them and imposed the responsibility of prasamgas upon them in the 'Thans' and 'Satras'. Then Kajalananda was adored the great title of 'Sutradhar' and Basudev as 'Pathaka' and were established them near the Kirtanghar. The famous Sutradhar and Pathak generation originated from them. From those days the rites of fourteen prasangas from the early morning to night has been continuing in Barpeta Kirtanghar. From these fourteen prasangas, five prasamgas of morning are

- i. The song of morning from Bargit (Jagarana and Calana's)
- ii. Bhatima (Yasoda Janani (mother) in morning time)
- iii. Two ghosas from the 'Kirtanghosa' are sung after singing Namchanda from the Namghosa and one Yugal Patal from Saranchanda,
- iv. Reading and explaining the slokas from the Sanskrit 'Bhagavata' and the 'Gita',
- v. Reading (Path). In the morning the Harischandra Upakhyan, the Kirtanghosa, the Bhagavata 1st, 2nd, 3rd skandha (Anadi Patan), Ajamil Upakhyan, Brtrasur Badh (7th Skandha) 8th skandha, Dasam (frontside), Rukmini Harana, Rajasuya (by Madhavadeva), Kurushetra, Nimi Navasiddha- Sambad, 11th and 12th part read respectively.

After these, the Harischandra upakhyan is again started. The three prasangas of the afternoon are

- i. Reading (Path),
- ii. Prasanga (Namchanda) and
- iii. Bhagavata.



For example-

Prangopala, Tomar Binod Hari janiba Kemane
Baikuntha Tajiya Keli Kara Brindabane.

The rituals and festivals celebrated in Barpeta Satra are the Kirtanas, Bahagar Domahi (new year eve) Maghar Domahi, Daul Utsav, Nandautsav.

Bahagar Domahi is celebrated for seven days beginning from the last day of the Assamese year to the end of the 1st week of the new year. On the 1st day of the month, the 'Bihu' is celebrated with the morning session of Kirtana. The practice of the years prediction by numerologist is an important event on this day. Maghar Domahi is celebrated for five days to usher in the month of 'Magh'. Like in Bahagar Domahi special singing of the hymns is arranged.

Doul utsav is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of Phagun (mid February) and called 'Deka Doul'. The first day of the doul is called 'gandha' or 'bohnostar'. After the community singing of hymns, the deities of Salegram and Doul Govinda are brought out with due reverence and taken around the pyre prepared in the courtyard of Satra. The deities takes total seven rounds around the fire and at the declared auspicious moment, the deities are entered into the Doul griha. Around this time, there is a big display of fireworks by the local artisans of Barpeta. The next two days are celebrated as the 'Bhordoul'. People assembled in front of the deities and reverentially exchange colour. The last day of the doul is 'Suveri' when relevant verses and compositions of the Gurus on 'Falgutsav' are sung with great passion. A colourful procession is held wherein the deity is carried on a palanquin and taken 'to the abode of Ghunusa' at Kolanibari. The Bhakatas of the Hati sing Holi gits and forget themselves in joy. On return of the deity from 'Ghunusabari' to the abobe of Laxmi at the Satra premises a practice called 'bole bolon' is exercised. During this Gobinda, the deity is prevented from entering into the above of Laxmi as he had hurt the feeling of his loving wife Laxmi by going to Ghunusa, the daughter of king Indradyumna. Ironic verses are showered on the accompanying party of the deith of Gobinda. Finally, Gobinda is allowed entry after finding him Rs. 300, that too for a period of seven days only. From the ancient time till now the Doul Festival of Barpeta are celebrated with great splendour. Nandautsav is celebrated wherein the devotes play with mud and water to celebrate the birth of Krishna.



VI. Conclusion:

Thus, it can be concluded that Sankaraveda's religious culture greatly influenced the people of Barpeta. Sankaradeva contributed a lot in the field of religious culture through the propagation of the 'Eka Sarana hari Nama Dharma' by bringing unify among the people of various religious race, caste and tribe. Vaishnavism, religion being the social lingua franca of the era touched upon life in full measure, no segment remained without its impact. The Satras and the Namgharas are the living centres of Sankarite heritage and culture. The religious ideals propagated by Sankaradeva are living tradition in Assam today.

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