

Neo-Vaisnavism in Kamata Koch Bihar: Study of the Declining Phase

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The Neo-Vaisnavite movement, which was started in Assam along with Bhakti Movement elsewhere in Medieval India by Srimanta Sankaradeva, a scholar, poet, playwright and social-religious reformer, was introduced in the Kamata-Koch Kingdom by the founder himself during the reign of King Naranarayan (1540–1587), the greatest and last ruler of the undivided Koch kingdom of Kamata. King Naranarayan gave Sankaradeva the first royal patronage to his *dharma*.

This neo-Vaisnavim was characterized by *Nama-Kirtana* (community prayer), *Satra* (monastery), *Namghar* (prayer hall) and Krishna or Narayan being the sole object of devotion as the supreme reality. Hence the neo-Vaisnavite religion propagated by Srimanta Sankaradeva is called *Ekasarana Dharma* (literally: Shelter-in-One religion).

King Naranarayan at fifty years of age nominated his brother's son Patkumar as his successor. However, on the earnest request of his brother Shukladhvaj he remarried and in course of time a son was born to him, who was given the name of Lakshminarayan (Beveridge 2010: 1067). The son was probably named so because the King might have thought that his whole-hearted patronage to the *Ekasarana Dharma* of Srimanta Sankaradeva had affected his birth.

Maharaja Naranarayan died in 1587 CE and was succeeded by his son Lakshminarayan. Four years after his reign in 1591, two direct disciples of Sankaradeva - Madhavadeva and Damadoradeva - crossed over to the kingdom of Kamata because they had to leave their native country because of the sectarian oppression of the Ahom King. King Lakshminarayan received them with wholehearted favour and offered them shelter and enthusiastic patronage. The King also married Damayanti Devi, the granddaughter of Madhavadeva (Satsampradayer Katha: 47). It is said that he declared the religion of Madhavadeva to be the royal religion inimical to the followers of other doctrines.¹ Neo-Vaisnavism reached a unique dimension, when after the death of king Lakshminarayan, his son Kumar Birnarayan was duly installed as the king. According to the tradition of the royal family, coins were struck in his name. The most interesting and exceptional aspect of Birnarayan's coins is the change in the reverse legend concerning the sectarian affiliation

¹In the colophon of the Sanskrit anthology titled *Namamalika*, which extols the merits of the holy name, it is written: "Victory to Lakshminarayana who is the foremost of all great kings....., who full kindness recently removed all other religions, and punishing the wicked, made all the people take shelter of Hari."

of the issuer. Traditionally, the reverse of all the preceding Kamata-Koch coins displayed the legend *Sri Sri/ Siva Charana/ Kamala Madhu/karasya*. On the contrary, on the reverse of Birnarayan's coins are inscribed in four lines *Sri Sri/Krishna Charana/Kamala Madhu/Karasya* while the obverse shows the five-lined legend in just traditional pattern such as *Sri Srimala/d ViraNaraya/Nasya Sake/1547/118*. In a word, King Birnarayan had chosen himself to be described not as the 'bee of the lotus-feet of the god Siva' like his predecessors and many of his successors but as that of Krishna. It was he who installed the Chaturbhuj idol at Bheladanga. This, no doubt, speaks of the enormous royal patronage to the neo-Vaisnavism in the land of Saivism and Saktism. (Sarkar 2016 :143-154). Though professed by a few later kings, it was gradually losing its dominant ground in the Koch dynasty and possibly among the people. The article aims at reconstructing the condition of the faith in the post-Birnarayan period delving deep into the process of its comparative decline.

Maharaja Pranaranayan (1625-1665) succeeded his father Birnarayan to the throne of Kamata-Koch Kingdom. He was initiated into Vaisnavism by Banamali Gosain of Madhupura. (*Sri Sr iVanamali Deva Charita*: 52, 53). He established images of *Chaturbhuj* in Madhupura, *Madanmohana* in Shrirampur, *Chaturbhuj* in Kagajkuta, *Banamali* in Banamalipur and *MadanGopal* in Damodarpur. (Pal 1385 B.S.:13-14)

On the death of King Pranaranayan, four sons of Nazir Mahinarayan attempted to seize the throne. To pacify them all, Mahinarayan raised the last king's second son Modanarayan to the throne but virtually kept all powers in his own hands. The helpless king, managing to win over to his side some of the troops, killed some and expelled others of Mahinarayan's creatures from the royal court. In a battle that ensued, he finally defeated Mahinarayan who was later killed in a scuffle with the king's men. However, Mahinarayan's sons invaded the country with the help of the Bhutias but were ultimately defeated. After a disturbed reign of fifteen years king Modanarayan died in 1680 without any issue. Thus, one line of Viswa Singha's family became extinct, and the order of succession from father to son ceased (Pal 2009: 245). Nothing is known about the religious activity of king Modanarayan or the succeeding king Vasudevanarayan (1680-1682). From the first name of the king being Vasudeva, it appears that neo-Vaisnavism was still receiving the royal patronage. The next king was Mahendranarayan (1682-1693 CE), the great grandson of Pranaranayan, who took interest in the Vaisnava faith. Initiated by Ratikanta Misra, he was a devout Vaisnava, accordingly a vegetarian and used to take *Havisanya* (boiled rice mixed with clarified butter). He always performed *japain* the name of Hari and sung in praise of Him (Ghosal 2005: 218).

The next king Maharaja Rupanarayan (1693-1714) was also a follower of Vaisnavism. His guru was Siddhanta Shiromani Bhattacharya (Ghosal 2005: 224). On the occasion of initiation, a land-grant was made to him by the Maharaja at an eclipse of the Sun. It is he who constructed an image of Madan Mohan image, and established magnificent worship;

arrangement of provisions for its maintenance was made under his encouragement in Koch Behar (Pal 2009: 242)

Maharaja Rupanarayan was succeeded by eldest son Upendranarayan in 1714 CE. Previously the pro-Damodaradeva Goswamis of the *VaidikSreni* of Kamarupa were the royal Gurus. When Shakti-worship was re-established in the royal family (Roy 2006: 82). Maharaja Upendranarayan gave up the old line of Gurus and became a disciple of Satananda Goswami. Satananda was Radhiya Brahmana of village Sadikha in Murshidabad district (Ghosal 2005: 201). After the death, Satanandawas succeeded by his son Ramananda Goswami.

After a reign of 49 years, King Upendranarayan died in 1763 CE and his son Devendranarayan, still a child of four years, was placed on the throne. Only two years after his accession to the throne, the 6-year old king was assassinated in which Ramananda Goswami came to be involved. As a result, he was executed under the order of the Devraja of Bhutan (Das 1985: 44). Subsequently Ramananda's cousin Sarvananda Goswami came to the Koch Kingdom during the reign of the next king Dhairyendranarayan. Sarvananda, who is said to have given spiritual initiation to the Maharaja (Das 1985: 45), was appointed as *Rajguru*.

In the period from 1765 to 1773 which was full of internal intrigues and the Bhutanese aggression, we find three royal family members to be installed as the king one after another: Dhairyendranarayan (Upendranarayan's nephew), Rajendranarayan (Upendranarayan's another nephew) and Dharendranarayan (Dhairyendranarayan's son). To save the Koch country, which was almost occupied by the Bhutias on April 5, 1773, a treaty was concluded between the young Maharaja Dharendranarayan and the East India Company; Thus, Cooch Behar became a feudatory state. Thereafter a peace was concluded between Bhutan and East India Company on April 25, 1774, in consequences of which King Dhairyendranarayan was released from captivity.

During his second term Dhairyendranarayan (1774-1783) was very much indifferent to administration and mostly engrossed in religious thoughts. According to *Rajopakhyana*, one day during his sickness, the king desired the image of Madanmohan to be brought before him, which was complied with. Dhairyendranarayan died in 1783 leaving his almost 4 years old son Harendranarayan as the heir to the throne of Kamata-Koch Kingdom.

Maharaja Harendra Narayan (1783-1839 CE) was out and out a freedom-loving person. In addition, he was a typical Hindu with much devotion to gods and Brahmanas. However, he was a sincere and devout Sakta so much so that he composed a large number of *Shyamasangita* (songs in praise of Kali) (Pal 1999: 63-114). Harendranarayan's son and successor Sivendranarayan (1796-1847) was also full of devotion for the gods and goddesses as well as for the Brahmanas. Jaynath Munsii in *Rajopakhyana* has described him as '*Saktasiromani*' (crest-jewel of the Saktas). Being a devout Sakta, he paid much attention to the erection and repair of temples in the Kamata-Koch kingdom and composition of devotional songs including *Shyamasangitas* (Pal 1999: 39-40)

The reign of Maharaja Narendranarayan (1847-1863 CE), adopted son and successor of Sivendranarayan, witnessed celebration of Durgapuja with pomp and grandeur (Pal 1999: 117). Narendranarayan's son Maharaja Nripendranarayan (1863-1911) was highly influenced by his father-in-law Keshab Chandra Sen's ideas, i.e., the Brahma faith and therefore, declared the Brahma faith as the royal religion (Roy 1413 B.S.: 264). Like Nripendra Narayan, his son Maharaja Raj Rajendra Narayan (1911-1913 CE) was also baptized into *Nabobdhan* Brahma Religion founded by Keshab Chandra Sen. Maharaja Jitendranarayan (1913-1922 CE), younger brother of Rajendranarayan, was also a Brahma and even wedded to Indira Raje, daughter of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda, at a hotel in London by the rites of the Brahma Samaj. However, after his marriage he was influenced by Hindu religion and became a devout Sakta (Debnath 1993: 179). Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan (1922-1970 CE), eldest son and heir of Jitendranarayan and the last ruling prince of his dynasty,² also adhered to the Hindu religion and took initiation in accordance with Sakta faith (Bandopadyay: 207)

Thus, it appears that after Dhairyendranarayan, the Koch kings devoted themselves fully either to Saktism or to Brahmaisim discarding the Vaisnava faith. The Vaisnava movement in the Kamata Koch Kingdom practically continued in full swing during three generations of rulers. Subsequently Vaisnavism remained confined in the initiation of the Maharajas by the Vaisnava preceptors.

It is interesting to note that the Neo-Vaisnava movement propagated by Sankaradeva, which sought to establish a new casteless and classless society, created tremendous impact in this region. However, it gradually lost its popularity because of lack of people's enthusiasm to the movement. Again, Vaisnavism as propagated by Chaitanyadeva in Bengal, though deprived of royal patronage, influenced the people from the time of Naranarayan itself. The influence of the faith as mentioned in the *Damodaracharita* (Sridamodaradeva Charita: 192) has not been properly evaluated. The influence of the cult of Radhakrisna is very much apparent even in the traditional folk songs of Kamata Koch Kingdom. Here, we may refer to worship of Radhavinoda, Radhavallabha, Radhagobinda, etc. patronized by royal ladies. It is probable that during the period of Damodaradeva the followers of the cult were preaching in western part of Kamarupa (Bhattacharya 1991: 116)

Kamata-Koch Kingdom, nay north-east India was predominantly inhabited by the tribal people most of whom were later on Hinduised. Among them worship of Siva prevailed from the remote past. Siva was the deity of fertility and agriculture to the people whose chief avocation was cultivation. That is why, Siva perhaps constantly remained as the guardian deity and there is no wonder that the deity would be adored and worshipped by the people. This perhaps gives satisfactory explanation as to the Koch king's obligation to

²The State of Cooch Behar was merged with the dominion of India (later the union of India) during his reign on August 28, 1949 and finally it became a district of the state of West Bengal on 1st January, 1950.

erect Siva temples occasionally and adopt legends leading their devotion to Siva (Bhattacharya 1991: 116).

The satras established by Sankaradeva usually on royal tax-free land, played a significant role in disseminating his ideals as well as the sophisticated methods of cultivation to the peasant of the distant parts. Signs of population growth after 1500 CE on account of adoption of labour intensive cultivation and the increased number of Satras (700) in the Brahmaputra valley indicate the popularity of the Satras (Guha 1984: 495). But the picture the Kamata Koch kingdom was something different. The Madhupura Satra in Koch Behar with its large amount of rent-free land (75 bighas) did not make much progress probably due to less growth of population for which it had depended mainly on charity (Bhattacharya 1991: 116)

Madhavadeva is said to have appeared to the rich traders and men of position to support his bhakats and himself with food and money. They were considered to be the mainstay of the NeoVaisnavism whose position became jeopardized with the large influx of Muslim peasantry and outsiders like the Armenian and the Bhutiyas in the bigger business transactions of the country (Sinha 1962:58).

The most important reason behind the decline of Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva seems to be the opposition of the priestly class and the Brahmanas in the court of the Kamata-Koch Kingdom. During the reign of successive rulers, they tried their best to restore the position of the Brahmanical religion in Koch Kingdom. In this connection, mention may be made of Maharaja Harendranarayan and Sivendranarayan who expressed their devotion to the Goddess Kali, composed songs in praise of Kali and constructed temples in dedication of Kali. All these virtually mark the extinction of the values which Sankaradeva is said to have propounded in the Kingdom.

Neo-Vaishnavism was brought to Cooch Behar by Sankaradeva and was being maintained and propagated by the followers. Before 1714 CE when Maharaja Rupanarayan was succeeded by eldest son Upendranarayan, the Brahmins of the Vaidik Sreni of Kamarup were the royal Gurus. Giving up the old line of Gurus, Upendra Narayan took SatanandaGoswami, a Radhiya Brahmana of Murshidabad district as his Guru. Naturally the Neo-Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva was deprived of royal patronage and consequently weakened.

The custom of Rajguru in the Koch Royal family was an established one. These Rajgurus enjoyed special privileges even till the reign of Maharaja Harendra Narayan. It is said that Rajguru Sarbananda Goswami received a royal order to collect *Guru Pranami* at the rate of one *taka* per house in all the houses of the kingdom. (Roy 1413 BS: 132) Naturally the Rajgurus played a significant role in maintaining and popularizing the glory of the *Rajadharma*. The English whose feudatory state was Cooch Behar since 1773, however, later stopped all the facilities of these Rajgurus and their families. This badly affected the *Rajadharma* in the Koch royal family.

Maharaja Harendranarayan had an intense love of freedom against the British intervention in the administrative affairs of the Koch Kingdom. This perhaps inspired him to be a Shakta and worshipper of goddess Kali in place of peaceful Vaisnavism. Under the indomitable influence of father-in-law Keshab Chandra Sen, King Nripendranarayan not only embraced the Brahmo religion himself but also declared it the state religion. These developments dealt a final blow to the hope of reemergence of neo-Vaisnavism in the Koch Kingdom.

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Sarkar Bijoy Kumar, "Neo-Vaishnavism in Kamata-Koch Dynasty: A Study of Birnarayan," *Satsampradayer Katha*, p. 47. Madhavadeva was a bachelor, Sri Damayanti Devi was not his real granddaughter.

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