

## Srimanta Sankaradeva and the Concept of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam

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Sankaradeva (b. 1449 A.D. - 1568 A.D.) was the most celebrated founder and potential leader of the Neo-Vaishnavism during fifteenth-sixteenth century A.D. in Assam and its adjoining regions. It may be noted that Vaishnavism was very much prevalent in this region before the advent of Sankaradeva and his great disciples as is evidenced by the historical monuments, inscriptions and Thans and such other records.<sup>1</sup> After Sankaradeva under Madhavadeva, Damodaradeva, Gopala Ata, Aniruddha and others diverse schools and sects of Neo-Vaishnavism flourished in this region, and these popular religious leaders organized and systematized the Vaishnava religion with institutions and organizations and gave the much needed mass base and made it a popular religion and cultural medium. In this connection mention may be made of Maheswar Neog's *Sankaradeva and His Times*<sup>2</sup> which was subsequently re-issued, with addition, under the title *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam*<sup>3</sup> and S.N.Sarma's *Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*<sup>4</sup>. His Vaishnavism is called Neo-Vaishnavism where it is believed that there is one and only one God. This has been depicted very beautifully in the first line of his outstanding composition 'Kirtanaghosa'-

*"Prathame pranamo Brahmarupi sanatana,  
Sarva Avatara karana Narayana"*

The religion propagated by Sankaradeva is popularly known as 'Mahapurusiya' *dharm*a. The term *Mahapurusa* is an epithet of God Narayana (Vishnu). The *Bhagavata* prescribed the method of worshipping Krishna with *Kirtana* and addressing Him as *Mahapurusha*. It is also popularly believed that the term '*mahapurusha*' was applied to mean Sankaradeva as he was known to his followers as *maha* (i.e. the great being) and the religion initiated and propagated by him came to be known as *Mahapurusiya dharm*a.

The fundamental outline of Sankaradeva's philosophy centers on the following principles:

1. The knowledge of the supreme reality conceived as Narayana.
2. Surrender to the supreme in the form of Srikrishna.
3. Company of good soul's *Satsanga*.
4. Prayer and chanting of the name of the Supreme Being.

Sankaradeva says- '*ek deu ek seu, ek vine nahi keu*'

i.e., there is only one God, there is only devotion and there is nothing else besides them.

Sankaradeva lays great emphasis on '*Eka-Sarana*' which is known as *Eka Sarana Dharma*- the religion of supreme surrender to One, and that One is Vishnu. For an *Ekasaraniya*, that is, the followers of *eka sarana dharma*, the worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. In his opinion - God Narayana is the Supreme Soul and is the One and only Lord of the universe. Nothing exists without Him. He is the cause (*karana*) as well as the effect of creation (*karya*). He continues that God is a spiritual presence, a creative power, an exponent of righteousness, beauty and love. Sankaradeva upholds about two aspects of God. First is the concept of God as *Nirguna* (without attributes) and secondly is the *Saguna* (with attributes).

Sankaradeva's teachings are expressed through chanting of the '*Nama*'. Chanting the name of *Hari* is an integral part of Vaisnavism and accepted by all Vaishnava saints of India. Hearing (*sravana*) and chanting (*kirtana*) of the divine *nama* is recognized as a powerful medium for spiritual realization. The love of *nama* cleanses the sin which defiles the mind. In the *Kirtanaghosa*, he thus explains that the chanting of the name of *Hari* can liberate us from all kinds of sins and helps us to succeed in life. It is also stated that in Kaliyuga, no salvation can be attained without *nama*. The people of Kaliyuga would be sinful in motive. They have no right to other forms of religion and *nama* is the only essence in this age. Without *nama*, people pass through idleness which leads to self destruction.

In his *Kirtanaghosa*, *Srimanta Sankaradeva* has shown the intimate relation between bhakta and Bhagavana, i.e. God and His devotees. A true devotee is very dear to God. A true devotee never fears any critical situations and he has firm determination in serving God with deep and profound faith and beliefs. In order to substantiate his idea, he narrates the Prahlad-Hiranyakasipu episode. According to this tale, Prahlad was ordered by his father Hiranyakasipu to give up faith of the Sri Krishna, or face death. He was tortured by all possible means. Prahlad was not afraid at all and he continued to stick to his faith. He had realized the power and greatness of devotion from his childhood and also requested his father to resort to Sri Krishna. His faith ultimately saw him through the rest.

In order to translate his ideas and doctrine into reality Sankaradeva as stated earlier established religious institutions, mainly the *namaghars* and *satras*. It is heard that he used to preach his teaching and the name of *Hari* chanted. The *satra* institution, meant for local cultural assemblages of the Vaisnavas was a unique feature of Assam Vaishnavism. In these, besides religious discussion, *kirtana* songs, dramatic performances of Pauranic legends, devotional dances, etc. were held.

The *satras* or monasteries were established by Sankaradeva and a number of followers, like- Damodaradeva, Madhavadeva, Harideva and Gopala Ata of Bhawanipur

and the sects founded by these disciples of Sankara, although subsequently differed from each other in minor ritualistic matters or principles, were all engaged in propagating Vaishnavism with new form and fresh ideas. And these *satras* played a vital role as traditional repositories of Sankaradeva's Bhaktism. In fact, S.N.Sarma in his book<sup>5</sup> and M.Neog's edited work<sup>6</sup> discuss with an exhaustive manner.

A critical analysis of the works of Sankaradeva reveals the impact of the contemporary Assamese society and culture. Vaishnavism means to promote inner peace, develop love in place of hatred, and give encouragement in place of unknown fear and to be satisfied with the minimum requirements. Affluence can do his best only for the outward comfort of people and not for the inner peace and happiness of mankind. This is where Sankaradeva's teachings come into play.

The society where Sankaradeva was born was full of superstitions and beliefs. Most of the people were the blind supporters of Saktism, Tantricism and they practiced all sorts of horrible, terrible, fierce and evil deeds. All these made the environment unhealthy. Sankaradeva realized the cause of this degradation of the society and he tried heart and soul to reform it. He stood against the evil influence of Tantricism, Saktism and Nathism that flourished the entire region of Kamarupa and Kamata kingdom. He vehemently fought against these religious beliefs and preached Vaishnavism and inculcated the doctrine of Salvation by faith and prayer only, and not by offering sacrifices.

Sankaradeva started a movement of the religion of love and devotion. With this attractive movement to the common milieu he was able to establish harmony and unity among people of different communities. Sankaradeva had a mission to elevate the socio-cultural life of the people of this place as well as other neighboring regions. Moreover, in order to translate his ideas into reality in the society, irrespective of any caste, colour distinction, he took help of art, music, culture, dance and drama and sometime even folk performances. He upheld the cult of devotion (bhakti) popularly designated 'Neo-Vaishnavism'.

The caste system was a serious social evil, destroying the peace, discipline and unity among the members of the society. It sows the seeds of hatred and cruelty. Sankaradeva tried to remove this evil from the society. He forcefully expressed that human beings should be guided by understanding that everything is created and sustained by One (Lord Vishnu). He allowed no caste among the *bhaktas* (devotees) and invited community worship in which everyone could participate irrespective of caste and creed.

In his time Sankaradeva witnessed that, some people did not hesitate to sacrifice animals, birds and even human beings at the altar of gods and goddesses. Countless misdeeds were done in the name of religion. Sankaradeva was one of the godly persons who tried to reform the Assamese society by preaching the glory of Vishnu (Krishna) through the *Kirtanaghosa* and his other religious books. He tried to impress upon the

people of his time that social harmony, peace and happiness of every member of society depend upon self surrender before God and taking the path of devotion to Lord. Hence – *Laiyo eka Sarana Krishnata.*

Sankaradeva as mentioned earlier used the form of Krishna to preach devotion to a single God (*eka sarana*) who can be worshipped solely by uttering his various names (nama) in contrast to other *bhakti* forms *eka sarana* follows the *dasya* attitude (a slave to God). Moreover, unlike the Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Bengal [founded by Sri Caitanyadeva (1485-1533 A.D.) during fifteenth sixteenth century A.D.], Radha is not worshipped along with Krishna in uttering the name of God Hari, Rama, Narayana and Krishna are most often used. It is interesting to note in this connection that scholars on the history of Vaishnavism are still not unanimous pertaining to the meeting of Sri Caitanyadeva with Srimanta Sankaradeva. According to P.C.Goswami<sup>7</sup> “There are many references of religious discussions between Sankaradeva and Caitanyadeva. Both were the same creed of Bhakti.” But there are scholars who are of the opinion that Sankaradeva met Caitanya seems to be erroneous.<sup>8</sup>

B.B.Majumdar<sup>9</sup> upheld that Sankaradeva met Caitanyadeva at Puri but they did not talk each other. Similarly, R.M.Nath<sup>10</sup> says – “Sankaradeva met Chaitanya who was in a state of divine ecstasy. Both gazed at each other; but there was no discourse between them.” Sankaradeva possibly met Sri Caitanyadeva at Puri during his first pilgrimage ‘as he spent twelve years during his sojourn and he returned to Kamarupa before 1535. Chaitanyadeva spent at Puri from A.D. 1515 till his death in 1533.’<sup>11</sup>

It may be noted in this connection that in ancient Kamarupa there was a vast difference between upper class and lower class of people. The lower class was deprived of all socio-political rights in the society. The socio-cultural background in the society at that period was complicated being inhabited by the population of various castes and creeds. Sankaradeva says that *bhakti* is no respect of caste.

In his *Uddhava Samvada*, Sankaradeva says –

“*Krishnara bhakti ati,  
Nachabe achara jati,  
Jagatare maha hitakara  
Yena amrta paile,  
Yei sei mate khaile,  
Save haya ajara amara*”

“Undivided devotion unto Krishna observes no distinction between customs and castes. It is very beneficial to the Universe. Just as nectar, when obtained and taken in whatever form, results in rejuvenation and immortality”.

He was successful to abolish the class and caste distinction through preaching his ‘*eka-sarana-nama-dharma*’. Many verses of the *Kirtanaghosa* teach us the true

significance of fundamental equality of all religion. His teachings embrace the lowest of the lowly. This has been brought out in the following verse of the *Kirtanaghosa*-

*Nahi bhaktita jati-ajati vichar,  
Krishnatu bhakti samsatare adhi karma l*

i.e, in *bhakti (devotion)*, there is no distinction of caste and everybody has equal rights to chant the *Hari Nama*.

In short, what Sankaradeva says is that, the social status to man does not depend upon his birth, but true devotion to One (Lord Vishnu). A true devotee can be considered as a great being. Sankaradeva's thought was a great liberating force in terms of humanism and secular well being of the people and served the social and spiritual needs of the common people. He is undoubtedly the boldest social reformer ever born in Assam, stood against the evil influence of the then religious practices that flourished in the region centering round Kamarupa and Kamata kingdom.<sup>12</sup> He fought against these religious beliefs and practices and preached a purified Vaishnavism and inculcated the doctrine of salvation by faith and prayer instead of offering sacrifices.<sup>13</sup> The establishment of the Bhakti form of worship, popularly known as Neo-Vaishnavism<sup>14</sup> was not an isolated phenomenon having no connection whatsoever with the contemporary Vaishnava revival that swept over the rest of India during the period. In fact, as observed by S.N.Sarma- "Characteristics like belief in and adoration of a personal God Visnu or Krishna, emphasis on devotion and faith, recognition of the equality of all persons, the ignoring of the caste distinction at the spiritual level, the high place assigned to virtues like love, piety and non-violence and deprecation of the practice of image-worship, are common to all Vaisnavite movements of the middle ages."<sup>15</sup>

In spite of this the neo-Vaishnavism as preached and propounded by Srimanta Sankaradeva in the entire Brahmaputra Valley was having certain characteristic traits of its own. It evolved a cult of its own best suited to the genius and befitting to the temperament of the general milieu of the region and its surroundings. His religion of love and devotion (*bhakti*) to Krishna would lead to the illumination of the mind and to ultimate salvation. He recommended dance and music to produce a state of ecstasy in which the *bhaktas irrespective of any caste colour, and creed distinction* could have a vision of God.

#### Notes & References:

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