

Neo- Vaishnavite Movement and Assamese Society: Special Reference to Sankardeva

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Abstract

The Assamese society is the assimilation and amalgamation of diverse culture, language, religion, customs and traditions evolving through different opportunities and challenges. From the pre- historic era, this land is the witness of numerous great leaders, who have been contributing for the rich Assamese culture, literature, art and heritage. Srimanta Sankardeva was a multifaceted genius of modern Assam. Through introducing Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam, he tries to enrich the Assamese culture by dispelling the darkness of ignorance, cruel, intolerance, and prejudices that were prevalent at his time. Saktism and Tantrism dominated the socio-religious landscape of medieval Assam, and the results of these religious cults include intolerance, social hierarchy, untouchability, and the degrading of human dignity. By abolishing the social hindrances, he created different mechanisms for the acculturation and spiritual elevation of the various social groups, i.e., racial peace, and established the groundwork for brotherhood and a greater Assamese society. Regardless of caste, creed, class he revived the ethos, culture, society, and concept of *Bor Asom*, encompassing all multiethnic groups. Through this study, an attempt is made to highlight the socio- cultural background of mediaeval Assam. Another purpose of this paper is to analyse the role of Neo- Vaishnavite movement lead by Srimanta Sankardeva for the enrichment of society and culture of *Bor Asom*.

Keyword: Neo- Vaishnavite Movement, Eka- Sarana- Nama- Dharma, Bor Asom, Assamese Culture, Medieval Assam.

Introduction

The maker of contemporary Assamese literature, culture, and society, Srimanta Sankardeva (1449- 1568) was a multifaceted genius who introduced and spread the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. This was done not only as a religious cult but also to drive out the darkness of ignorance, cruel, and illogical customs that were sustained at his time. Saktism and Tantrism dominated the socio-religious landscape of medieval Assam, and the results of these religious cults include intolerance, social hierarchy, untouchability, and a decline in human dignity. Sankardeva showed that the road of Bhakti (devotion), the most basic religion founded

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on humanism and tolerance, is the best path to Hari (God). Srimanata Sankardeva created a new social order and propagated it throughout Assam with the goal of eradicating untouchability, injustice, and inequity. Srimanta Sankardeva created the concept of Nirguna Brahman, the fundamental tenet of Sankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta, by investigating the maxim 'Eka Deva Eka Seva, Eka Bine Nahi Kevala'. He created a spontaneous mechanism for the acculturation and spiritual uplift of the various social groups, i.e., racial harmony, and established the basis of brotherhood and greater Assamese society through Namghar (the prayer house) and Satra (the central monastery). He also developed a democratic and holistic outlook. Through his creation of Borgeet, Ankia Nat, Satriya Dance, etc., he revitalized the ethos, culture, society, and concept of Bor Asom regardless of caste and creed, including all the multi-ethnic communities.

Literature Review

Neog, M. (2018), in his book '*Sankaradeva and His Times*' explores the early history of the Vaisnava faith and movement in Assam religious life during Sankaradeva era against the regions medieval socio-cultural backdrop beside the historical, literary and artistic aspects of the Assamese bhakti movement. A very detailed account of the Eka-sarana- naam system of religious organisation that evolved under the auspices of Sankara has been highlighted in this book.

In the study '*Historicity of Casteism: Assam and the Vaishnava Monasteries*', **Mahanta, A.J.**¹ (2020) examines how the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam, especially in its monastic institutions, promoted social inclusion. Numerous marginalized groups, including indigenous populations, are identified by the study. According to the researcher, Srimanta Sankardev's emphasis on egalitarian bhakti and rejection of ceremonial hierarchy allowed these groups to actively engage in religious life, frequently for the first time outside of the constrictive frameworks of Brahmanical orthodoxy.

Kalita, G. (2023)² Through the paper '*Cultural Tradition of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam and its influence on Society*' makes an effort to highlight the cultural and social contributions of neo-Vaishnavism to the greater Assamese society. The researcher analysed that Neo- Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva has made a significant contribution to the development of an egalitarian society in Assam by promoting social justice and a classless society.

Borah, R. (2016) in his paper '*The Neo-Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankaradeva: A Great Socio-Cultural Revolution in Assam*'³ tries to analyse about Neo- Vaishnavite movement as a great socio-cultural revolution in Assam and its impacts on the social life of the people of Assam.

¹ Mahanta, A.J (2020), Historicity of Casteism: Assam and the Vaishnava Monasteries. *Journal of Critical Reviews*.

² Kalita, G (2023) 'Cultural Tradition of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam and its influence on Society' *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*.

³ Borah, R. (2016) 'The Neo-Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankaradeva: A Great Socio-Cultural Revolution in Assam. *MSSV Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Vol. 1 NO. 1*

Bora, S. (2023), in his study *Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam: Social Transformation, Structural Hierarchies and Cultural Consciousness*, highlights dynamics of caste-based resistance and acceptance that accompanied the growth of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. He notes that underprivileged and indigenous people discovered both spiritual dignity and social involvement in the movement's inclusive spiritual doctrine, which was previously unattainable for them due to Brahmanical rules.

In the paper, '*Neo-Vaishnavism and Tribal People of Medieval Assam: The History of Social Assimilation*' **Kalita, A.**⁴ (2022) tries to highlight how Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam opens the ways for assimilation of diverse communities of Assam and what is the impact of this assimilation upon the society.

Methodology of the study:

This study is primarily qualitative study and based on the analysis of secondary data. The research methodology utilized is document-based, relying on secondary sources such as historical texts, research studies, ethnographic research and academic articles. This methodological approach enables the integration of diverse perspectives and phenomena related to the role of Neo- Vaishnavite movement for the enrichment of Assamese society.

Objectives of the study:

The Objectives of the study are

1. To highlight the growth of Neo- Vaishnavite Movement in Assam.
2. To analyse the role of Neo- Vaishnavite Movement for the enrichment of Assamese society and culture.
3. To assess the relevance of Sankardeva's philosophy in addressing contemporary challenges in Assamese culture, society and literature.

Discussion:

Neo- Vaishnavite movement in Assam:

At the of medieval Assam, religious practices and social systems were extremely cruel and substandard. Saktism, which required the gift of blood to the god, was very popular among laypeople. In the name of religious rites and rituals, Saktism's adherents engaged in some wicked and unscientific practices, such as animal and even human sacrifice. In addition to this, the caste system's authoritarian nature had upended society's underpinnings. The Brahmin priests and pandits who had managed to rise to positions of power did all in their power to maintain their tight hold on society. With the great majority of people lacking any kind of education, conflicts of interest between the illiterate majority and the literary few persisted. The upper caste took full advantage of the fact that the lower classes were prohibited from reading or even viewing the sacred texts. Religion was essentially a closed institution because

⁴ Kalita, A. (2022). Neo-Vaishnavism and Tribal People of Medieval Assam: The History of Social Assimilation. *International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)*.

the Brahmanas held all proprietary rights over it. Srimanta Sankaradeva spread cohesive religious ideas and increased public awareness of these kinds of evil acts in the middle of the unpleasant and unsettling circumstances, which helped to develop Assamese society's emerging ideals and social cohesiveness. Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism mainly targets Saktism, which is founded on a vulgar materialist perspective. Spiritual propaganda has been used by Saktism to counter it

Vaishnavism is a well-known Hindu religious denomination that honours Vishnu as the Almighty, who occasionally exposes Himself through various *Avatāra* to refute Adharma, or wrongdoing and immoral behaviour. Vaishnavites believe that the fundamental means of obtaining heavenly grace are Bhakti (devotion) and Karma (rituals). Among India's many Bhakti cults, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement- which started in Assam in the first decade of the 16th century and peaked in the middle of the 17th century- is noteworthy due to its unique and creative nature, which shared the ideals of democracy, humanism, equality, and fraternity. It began with the goal of working towards the upliftment of the lower classes and minimizing the rigidity of caste distinctions. The first attempt to bring the lower classes, tribes, and castes into the fold of Vaishnavism was made by Srimanta Sankaradeva, who accepted his disciples regardless of their caste, tribe, class, or religion.

His goal was to establish a society that would not differentiate between caste, religion, language, place of residence, royalty, or peasantry, but would instead be based on the values of equality, fraternity, liberty, and human dignity. He declared, "*Nahi Bhakatit jati ajati bichar, hari bhaktit samastare adhikar,* " since anyone can incorporate Krishna nama into their heart and mind, regardless of social standing. Sankaradeva advocated for the liberation of the oppressed group in society and declares- "*Brahmanara chandalara nibisari kul, kukuroko, khay heno mless gone, Xio xuddho howe harir kirtane*"⁵. As a result, Sankaradeva spread a religion that united God and humanity. Most importantly, regardless of caste, creed, or language, everyone was subject to the *Sarana* system. Sankaradeva used his *Eka Sarana Naama Dharma* to advance this wholly democratic concept of equality.

By establishing *Naamghar*, he made it possible for everyone, regardless of caste or creed, to engage in group religious and social conversations. Naamghar, (prayer hall) the best museum, eliminated social norms imposed by the temple from daily existence. In order to eradicate ignorance and rigidity and foster humanity, tolerance, and democracy among the populace, the namghar serves as a venue for cultural, artistic, and musical performances rather than religious rituals. Through this Namghar Sankaradeva attempted to establish justice, law, and harmony in the rural society. Since Srimanta Sankaradeva's time, the Namghar has been built and designed so that people of all races and tribes might join and participate in religious rites and events. It made significant contributions to the fields of literature and art and enhanced Assamese social and educational life. Furthermore, an open, wall-less Namghar is a representation of

⁵ *Kirtan Ghosa, 117*

adaptability, where doors are open to everyone and the institution welcomes everyone without discrimination. “*Parar dharmik nihingkhiba kadasit, Kariba bhaktak daya khakarunsit*”⁶

He later established *Satras* to spread the Vaishnava religion, which is essential to the ideology's spread throughout Assam. It is an institution or centre of worship that is unique to the Eka Sarana tradition. It is where religious teachings, beliefs, and spirituality are imparted and acts as the centre of religious activity for all Vaishnavite organizations. People from different castes and tribes gather there to receive religious education and congregational prayer. Satras of Assam have been commemorating a number of cultural events that have the power to forge close bonds amongst people, including Ankiya Naat, Ras Leelas, Janmashtami, Dol Utsav, etc. Satra institutions use a variety of religious ceremonies to inspire the ordinary people. Through the ritual, anyone, regardless of caste, class, creed, etc., can join the Satra fold or become a disciple of Satra.

Sankardeva created the dramatic expression form known as *Angkiya Bhaona* by assembling the elements of *sloka*, *bhatima*, *nandi*, *sutradhar*, and the division of act from the granary of Sanskrit dramaturgy. However, he did not strictly follow Sanskrit dramaturgy. He introduced the *Brajawali* language for the benefit of the general public, in contrast to the Sanskrit plays. He deftly penetrated Assamese society through his Angkiya Naat- Patniprasad, Kalia Daman, Keligopal, Rukminiharan, Parijatharan, and Ram Vijay. Sankardeva began this magnificent journey with first Angkiya Naat- Sinha Jatra.

Prior to Sankardeva, the Assamese dance scene was restricted to religious and folk dances performed in temples. Sankardeva blended aspects of classical dance to develop a style of dance called *Satria Dance*. Nevertheless, the Bor Geets touched the spiritual cord of the mass. Borgeet made the greatest contribution to the development of Neo-Vaishnavism among Sankardeva's creative aspects. Though he composed 240 Borgeets, fire destroyed them all. Only about 34 Borgeets are of them could be retrieved from his memory. This loss devastated Sankardeva so much that he stopped writing Borgeets and asked his disciple, Madhavdeva to write Borgeet.

Relevance of Sankardeva's philosophy

The spiritual, cultural, and moral aspects of Srimanta Sankardeva's worldview continue to be relevant in contemporary Assam. Sankardeva's philosophy emphasizes the value of character development, moral education, and the cultivation of ethical principles in addition to academic knowledge. His teachings offer a useful framework for cultivating moral consciousness and encouraging responsible citizens in a world beset by moral quandaries and ethical difficulties. In today's diverse and multicultural communities, Sankardeva's theories on cultural assimilation are extremely pertinent. Sankardeva's method can help create global citizens that value and respect many cultures, promote cultural integration, and fight prejudice. Sankardeva's emphasis on holistic development is in line with the modern view of education as embracing social, emotional, and physical well-being in addition to intellectual success. His focus on incorporating music, theatre, and the arts into the classroom is consistent with modern

⁶ *Bhakti Pradip*, 141

ideas of encouraging critical thinking, creativity, and hands-on learning. The educational theory of Srimanta Sankaradeva is still relevant in today's classrooms.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that the Neo-Vaishnavite movement is a major sociocultural change that aims to unite Assamese people. During a time of social upheaval and factionalism in Assam, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement promoted the idea of universal brotherhood. It contributes to the spread of this concept because there was no feeling of caste, class, or racial discrimination. The uniqueness of 'Ek-Saran-Hari-Naam-Dharma' lay in the fact that its practice encouraged ethnic unity and spiritual elevation through a fresh approach to religious behaviour based on the local indigenous traits. Through the numerous mechanisms, Srimanta Sankaradeva sought to abolish a number of superstitious beliefs and practices from Assamese society, which had a profound effect on the social conditions of the Assamese people. His faith is the most liberal, tolerant, direct, and simple way to get in touch with God and maintain societal order. Through the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement, he improved living circumstances for all social classes.

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