

## **A Quest for a Peaceful Socio-Religious Value system: Revisiting the Reformist Devotional Creed of Medieval Assam**

Dr. Sangeeta B. Sahay

*University of Science and Technology Meghalaya, India*

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**Abstract:** ‘The devotional transformations of medieval Hinduism known as Bhakti movement, was a phenomenon of crucial importance in the history of Indian religion’. Srimanta Sankardeva is considered the pioneer of Bhakti movement in Assam. The new religion, ‘Ek Sarana Naam Dharma’, founded by Sri Sankardeva in fifteenth century in Assam marked the revival of Vaishnavite faith in Assam: it had a distinct reformist orientation and a social intent. Most importantly, it offered a respite to the largely uneducated and illiterate masses from animal- sacrifice-based rituals prevalent in all the existing religions of the times. Various aspects of the bhakti movement in Assam have been researched in recent times which have brought forth suggestions that counter the popular views regarding its nature and goals. Present article seeks to bring back into focus the fundamental tenets of Sri Sankardeva’s philosophy, its context and the element of ‘bhakti’ that characterized it.

**Key words:** Bhakti movement, medieval Assamese society, Sri Sankardeva, socio-religious reforms, Ek Sarana Naam Dharma

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Indian Context of ‘Bhakti’ ‘The devotional transformations of medieval Hinduism known as Bhakti movement, was a phenomenon of crucial importance in the history of Indian religion’. [Schomer, 1987, p.2] Starting in the Tamil South in the seventh century, it gradually spread northward through Karnataka and Maharashtra, and swept over North India, Bengal and even Assam. From fifteenth century onward, the impulse towards a personal devotional faith profoundly changed both the quality and the structures of religious life. The spiritual leadership shifted from the Brahman priest who was considered knowledgeable about rituals and Sanskrit scriptures to the figure of the poet-saint who composed fervent songs of devotion in the regional vernacular. [Schomer, 1987] However, at the level of doctrine and social ideology, there were varying degrees of opposition and accommodation to the orthodox tradition. In matters of devotional practice, finally, one finds on the one hand the rejection of all external forms of worship and the most elaborate kind of idol worship and temple ritual on the other.

### **II. BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN MEDIEVAL ASSAM**

Assamese culture has dominant streams of Shaivism and Mother Goddess cult in its folds. The society at large also reflects a deep rooted reverence and affliction to Srimanta Sankardeva’s (1449-1569) *bhakti* tradition as exemplified in the congregational kirtans and borgeets that characterises the community life in Assam and cuts across the caste, creed and class. His *Ek Sarana Naam Dharma* marked a distinct phase of Vaishnavite revivalism in Assam, also called ‘neo-Vaishnavism’. It offered a respite to the largely uneducated and illiterate masses from animal- sacrifice-based rituals generally associated with all the existing religions of the times including that of Saktism, Shaivism, Vajrayan Buddhism, tantricism, tribal cults, black magic and the like.

New researches have brought into focus the limitations of the Bhakti movement that presumably started with Sankardeva’s ‘Eka Sarana Naam Dharma’. Recent researches have shown that the Neo-Vaishnavism, just like the medieval state in Assam, was essentially patriarchal in nature and was based on hierarchy of class, caste and gender and that It tried to establish the social traditions laid down in the brahmanical scriptures and did not accept men and women on an equal plane. [J. G Nath, 1990]

However, this fact cannot be denied that the philosophy of ‘Bhakti’ preached by this saint was first of its kind in Assam and indeed aggressively addressed the violent and obnoxious religious practices prevalent during the times. Continuous wars among the tribes and the military invasions both from the east and west directions further created disruptions and displacements in people’s lives. The political rivalries and intrigues as

well as the religious complexities beyond the understanding of common people created social-religious dilemmas of varied nature. Sankardeva preached a devotional path to those who sought to tackle those dilemmas.

### III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Present paper seeks to highlight the reformist agenda in the new religion that Srimanta Sankardeva's founded and its philosophy which undeniably accords him a unique place in the cultural history of Assam. The main historical and literary sources, on which this article builds upon, include Lakshminath Bezbaruah's 'History of Vaishnavism in India' (2004), Maheshwar Neog's, 'Early history of the Vaishnava faith and movement in Assam: Sankardeva and his times' (1965), and the *Kirtanghosa*, one of the main compositions of Sankardeva which highlights the saint's religious philosophy and its socio-religious implications very clearly.

### IV. EK SARANA NAAM DHARMA

Srimanta Sankardeva brought the belief system established by the Bhagwat Puran and Bhagwat Gita in North India to Assam. (Bezbaruah, p.3) He is said to have undertaken a long and extensive pilgrimage of twelve years (1481-93) which enabled him to enter into religious discourses with different theologians [Bezbaruah, p.447] and developed in him a perspective over the religious questions facing the society. He was accompanied by seventeen devotees including Ramarama Guru (the son of his family priest), Mahendra Kandali (his school teacher) and 15 others in his voyage. He visited Haridwar, Badrikashrama, Setubandha, Ayodhya, Gaya, Varanasi, Prayaga, Puri, among other places. He stayed at Puri the longest. [KG, intro. xii] All the literary works written by Srimanta Sankardeva both in Sanskrit and Assamese, reflect some degree of pan Indian influences on him as his religious and spiritual ideas unfolded in the course of development of his personal religion, *Ek Sarana Naam Dharma*.

Srimanta Sankardeva founded the Vaishnavite *Eksarana Naam Dharma* and preached absolute devotion and surrender to a single God Krishna. What is unique in Sankardeva's bhakti is that Lord Krishna is seen as a single figure of 'Narayana' and is not accompanied with any female deity. The idolisation of the female element which formed the marked feature of Northern Vaishnavism and of Chaitanya movement in Bengal is totally absent in Sankardeva's Vaishnavism. [Bezbaruah, p12-13] It is interesting to note that the nirgun naam kirtans permeated Sankardeva's love and absolute surrender to the narayana. Though essentially based on the Srimadbhagwata, Sankardeva's did not prescribe doctrines to be followed by the devotees. It gave prominence to the chanting of Rama's and Krishna's Names as well as the other thousand Names of the creator (Vishnu). Sankardeva writes, 'Forsaking all other popular creeds whoever keeps on recalling Vishnu's nama, happily does he achieve salvation, what others fail to attain with strain. [KG, v. 84]

The reformist agenda is clear in Sankardeva's philosophy as he says "To offer bhakti to the supreme, a man need not be a deva, or a dvija or a rishi. It is not necessary that he should be learned in the lore of many shastras. Tapa, japa, yajna, dana are not essential for him in order to get Krishna: they are rather obstacles in the way. Krishna is pleased and is attainable simply through bhakti." He further says, 'In solar eclipse a crore of cows may be donated to brahmanas, a holy dip may be had in Prayaga Ganga for span of about ten kalpas (432 years), millions of sacrifices may be made, a mountain of gold donated; all these can never be equal to a hundredth part of a dust of Nama Govinda. Recite the name of Rama on your lips and contemplate His image in your heart to get mukti.' [KG v. 211-212]

The elements of nirgun bhakti were uniquely intertwined with the sagun form of Krishna. This element of total surrender to almighty that Sankardeva advocated as a path to spiritual emancipation, was hitherto absent in the society in the region of modern Assam. Naam Kirtans were organised in open spaces or Naamghars in the village fields which helped to join the common bhaktas together as fellow humans in the community prayer. The prayer songs or borgeets written and sung by Sri Sankardeva and his followers were the soulful expression of poor miserable common man seeking spiritual solace.

Assam did not have a tradition of Guru based religious system before the advent of Sankardeva. The use of a common language to preach his beliefs, was not a new tradition in Kamarupa and Assam, as the Buddhist Acharyas also composed the *charya padas* in local dialects in 11<sup>th</sup> century. [The charyas were composition in vernacular language used by the siddhas in their preachings. Siddhas were the monks who were responsible for spreading the various systems associated with Vajrayaan Buddhism in 11<sup>th</sup> century.] [Sharma, 2014] But the use of visuals like scenes of Vaikuntha that he himself painted on a large canvas and one act plays based on religious themes interspersed with distinct dance performances, were great innovations of Sri Sankardeva as the medium of his preachings. These appear to have had immense mass appeal. 'Satra', which eventually grew as a monastic settlement, was originally a meeting place for the dissemination of his views and preachings.

## V. LARGE SCALE FOLLOWING OF THE TRIBAL AND NON TRIBAL MASSES

Sankardeva preached a doctrine of 'universal social brotherhood' and offered prescriptions for harmonious living of the people of diverse caste and creeds. His philosophy of 'bhakti' succeeded in uniting the diverse tribal communities of the region and gave it a culture, to be identified later as Assamese culture. [Baruah, p.447] The people of lower caste acquired respect and equal status within the fold of Ek Sarana Nam Dharma. His disciples included, the Goalas, the Ahoms, the Rajakas, the Chandalas, Yavanas, the Mikirs, the Mishings, the Garos, the Bhutias the Bodos as well as the Kayasthas, Kacharis, Chutiya, Kaivartya, Ahom, Brahman, Koch, and also people of other faith like Chandsai, a Muslim, who reportedly became a much respected devotee and rose in the ranks [Neog, p.65]

Till the 15<sup>th</sup> century the tribal population still constituted a major demographic factor in Assam. The dominantly Hindu social formation remained largely confined to the region of Kamarupa. [Nath, p.375] Sankardeva's devotional philosophy brought him large tribal following. The extent of tribal conversions that Sankardeva was able to achieve can be inferred from a verse by Ramanada Dwija, a Vaishnava hagiographer: "Kamarupa is a Mleccha country and Krishna has incarnated here as Sankara. . . The greatly impure Mlecchas now perform nama kirtana, and at ease, attain to Baikuntha. [Guru Charita. v. 1147] [(D. Nath, p.92] Sarma (1999:1) has stated, "The current of the religious history of Assam took a new turn towards the closing decade of the fifteenth century of the Christian era. It was caused by the new-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Sankardeva. Within two hundred years of its inception the movement firmly established the Vaisnava faith as the supreme religious order of the Brahmaputra valley. [Sarma, 1966]

## VI. CONCLUSION

It should be remembered that Neo- Vaishnavism as laid down by Sankardeva saw great development under his disciples Madhabdeva and others under whom the 'Satra' system fully developed. Neo- Vaishnavism appears to have acquired a more rigid form later on due to increased brahmanical influence under the Ahoms and the development of Satra system. What Sankardeva was primarily fighting against was the socio-religious malady of a degenerating society. The fundamentals of the new reformed society that he strove to create rested on the idea drawn from Bhagwata, so the concept of 'stri dharma' remained confined to the limits of Hindu law.

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