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Neo-Vaishnavism and Tribal People of Medieval Assam: The History of Social Assimilation

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Abstract:

Assamese form of Vaishnavism called Neo-Vishnavism was propounded by Srimanta Sankardeva, the great social and religious reformer of Assam, in the 15th and 16th century. The term Neo – Vaishnavism applied to the Assam version of vaishnavism of Sankardeva to differentiate this phase of vaishnavism from its early phase. Sankardeva and other Vaishnava leaders opened the doors of Neo-Vaishnavism open to all caste and professions, including the most despised and degraded. As a result, many backward communities entered into the fold of neo-vaishnavism and the process of their assimilation with the mainland culture started. In this paper an attempt is made to discuss how Neo-Vaishnavism of Assam opens the ways for assimilation of diverse communities of Assam hitherto considered as 'backward' to fold of Hinduism and what is the impact of this assimilation upon the society.

Key words: Neo-Vaishnavism, Tribal, People, Assam, Assimilation

Introduction: A socio-religious reform movement in between 12th and 15th century A.D. was witnessed in India. It was the *Bhakti* (devotional) movement based on the liberal doctrine of *bhakti* or devotion. It initiated new ideas even as it gave birth to new faith, which at some places of the country took the shape of a revolution. The context of the new revolution rotted in the societal degradation and cultural distortion that plagued many parts of India at that time. Under the corrupting influence of power and wealth and the incipient ritualism that had taken hold of the priestly and ruling classes of the Hindu society, various mal practices were committed in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure. These factors impelled the Hindu thinkers and reformers of the day to evolve to a simpler and liberal faith that would be acceptable to all Vaishnavism *Bhakti* movement, originally started by Alvares of south India and which thereafter spread to northern India and then to the eastern regions India.

The Vaishnava *Bhakti* movement thus encompassed the whole of India and thereby brought a renaissance in the socio-religious life of the Indian people. By propounding in

general that divine grace could be achieved through devotion, which was open to all classes and castes, the movement dispensed with the principle of birth, which hitherto determined access to salvation through knowledge and ritual. To that extent, the movement initiated structural changes in the socio-religious sphere of the Hindu society and consequential changes in its value system and equality of relationship. The caste hierarchy and the ritual complexities of Brahminic Hinduism enjoyed little significance in neo-vaishnavism¹.

Bhakti movement popularly known as the New-Vaishnavite movement entered Assam in the 16th century. Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568), the great Vaishnava saint-cum-social reformer of Assam started the movement in the beginning of 16th century. 'New-Vaishnavism' is a term applied to the Assam version of vaishnavism of Sankardeva to differentiate this phase of vaishnavism from its early phase². The movement in Assam is remarkable for its many sided contributions to the cultural history of land. Within two hundred years since its inception it spread over the entire Brahmaputra valley and the parts of Cooch-Bihar which then formed a part of kamrup³. It was revolutionary in the sense that Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life. It encompassed their social, cultural and religious spheres even as it brought about a change in very outlook on life and the world. Neo-vaishnavism stands out among the different *Bhakti* cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character, which found expression in the move to create an egalitarian civil society based on shared values of fraternity, humanism and democracy.

Objective of the study:

In this paper an attempt is made to study the following objectives:

1. To study about the history of the entry of the backward communities to the fold of Neo- Vaishnavism.
2. The impact of neo-vaishnavism on the backward communities of Assam.
3. The nature of their assimilation.

Methodology: The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary source consists of mainly Charit Puthis. Secondary data are collected from various books and journals.

Discussion and Findings: Assam vaishnavism has been constantly playing a significant role in the process of assimilating diverse elements-indigenous and non-indigenous into Assamese culture. Prior to the beginning of Vaishnavism in Assam, Assam was the land of various extra Aryan tribes. The tribal people or non-Hindu people of Assam followed primitive religious practices. In ancient Assam the great Mother Goddess like *Kamaikhya* and *kechaikhati* were popularly worshiped. For example the Sonowal Kacharis were the worshiper of *Kechaikhati Gossani*. The common feature of religious practices of the primitive people may perhaps be named as fertility cult and ancestor worship often assuming the form phallic worship and headhunting. These features may be identified in some way or other of the megalithic remains of ancient Assam⁴.

It is the most important feature that Assam is a land where various tribes and castes lived. Different ethnic groups like Karbi, Ahom, Kachari, Chutiya, Barahi, Moran, Matak, Deuri, Rabha, Tiwa, Kalita, Kyastha, Brahmin, Bodo, Garu, Dimasa, Mising, Kumar Bania etc were in conflict when Srimanta Sankardeva was born in Assam in the fifteenth century.⁵ Srimanta Sankardeva with all his effort tried to integrate all these ethnic groups with the purpose to create an egalitarian society. Caste system in the valley Brahmaputra was not rigid as elsewhere in the country. This was due to the liberal outlook of the Brahmins and partly to the teachings of Bhakti cult by Sankardeva, the greatest Vaishnavite preacher and social reformer in Assam in the 15th century.⁶ The path of devotion is easy for all people irrespective of their caste and creed. Sankardeva writes-

Kirata Kachari Khasi Garu Miri
Yavana Kanka Gowala
Asama Muluka Dhoba je Turuka
Kubacha Mlechcha Chandala
 (Bhagavata/2/53)

In his *Namaghosa*, Madhavdeva refers to the acceptance of *namadharm* by people of Garu, Bhota (Bhutiya), Yavana (Muslim), Miri, Asama (Ahom) and Kachari, who were till the time of Sankara outside the pale of Hinduism. An old work called *Amulya-ratna* names together these *bhaktas* of Assam-Govindra-a Garu; Paramananda, a Miri; Narahari, an Ahom; Jayarama, a Bhutiya; Candsai, a Muslim, and Bhatadeva, a Brahman was converted by Sankardeva himself into the faith, and he was so much respected within the order that he is counted among the great devotees, identified with the beads of an Assam vaishnava's rosary.⁷ Paramanada accompanied the saint in both pilgrimages as well as during the trial in king Naranarayan's court. No other disciple had this rare privilege⁸. He (Govindra) had a different name before his conversion to the *Eka Sharana Nama Dharma*. That earlier name was however obliterated and the new name 'Govindra' given by Srimanta Sankardeva became popular⁹.

The gravest allegation of public indecency leveled against Sankardeva was that among his followers Kaivatas, Kalitas, koces, Brahmans and other assembled and dined together¹⁰. In Sankardeva's vaishnavism the non-Hindu population of the country found an attractive portal into Hinduism, and through it they entered a clean and disciplined way of individual and social life. The old way of unclean food, clothing and general behaviour were replaced by cleanliness and decency. The Melecchas were no longer Melecchas after their conversion; they were to be counted only as members of a holy fraternity¹¹.

The missionary work of bringing many backward tribes of Assam into the fold of Vaishnavism was started by early reformers and their successors. Ahom, Chutiya, Kochs, Miri, Kachari, and Naga-all these tribes were brought into the fold of Vaishnavism. In Eastern Assam it has been the name of a Hindu sub-caste in which are received the converts to Hinduism from the rank of Kacharis, Lalung, Mikir and other tribes. In former times the Koches and Meca (a branch of the Kachari) freely intermarried, but the conversion of the former to Hinduism has caused the practice to be discontinued¹². The people of these tribes

who took to Vaishnavism have gradually adopted Hindu conducts of life. They have also given up many of their unclean habits, discarded animism and become more and more refined in their dealings¹³. They have mostly discarded their own tongue in favour of Assamese. It should not, however, be supposed that the influence was a one sided one. Customs and beliefs of the tribes have influenced or at least colored Vaishnavism of Assam to a certain extent. That the Vaishnavism of Assam was adopted to suit the different types of people and also received in its fold certain things from the tribes can never be doubted. The incorporation of tribal elements in the 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma' is note-worthy aspects of this order. Sankardeva remembered the Mising institution, Murang-ghar when designing the Kirtanghar. The practice of calling the main pillar of the Kirtanghar as Lai-khuta came from the Ahom. The *Bhor-tal* came from Bhutan, because of which it was called Bhot-tal. The Sarengdar, another instrument used during the days of Sankardeva was a contribution of the Bodo tribe. The contribution of tribe of Assam is undisputed in case of Sankari dance too¹⁴.

The Sonowal Kacharies accepted dual religious system. They are 'Kirata dharma' and 'New-vaishnavism' or '*Eka Saran Namdharma*'. But there is vast difference between the systems of the two religions in terms of beliefs and practices. Though they have faith in *Namdharma*, which is against the worship of any other god or goddess with or without sacrifice, yet they can't abolish their traditional religious system. So they still continue to hold sacrificial worship to their traditional deities¹⁵.

Along with the traditional religious ceremonies it is found some of the Pati Bitalia and Totla Rabhas have established the '*Namghar*' as social and Vaishnavite religious institution. There they celebrate the *Tithi of janmastami, Douljatra, Ambubasi, Budha-Purnima, Akshay-Tritiya*, the birth and death ceremony of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, Damodardeva, Harideva and so on. Such ceremonies are performed by reciting verse from the religious book of the *Bhagavata Gita, Namghosha* etc. Along with them, Assamese Nam-Kirtana (congregational singing and reciting), is also performed¹⁶.

Satras, a socio-religious and cultural organization developed in medieval Assam as a part of the development of Neo-Vaishnavism have contributed a lot towards the assimilation of various tribes of Assam into the fold of Hinduism. Satras played an important role in the process of sanskritisation in Assam. Sanskritisation is the process by which a low born Hindu caste, or tribal or other groups changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, twice born caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community¹⁷. In respect of Assam H. K. Barpujari commented that the time honored theory that Hindu cannot be a Hindu unless he is born in Hindu had been gradually demolished. *Jatutkarsha* or 'sanskritisation' is a process by which tribesmen or low Hindu caste changed its customs, rituals and way of life to a higher level in the caste ladder¹⁸.

The process of Sanskritisation, which was started long years back in Ahoms and the tribal society in the Brahmaputra valley become faster with the starting of neo-vaishnavism in Assam . By giving 'saran' to the tribal people positioned them in the Hindu caste hierarchy. They had given the opportunity to uphold their position in Hindu caste hierarchy by adopting the customs and manners of higher caste¹⁹. Initially when the Kacharis came under the influence of a spiritual head or 'Gossain' he was called *Sarania* (Kamrup and Darrang) and *SaruKoch* (Nagaon)²⁰.

In the 15th and 16th century, the neo-Vaishnava movement created a new dimension in a new direction. The satras have played a vital role. Srimanta Sankardeva started this movement with the common people. The active participation of the backward classes of our society makes it popular.

Satras plays a vital role in the life of Assamese society. The disciples of the satras come to its fold through a ceremony, known as 'Saran'. *Saran* means shelter. By taking *sarana* under a *guru* through a very simple procedure anyone could enter into the fold of neo-vaishnavism. It thus facilitated the entry of a large number of tribal people into the fold of Hinduism. The tribal neophytes were known as the *saranias* and still are addressed as such as a community who had over the years been assimilated into the Assamese society²¹.

When Arunachal was within the map of Assam, Shri Rmadv Gossain, *Satradhikar* of Bareghar Satra, a dynamic personality, initiated Lotha Khon Bao and renamed him as Narotom. Therefore, the kings of Loptang and namchang were initiated to Vaishnava sect along with thousands of Noctes. The Garamur Satra of North Lakhimpur took similar steps among the Abors. All of these communities were from the hills, which now come under present Arunachal Pradesh²².

Many Naga people also were initiated in the Eka Sharana Nama Dharma at the initiative of the activist *Kala-Sanghati*. Jagat Mahanta, the *Satradhikar* of Chaliha Bareghar Satra initiated as many as fifty thousand Naga people in Eka Sharana Nama Dharma in the twentieth century. There is a Naga village near Moiramar Satra. The Naga-gaon in the Hahchara Mouza of Sivasagar district has about five hundred population. Many ancient Naga customs like burying the dead, celebrating the Naga festivals Ailingand Auniye, wearing loin cloth, playing on the instrument Tungkhung etc. are still in vogue among these people²³.

The expansion of Vaishnavism into the tribal territories and the villages of the so-called non-Hindu or semi-Hindu population was a historical reality during the days of the saint; but no sooner had he died and his sect got factionalized into different divisions, than old Brahmanical conservatism with the practice of casteism and untouchability sprang up and entered the satra fold. It was only to a limited extent that the ideological stand of the saint still held ground, make a man like Mathuradas Burha Ata, a member of the depressed class was allowed to head a satra²⁴. The tradition of sankritising the tribal and other backward and non-Hindu or semi-Hindu communities, however, continued in the *kala sanhati* branch, particularly in its *Moamara* or *Mayamara* sect proposed by Anirudhdeva (1553-1626),

who was the son of a *bhuyan* and a nephew of Sankardeva²⁵. The Morans are a plain tribe inhabiting the eastern part of the Ahom Kingdom and they are the largest constituent of the Mayamora satra. After undergoing a process of Ahomisation and later on sanskritisation, they turned to wet-rice cultivation from shifting cultivation²⁶.

One notable contribution of Satra is its works towards the upliftment and betterment of the backward classes and bordering communities of Assam. Sankardeva from the very beginning of his missionary life led a crusade to restore the inter-community balance and understanding to its pristine glory. He strove for a complementary equality of all men across caste, character or status in the eyes of God and exhibited deep sympathy for the downtrodden class.

Conclusion: Neo-vaishnavism brings socio-cultural change among tribal and depressed castes largely in accordance with the pace of their social development. Neo-vaishnavism contributed immensely towards the formation of a broader de-tribalised homogeneous society in the Brahmaputra valley. The Satra Institution, which is the greatest contribution of neo-vaishnavism to the people of Assam, plays a vital role in this regard. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement and the Satra institution played the role of an agent in social change in Assam and the backward communities of Assam got the opportunity to uplift themselves in the development process with the influence of Neo-Vaishnavism. Neo-Vaishnavism thus became a powerful catalyst, in the word of B. K. Barua, 'a cementing force'- in the process of acculturation of the different social groups.

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