



Vaishnavism in Assam

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Introduction: Vaishnavism is the largest branch of modern Hinduism. Its devotees worship Vishnu, or one of his avatars, as the Supreme God. Vaishnavism has numerous sects and their beliefs vary. Despite the differences, all Vaishnavas believe that there is one Supreme God over all creation. And like other Hindu branches, they believe in the existence of many lower deities under that Supreme God. Vaishnava beliefs are, in large part, based on the Upanishads, as well as the texts of the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita, among others. When this Neo-Vaishnava movement was going on in the whole of India, then Sankardeva took the leadership of the movement from Assam.

Methodology: Methodology of this paper is qualitative nature based on different books, journals, and articles. Similarly, different websites have also been visited for preparing the present paper. In this paper we use analytical method to reach the goal.

Objective and scope of the study: Through this paper we are trying to know how Sankardeva influenced the people of Assam for the prestige of Neo Vaishnavism.

Discussion: Sankardeva came like many other prophets who had come before him and preached the message of humanity. His religion, for the Assamese, is like a rebirth and transformation from darkness into light and has been the religion and guiding force for the followers for the last six centuries. This Neo-Vaishnava “friend, philosopher and guide” and the doyen of Assamese culture has served as a beacon light for the masses.

The Neo-Vaishnavite religion propagated by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva was the outcome of his wide experiences that emanated from various sources. In 1481, Sankardeva went on a pilgrimage to northern India where he spent several years visiting various Tirthas (Hindu holy places) and temples acquiring many dogmas that prevailed at that time. He was aware of the relevance of the Neo-Vaishnava movement growing in various parts of India and when he came back to his native land he directed his endeavours towards the formulation of the doctrines of his own form of Vaishnavism, namely, Eksaran Naamdharma. Sankardeva along with his staunchest disciple Madhavdava propagated his faith among the masses and within a short period of time, this new religion attained an all-pervasive nature. Eksaran Naamdharma has three aspects: Eksaran, Satsanga and Naama. Eksaran means seeking solace from one God, Satsanga denotes an assembly of Bhaktas (followers) for obeisance while Naama refers to chanting as a means of prayer. It forbids elaborate rituals and worship of idols while advocating an austere lifestyle for the Bhaktas (followers). Naama was considered to be sufficient for the common people because it could be performed by the high and the low. Sankardeva reduced rituals to the minimum and emphasized on prayer through community chanting in private prayer-rooms called ‘Kirtanghars’ and congregation halls called ‘Naamghars’. Over a period of time, the Naamghars grew to be centres of every activity of the village: it was like a club where people gathered in the evening, it was the theatre where classical dramas were staged, it was the court where misconduct was adjudged and it was the place for discussion on various affairs of the village. The Eksaran

Naamdharma propagated by Sankardeva has been able to unify people from all walks of life, from the aristocrats to the poor and downtrodden, into one spiritual fraternity and thereby achieved a cultural synthesis. In Sankardeva's religion the essence of democracy, as well as the spirit of socialism, can easily be traced. Every individual was considered equal in his religion and neither caste nor class was taken into account while inducting anyone into the faith. The prayer service and the distribution of Maahprasada (offerings to the Almighty) could be done by anyone within the circle of Bhaktas. Through such an egalitarian philosophy Sankardeva was able to bring about the concept of equality among mankind and thus weed out caste-related differences.

When Eksaran Naamdharma spread like a wildfire, it raised many an eyebrow of the Brahmins who foresaw an end to their dominance. The Brahmins plotted conspiracy against Sankardeva and coaxed the Ahom ruler Suhungmung also known as Dihingia Raja to take action against the reformist movement. Thus Srimanta Sankardeva was thus forced to flee downstream and seek the safety offered by the Koch kingdom of Naranarayana in western Assam. King Naranarayana retained an open mind towards the new religion and his brother Chilarai became an ardent admirer of Sankardeva. The Brahmins were again being afraid of Sankardeva's growing popularity poisoned the mind of the king against Sankardeva, but Sankardeva so enamoured the king with his logic and sanctity that the king became his lifelong patron.

During his undisturbed life at Chunpora (present-day Barpeta town), Sankardeva composed almost all his major literary works including the 'Kirtan Ghosa', an adaptation of 'Bhagavatpurana', the doctrinal treatise 'Bhakti Ratnakar' and such plays as Paarijat Harana, Kaliya Daman, Rukmini Haran and Keli Gopal. Sankardeva composed about two-hundred-and-forty Borgeets (written in the Brajvali dialect), but a fire destroyed them all and only about thirty-four of them could be retrieved from memory. Sankardeva, much saddened by this loss, gave up writing borgeets and asked Madhavdeva to write them instead.

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement brought about a cultural revolution in the Brahmaputra valley apart from playing a significant role in unifying the people and imbuing in them a catholic sensibility. The moral standards set at the naamghars and xattras rescued the society from the depravity of earlier days and ushered in cultural renaissance along with religious reform. The xattras established by the disciples of Sankardeva have become the hubs of cultural activities, where classical music, dance and drama were cultivated. The Neo-Vaishnavites also gave birth to a distinct Assamese school of painting where holy books were enlivened by colourful paintings. They exploited the modes of the song, dance and drama with a view to explaining and popularizing the new religion. In this way, they could touch the minds and hearts of the common people. The rendering of Sanskrit and Vaishnavite treatises into vernacular as well as their original compositions created a body of literature which resulted in bringing about a literary movement apart from developing Assamese prose. The Ankiyanaats composed by them were immensely popular and gave rise to a vibrant theatrical movement. Their musical compositions formulated a culture of classical music and they left behind a rich legacy of classical dancing in the Xattriya dance form.

Sankardeva's creations in Assam:

Namghar: Namghars established by Sankardeva. Namghars literally Prayer House are places for congregational worship associated with the entire Assamese community and the Ekasarana sect of Hinduism, in particular, that is native to Assam. Besides forming the primary structure used for worship, they also function as meeting houses for

congregations, as well as theaters for dramatic performances (bhaona). The Namghar, also called the kirtanghar, is also the central structure in the Sattras (monasteries of the Ekasarana dharma) where the other buildings are positioned around it. Namghars are widespread in Assam, and very often more than one namghar exists in a single village, signifying many congregational communities.

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Borgeet :Borgeets ('songs celestial') are a collection of lyrical songs that are set to specific ragas but not necessarily to any tala. These songs, composed by Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in the 15th-16th centuries, are used to begin prayer services in monasteries, e.g. Satra and Namghar associated with the Ekasarana Dharma. They are a lyrical strain that express the religious sentiments of the poets reacting to different situations, and differ from other lyrics associated with the Ekasarana Dharma. Similar songs composed by others are not generally considered borgeets.

Ankiyanaats: The Ankiyanaats composed by them were immensely popular and gave rise to a vibrant theatrical movement. Ankiya Naats are a class of one act plays performed in Assam, India. These plays were written in an artificial old medieval period poetic Assamese mixed language called Brajavali and are primarily centered on Krishna. A particular presentation of an Ankiya Naat is called a Bhaona. The plays usually combine live instruments and singers, dance and elaborate costumes in production. The performance of an Ankiya Naat starts with benediction in Sanskrit followed by eulogy to God in Brajavali. [citation needed] The play usually starts with the prelude, or Purvaranga. Playing of the traditional percussion instruments accompanied by the big cymbal by the singer and musician duo (Gayan, Bayan) in a group. The instruments are played with exaggerated hand movements and in two paces called Saru-Dhemali and Bor-Dhemali. After the prelude, the narrator, or Sutradhar, enters the stage and begins the actual performance. Ankiya Naat were intended to be viewed by common folk in medieval Assam, majority of whom were expected to be illiterate. Thus, an explanation was included at every succeeding stage of the drama. The Sutradhar had to attend to various tasks viz. production, direction and delivered commentary of the entire drama. Ankiya Naat main subject is to worship Lord Krishna. The songs in Ankiya Naat are also descriptive.

Xattriya dance form: Their musical compositions formulated a culture of classical music and they left behind a rich legacy of classical dancing in the Xattriya dance form. The plays are usually performed in the dance community halls (namghar) of monastery temples (sattras). The themes played are related to Lord Krishna, sometimes other Vishnu avatars such as Rama and Sita and stories from the epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) are also referred to. The philosophic religion of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva was based on Vedanta, Bhagavadgītā and the Bhāgavata Purāna, so there is no presence of Radha in Sattriya dance presentations. In 2000, the Sangeet Natak Akademi of India recognized Sattriya as a classical dance. Modern Sattriya explores many themes and plays, and its performances are staged worldwide.9)

Brajavali language: Brajavali was a literary language used by Sankardev (1449–1568) for some of his compositions (Borgeets and Ankiya Naats) in the context of his Vaishnavite religion, Ekasarana Dharma, in Assam.

Though similar languages were used in the Vaishnavite contexts in Odisha and Bengal, the one used in Assam was different, as it was based on Maithili (and not Brajbhasa), to which Assamese is added and the native pronunciation overrides the original pronunciation of Maithili.[1] In general, the vocables and idiomatic expressions of Brajavali were local (Assamese), while the inflectional forms were Maithili, easily understood by the people of Assam but carrying the flavor of Brajbhasa, the language of choice of the Bhakti poets.

Conclusion:

It has been seen from this enterpretation that the Neo-Vaishnavite movement spread the message of Bhakti, religion and love amongst the common people. It was a welcome change for the masses who were oppressed by the Brahmanical and Tantric rituals which were the norm in Assam then. The common man found a way to connect with the God without any razzmatazz and external interference. Srimanta Sankardeva created a Vaishnavite society with three components, namely, Nama-Kirtana (community prayer), Satra (monastery) and Namghar (prayer hall).

Reference:

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