

# Srimanta Sankardev, the Pioneer of the Socio-Religious Reform Movement of Medieval Assam

## Abstract

Srimanta Sankardev (1449—1568) was the propagator of the Neo-Vaishnavism and the social reformer of Medieval Assam. At the time of his birth, the socio-religious condition of Assam was too much deplorable one. To save the situation Sankardev, founded the Neo-Vaishnavite religion in Assam which is commonly known as the Ek Sharan Naam Dharma and undertook the steps to remove the social evils and religious anomalies, prevailing in the society. The main principle of his religion is that there is one God in the earth i.e. Vishnu which is invisible, invincible, almighty and omnipotent, and the creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe. The people could attain salvation through the process of Bhakti i.e. devotion to the God which could be derived by chanting the songs that composed narrating the virtues and the activities of the God. He was accepted as the guru (spiritual preceptor) by all sections of people and took sharana under him.

Sankardev was not only a religious propagator; he was a great social reformer, a reputed scholar, a man of arts and culture and many more. He is regarded as the pioneer of the socio-religious movement of Medieval Assam.

**Keywords:** Sankardev, Neo-Vaishnavism, Social Reforms.

## Introduction

Srimanta Sankardev, the pioneer of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam was not only propagator of a new faith but also the great socio-religious reformer and a man of culture and contributed huge contributions to the socio-religious and the cultural life of medieval Assam. In this paper it tried to focus on the contribution of the great saint on the religious and social life of medieval Assam.

Srimanta Sankardev was born in Sak 1371 (1449 A.D.) at Alipukhuri of Bardoa in present Nagaon district of Assam.<sup>1</sup> His father was Kusumbar Siromani Bhuyan and mother was Satyasandhya. Both the father and mother of Sankardev died in his infancy, so he was brought up by his grandmother Khersuti in great care. He started his education in the age of 12 in the tol of Pandit Mahendra Kandali and within a short time he was able to show his scholarly quality. He flourished when the Neo-Vaishnavite movement was developed in different places of India during the period from 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Vaishnavism which means "the particular theistic religion in which Vishnu is the object of worship and devotion as the supreme God"<sup>2</sup> is as old as Rigveda where it is mentioned that Vishnu was identical with god Sun<sup>3</sup>. The Satapatha Brahmana, the Aitereya Brahmana, Pancharatra Samhita also refer to God Vishnu and the procedure of the worship of the deity was as like the Sakti cult<sup>4</sup>. The Mahabharata and the Bhagavata Puarna indicate the followers of the cult as Bhagavata<sup>5</sup>. The Puranas uphold the doctrine of avataras (incarnations) and identified Vishnu in the form of Rama and Krishna.

The archaeological sources like the rock inscription of Vidisapur (2nd century B. C.), the Rajyul inscription of Mathura ( 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.), the Sculptural remains of Tumain city of central Asia (1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.) indicate the existence of the creed. The sources of the Gupta rulers indicate that the Vaishnavism widely developed in India and the idea of the incarnation of Vishnu (avatar bad) was popularized under the Gupta monarch. However from the time of Harsavardhana of Kanouj, who was the great follower of Mahayana Buddhism the Vaishnavism lost its royal patronage and shifted its influence towards the Southern India.

From 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. a great transformation started in the Vaishnavism in India. Under the initiative of certain Vaishnava saints

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the process of worship of Vishnu was replaced with the principle of sincere devotion or Bhakti. This changing of the process of worship was so great that it can be regarded as the movement.

It is worth mentioning to note that certain factors brought the change and important of which were – (1) the emerging of the modern Indian Languages and translation of the Sanskrit works like Gita, Bhagavat, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata etc to the vernacular Languages, (2) influence of Islam, (3) increasing of malpractices in the religious activities and (4) believe of polytheism in Brahmanical religion. Practicing of Neo-Vaishnavism cult which was based on Bhakti principles appeared as the solution to save the situation.

The history of the Bhakti movement and Vaishnavism goes back to the time of great reformer Sankaracharya, who successfully combated Buddhism and gave Hindum a solid philosophical background. In Deccan the activities of Vaishnavism started under the Alvars of the Tamil country who glorified the incarnations of Narayana or Vishnu by composing the songs and ballads around 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The last devotee of the Alvars was Nathmuni. Ramanuia, the grandson of Nathmuni was a great Vaishnava Scholar, (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). In Karnataka and Gujarat Vaishnavism was preached by Mabbachariya or Anandagiri, in Maharastra by Gyandeva and Namdev, in Northern India by Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak, Bhattachariya, Dadudayal, Mira Bai, Tulsi Das etc. In Bengal and Orissa the Neo-Vaishnavism movement was popularized by Sri Chatainyadev (1485-1934A.D.)

Assam, in North east of India the Neo-Vaishnavism movement was started and conducted by the great Vaishnavite saint Srimanta Sankardev (1449--1568 A.D.) and his disciples, prominent of whose was Sri Madhavdev.

It is the fact that Vaishnavism, the cult of worshipping Lord Vishnu as the supreme deity is an ancient creed in Assam, and the sources indicate that Vaishnavism was practiced in Assam along with Saivism and Saktism from remote past. As example the Mahabharata associated Vishnu with ancient Pragjyotisa and mentioned Him as "Pragjyotisa jyestha samaga"<sup>6</sup>. The Bargaon rock inscription of Bhutivarman indicates the king Bhutivarman as 'Parama-Bhagavata', the great devotee of Vishnu, the Doobi Grant<sup>7</sup>, Nidhanpur Grant<sup>8</sup> and others also indicate the worship of God Vishnu. In Harsa Carita of Bana (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) indicates Bhskaravarman as the decendent of Vishnu (Visni kula), the Puspabhadra Grant of king Dharmapala indicates Varaha (Boar incarnations of Lord Vishnu) as the worshipping deity. One of the notable developments of Vaishnavism in Early Assam was the increasing popularity of avatar bad (theory of incarnation of Vishnu) that prevalence under the Gupta rulers.

However the Vaishnavism had to face a critical situation in Assam from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. With the decline of Kamarupa kingdom (Ancient Assam) from the period, the whole kingdom was divided into numbers of small kingdoms the mentionable of those were Kamrup-Kamata, and the territories occupied by the Barabhuya, Chutiyas, Kacharies, Ahoms, and the others who were constantly busy in their conflict for supremacy. However from 15<sup>th</sup> century the Ahoms emerged as the prominent one in Upper Assam and the Koches in earlier Kampur-Kamata kingdom<sup>8</sup>. Such

situation greatly affected the socio-cultural atmosphere of the land.

On the other hand the peculiar demographic formation of the land created a chaotic situation in the socio-cultural system of the land. From the remote past population of the land formed with the people belonging to the races of the Negrito, Austric, Alpine and the Tibeto-Burmans<sup>9</sup>, who gradually formed different castes, tribes and clans namely the Boros, Kacharies, Rabhas, Borahis, Morans, Chutias, Ahoms, Koches etc. with their separate identities and administered separately their respective occupied territories. Gradually there started conflict for supremacy among the tribes which adversely affected to the socio-cultural life in the region and in such atmosphere the people were always with the feeling of insecure and uncertainty. Moreover the prevailing social hierarchy greatly affected to the society. The Baishyas and Sudras were regarded as the very inferior castes in the society and did not allowed mix with the upper castes.<sup>10</sup>

Like the social system the religious life of medieval Assam was also a very pathetic one. Due the absence of a common acceptable religion for the all section of people a great chaotic situation prevailed in the religious life of the land. Taking it as opportunity the influence of Tantrikism adversely affected the society of Assam. On the other hand due to not having a unique and common acceptable worshipping deity, people worship different gods and goddesses which also dragged the country to an unwanted situation. The Kiratas who were considered as the important tribes of the time, worshipped the lord Shiva and offered him ducks, pigeons, hens, buffalos, goats, wine, rice and many more to satisfy the deity<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand in the Kamakhya temple of the Nilachal Hills, the sacred place of the sakti cult, worshipped the deity with various rites and rituals, mantras, mudras and sacrifices<sup>12</sup>. In the Tamreswari temple even human sacrifice was performed. In such way in the name of religion mysticism, debauchery, using of wine and attaching the women in the temple were performed and it created a severe situation in the society. The situation became more aggravated when the kings and his subjects affiliated to different religions which led to frequent tussles on the issue of religion. Besides the appearing of some secret faiths within the Vaishnavism like Rati Khoa, Gopidhara, etc created more critical situation in the religious affairs of the land.

In such a critical situation Sri Sankardev appeared as socio-religious reformer in Assam who came forward to save the situation through his Neo-Vaishnavite movement and other social-cultural reforms. After being properly educating himself and acquainted with the socio-religious problems of his time he introduced the Neo-Vaishnavite faith based on the simple principles of Bhaktism which was known as the Ek Saran Nam dharma. According to the faith there is one God and he is Vishnu who is almighty, all powerful, and who is the creator, preserver, destroyer of the universe. He is omnipresence and can be felt in all living beings. He is transcendent and immanent, he is the only real and whole world is unreal and illusory like a mirage<sup>13</sup>. The whole world is unstable; the God is the only stable<sup>14</sup>.

The worshipping system in the new faith is very simple. There is no complexity and ritualism in praying

the God and to attain the salvation. Only praying with the method of bhakti one could reach to the god<sup>15</sup>.

The People irrespective of caste, class, age, sex were greatly attracted by the Sankardeva's new faith and they came forward to take saran (initiation) from him. To offer a all India colour to his new faith, Sankardev conducted two religious tours along with his followers first in 1503 and second in 1545 A.D., and visited different places related to the Vaishnavism, discussed with some of the renowned Vaishnavite scholars like Sri Chatainyadev of Bengal<sup>16</sup>, Jagannath Mishra of Kasi, Kabir<sup>17</sup> etc on the religious matter. To popularize his faith, Sankardev took different steps so as to spread it towards all nocks and corners of Assam and its adjoining territories. As a part of this mission many Sanskrit works related to the Vaishnavism as like Bhagavata and the Ramayana, the Mahabharata etc were translated to Assamese, the people's language. He also composed number of works like Kirtan-Ghosa, Gunamala, Bhakti Pradeep, Bhakti Ratnakar, Bargeets, Bhatimas, and the Kabyas like Harichandra Upakhyan, Rukmini Haran etc in local vernacular. He also wrote numbers of Dramas namely Patni Prasad, Kaliya Daman, Rukmini Haran, Keli Gopal, Parijat Haran and Ram Vijay so as to exhibit the activities God Vishnu among the people. In this respect a mentionable aspect is that like other Vaishnava saints of other parts of India Sankardev and his followers used the local language vernacular for their writings.

Srimanta Sankardev was a versatile genius. Along with the propagation of Neo-Vaishnavite and literary creation he left numerous contributions to the Assamese culture. The most entionable among these was the creation of Namghar, which he used for praying and chanting the God Vishnu. He practiced Bhaona observation and religious discussion in the Namghar. Gradually it became the nerve centre of the rural culture of Assam. He also started the Satra institution in Assam which later became the main centre for the religious discourse in Assam. Sankardev was the pioneer in the social reforms of medieval Assam. The great saint knew it very well that Assam was a land where people of different tribes, castes, and sub-castes were living and so without having the harmony among the inhabitants belonging to different tribes, castes the prosperity of the land was impossible. So along with the propagation of his new faith Srimanta Sankardev took up the measures to remove the social barriers and restrictions that were prevailing at his times, and thereby to form the social harmony and unity of the people of Assam. He had the full beliefs in the principles of equality and humanism and allowed the people of all castes, community, tribes and sex to become his bhakat (disciples). Thus all the inhabitants, high or low born including the kiratas, kacharis, khasis, miris, yavanas (muslims ?) cowherds, washer men, koches, mlecchas etc could attain salvation after accepting the religion of Sankara<sup>18</sup>.

To show the example of this equality of castes and community Sankardev included Govinda from the Garo community, Paramananda from Miri, Narahari from Ahoms, Jayram from the Bhot, Ramai from Kachari, Purnananda from Keot, Chandsai from Yavan, Haridas from Bania and Bhattadev from Brahman community in the religious assembly<sup>19</sup>. Sankardev was even sympathetic towards the untouchables and the unsocial elements and criminals and thereby tried to give the

chance to have their pure life. Thus the unsocial elements like killers of the Brahmins, killers of preceptors, the matricide, patricide and the outcastes people who had the habit of taking the discarded foods could have the pure life becoming the followers of his faith<sup>20</sup>. Ideology of Sankardev was not confined within the humanitarian activities; it included the activities of universalism. According to him all living beings were equal and God was dwelling in the heart of them and so one should show respect to all<sup>21</sup>.

From the above discussion it is seen that the contributions of Srimanta Sankardev and his followers towards the socio-religious and cultural life of medieval Assam is noteworthy one. Their activities determined a new direction to the society of medieval Assam. It will not exaggeration to say that the contributions of Sankardev and his followers in respect of social, religion, language, literature and culture is incomparable one. In a sense Sankardev started a new era in the religious and social movement of Assam. No doubt Srimanta Sankardev was the pioneer of the socio-religious movement of the Medieval Assam.

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- 14 tumi satya brahma tomata prakashe jagata ito asanta | jagatato sada tumio prakasha antarjami tumi ghagavanta | Ibid, Vedastuti, V.14
- 15 Nalage bhaktita deva dvija rhishi huibe | Nalage sambhrita sastra bistara janibe | Tapa japa jajnya danasabe biramban | kevale Bhakatita tusta honta narayan | Ibid, Prahlad carit, V.165
- 16 Sarma, M.M., Op. Cit., Nidhanpur grant, V-19
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- 18 *Kirata kachari khasi garo miri Javana kangka gowal* | Asoma muluka dhova je turuka Kuvaca mlecha chandal || Aano papi nara Krishna sevakara Sangata pavitra hai | Bhakati labhiya sangsara tariya Baikuntha sukhe chalay || Dattabarua, H.N.

ISSN No. : 2394-0344

(Ed) Bhagavat, Skanda II, Sri sankardevar  
Bakymrit, pp. 474-75 Smaroka matra hari dine  
rati | Nabase bhakati jati ajati ||Op. cit, Pashanda  
Mardan, V.129

19 Kathaguri carit, p. 482

20 Brahmabadhi gurubadhi jatek | Pitri matri badhi papi  
anek || Kukura khaya hena mlecha gane |

REMARKING : VOL-1 \* ISSUE-7\*December-2014

Sio shuddha howe hari Kirtane || Ibid., Pashanda  
Mardan, V.117

21 Samasta bhutate byapi aaso mai hari | Sabako  
maniba tumi bishnu buddhi kari ||Ibid, Baikuntha  
payan, V.37 Kukura shrigala gaddarbharo atma ram  
| Jania sabako pari kariba pranam ||Ibid, Baikuntha  
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