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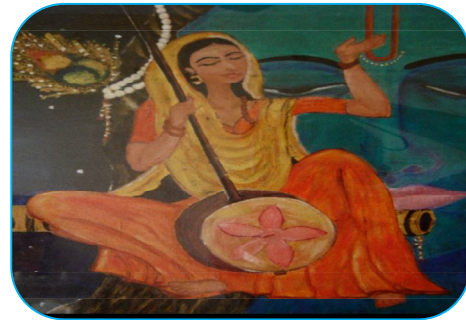


BHAKTI MOVEMENT AND SATRA INSTITUTION IN ASAM TILL 17TH CENTURY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Bhakti movement can be regarded a milestone in the religious history of Assam, which brought many changes to the medieval Assamese society. The vishnavism of Assam has been playing a significant role in the every sphere of Assamese society. The peculiar character of Assam vaishnavism was satra institution. Under the auspicious satra institution, the movement had reached every corner of Assamese society. Satra plays a vital role in the life of Assamese society as well as in the formation of Assamese society. In this paper an attempt is made to understand the bhakti movement in Assam and the evolution of satra institution.



KEYWORDS: Bhakti Movement, 17th Century.

INTRODUCTION :

The bhakti movement was a socio-religious movement in India. Originated in the south in the 6th century A.D., it consequently spread to the north India and brought many changes to the medieval Indian society. In Assam it was begun by Sankardeva. Worship of Vishnu as a faith existed in Assam since early times as proved by epigraphy, iconography and literature.¹ But worship of Vishnu through emotional devotion (bhakti) was brought to the land only in the 15th century by Sankardeva (1449-1568). The organisational structure of the bhakti movement in

Assam is the Satra institution. There are more than thousand satras in Assam, which generally independent of each other and under the control of a pontiff called Adhikara or Satradhikara.

Objectives of The Study:

The study has been conducted keeping in the view of the following objectives-

1. To analyse the bhakti movement of Assam version
2. To analyse the evolution of satra institution.

Methodology:

Methodology is an important part of research. This work depends on both primary and secondary data. The data have been collected from different sources such as research works on

bhakti movement of Assam and from other published books and articles.

Findings and Discussion:

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam was started by Sankardeva. He was a man of dynamic personality, a saint scholar, poet, playwright and a pioneer in the field of Assamese prose, drama, and dramatic performance. He set out on his first pilgrimage to various holy places all over India in 1481 A.D., when he was thirty-two years of age.² Seventeen persons are believed to have accompanied Srimanta Sankardeva during this sojourn, among whom the names of Ramarama and MahendraKandali (Sankardeva's teacher) are generally

mentioned.³ He visited many places in northern and southern India and stay in places like Puri and Benaras. Sankardevawas greatly inspired by the *bhaktimovement* in other parts of India. He stayed at Puri (Orissa)for along time and it is said that hereceived his illumination in this religious centre.After twelve years of travelling,Sankardeva returned home as a saint,carrying an abiding impression of the nascent *Neo-Vaishnavamovement* thatwas pulsating in the heart of northern India and manifesting itself in devotional songs.⁴ He had discovered his mission of life and was well intended on forsaking the world. As such, he set on his mission to reform the Assamese society through a revival of *Vaishnavism* on the basis of equality of all human-being. Sankardeva`s doctrine of `universal social brotherhood` created conditions for harmonious living of people of diverse castes,communities and creeds.It unified the diverse tribal communities of the region and gave it a culture,later identified as the Assamese culture.⁵ After listening to the discourse on the *BhagavatPuranaby* Jagadisha Mishra of Tirhut, Sankardevawas convinced of its great value and set up his mind to fix Krishna as the sole worshipful and that the celebrating of his acts in the company of holly men and taking of sole refuge in him, was the greatest religion of men.⁶ As such, he taught qualified monotheism of absolute surrender to one supreme God in the form of Krishna, which came to be known as `eksarana`.During that time *sakta* religion was prevalent in societyand the caste system opened the way for exploitation of one section of people by the other. But Sankardeva taught the common people simple ways of living and avoiding sacrifices of birds and animals. Moreover his new religion simplified *Brahmanical* ritualism and emphasised upon one supreme God in the form of Krishna or Vishnu.Thus the movement attacked the privileges of the priestly class who worshipped in the name of numerousGods and Goddesses.In order to preach his faith among the common people of Assam, he established the *satra* institution and the *namghar*. It is known that after his return from pilgrimage,Sankardeva asked his brother Ramarai to construct a *satragriha* or *deva-griha* to hold religious discussion.⁷Sankardeva started his mission of preaching his religion in his own place Bordowa in Nagaon after returning from his pilgrimage. He made an institution near his village and it became the nucleus of the *vaishnava* organisation. He adopted the alternative method of holding *kirtana* or mass prayer and dramatic performance and these soon attracted many people to his new religion. His next institution came up in the village of Dhowahat in the MajuliIsland, where he met Madhavadeva (1498-1596) in the year 1522 A.D. his most intimate disciple. Their meeting in the island is termed in the *charitputhis* as *mani-kanchan-yog*(combination of pearl and gem).⁸ However Sankardeva could not stay there for a long term. He left for Kamarupa andKochbihar and spent the rest of his life Kochbihar and passed away in 1568 A.D. During the life time of Sankardevathe *satra* institution did not grow up as a full-fledged institution.It was under the disciples like Madhabdeva, Damodardeva, Badula Padma Ata, Gopaldev, Mathuradas Ata, Purushottam Thakur etc.that the *satra* institution took a definite shape with its unique distinctive feature.These disciples took the initiative to spread the faith of their *guru*,Sankardeva. As a result number of *satras* was established in various parts of Assam. It was under the patronage of the Ahom Kingdom that the *satras*grew in number and by the 18th century, it had increased to more than thousand and the *satra* institutions exercised even today a tremendous influence of the cultural and social life of the Assamese people.At the same time, with the death of Sankardeva, the main order of *Neo-Vaishnavite*order dividedand four *samhati* or *sanghati* or sub-sects were formed by the later leaders.

Teachings of Sankardeva :

Sankardeva`s form of *Vaishnavism* is officially named *eksarana-nama-dharma*, having strict monotheism. The central doctrine of the *Neo-Vaishnavism* is the recitation of the name of one deity. He

derives the basic concepts of *nama,deva,guru* and *bhakata* from *Bhagabat Gita*.He is required to prostrate himself before each of the four realms(*cari-vastu*),*guru*(preceptor),*deva*(god),*nama*(chanting the name of god),*bhakata*(devotee). The function of the preceptor (*guru*)is to give council to man to realize the deity. *Deva* means the supreme deity.He is lord Krishna. He is omnipresent and omnipotent. He is the only deity to be recognised and worshipped. *Nama* is the chanting the name of god. There are no rules and formalities in *mahapurushiya dharma*, the only religion prescribed for people in *kaliyoga* is the chanting the name of god. The last is the *bhakata* or devotee. God manifests through the devotees and *nama* is no significant without the *bhakata*. In the religious system of Sankardeva initiation(*sarana*) makes to a devotee.The word *sarana*(initiation) means taking absolute shelter to Lord-Krishna.

Monotheism:

As mention above *ekasaraniyanam dharma* is strictly monotheism and interdicted people from worshipping all other deities other than Krishna or Vishnu. Main principal of Sankardeva *ekasarana* is

“eka deva ekasevaeka bine nahikeva”

(One God, on to be worshipped non else but one)

It prohibits worship of other deities except Lord Krishna. In *Bhagabata* he says,

*anya deva devinakaribaseva
murtikonechaiba tar,
prasadunakhaibogrihe kunapasiba
bhaktihoibe byovisyar.⁹*

(Don't bow down before any other god or goddess, partake not of their offerings. Do not look their images faith will be vitiated by this action)

Dasya Bhava:

It devised the concept of *dasya* (servitude) as the form of devotion to the guru only through whom the proselyte could attain salvation. A devotee should regard the God as his master and serve his feet with heart and mind.

Sravana-Kirtana :

Sankardeva new *vaishnavism* emphasised on listening to(*sravana*) and reciting(*kirtana*) the names of God. These are considered as the quickest and the most efficacious means of putting one's *bhakti*(devotion)into action.

Special place to devotees:

In Sankardeva *neo-vaishnavism*, there is a special place to the devotees or the *bhakatas*. The devotee is regarded as four realms of *nam-dharma*. The company of devotee is worshipped as the visible symbol of God. According to Sankardeva, one who worships Krishna without worshipping the devotee is not accepted by God.

Rejection of caste system:

Another principal feature of *Neo-Vaishnavism* is the rejection of the caste system in the field of religions practices. In his new religion, the Brahmans, Kaivratras, Kalitas, Koches and Sudras became his disciples and all of these could sit together during *nam-prasanga*. According to Sankardeva a Chandala, who chants for name of *Hari* is superior and he is to be regarded as of high order.¹⁰

History of Evolution of the *Satra* Institution:

The peculiar character of Assam Version of *Vaishnavism's satra* institution which is not found elsewhere in India. The movement in Assam was based on a wide network of *satras*, headed by a *guru*. By taking *sarana* under a Guru through a very simple procedure anyone can enter into the fold of *New-Vaishnavism*. The word *satra* is first used in the sense of sacrifice and it is derived from the Sanskrit word "*Sattra*" which means an association, a sitting or a session of sacrifice, lasting from a few days to a year or more. It is also used in the sense of an alms-house. S.N.Sarma explains that the etymological meaning of the word which means an association or a sitting ($\sqrt{\text{sad}}+\text{tra}$) or an instrument which helps to liberate the weight to form the above notion about *satra*.¹¹ M. Neog mentions that the word *sattra* was possibly applied in Assam Vaisnavism to mean an assembly of devotees in analogy to *brahma satra*.¹² Most of the scholars of Assam believe that the concept of *satra* has come from the *Bhagabata Purana*. The recitation of the *Bhagavata* gave currency to the word *satra* in Assam.¹³ The word *sattra* very naturally became *satra* in Assamese. In Assam, where Sankardev stayed and preached through congregational prayers and religious discourse, came to be known as *sattra*. In the days of Sankardeva, the daily sitting of the monks and lay disciples were held in the open space or under the shade of trees. Such meetings, independent of any construction whatever, probably formed the nucleus of a *sankaritesattra* with the *kirtanghar*, and the residence of superior and monks only came later to be associated inseparably with the notion of a *satra*.

Though Sankardeva started such type of institution in Assam but it had not taken a definite shape during his life time. Because the political situation prevalent during that time compelled him to move one place to the other. The contemporary literature of the period speaks of the existence of a prayer hall and shrine in the *satra* of Sankardeva but there is no reference to the system of "*charihati*" (cloisters for monks) like the later day *satras*. However biographies of the 18th century, specially the *kathaguru charita*, describe the existence of *namghar*, *manikut* and *chari hati*.¹⁴ Further development of the *satra* institution took place in the second half of the 17th century, when the *satra* received royal patronage of the Konch kings like Naranarayana and Lakshminarayan and later by the Ahom Kings from the time of JayadhvajSingha.

The principal house on the campus of a *satra* is the *nam-ghar* or *kirttana-ghar*. Sometime *kirtan-ghar* is divided into two parts; the main hall and the *manikut*, where scripture is kept. Prayer service, dramatic performance and general discussions are held in the main hall. There are *namghars* in almost all *Hindu* villages in Assam in the Brahmaputra valley.¹⁵ The head of the *satra* institution is called *mahanta*, *adhikar* or *satradhiar*. The houses of the superior and his relative are also situated within the *satra* campus. For running of various works of a *satra*, the organization has some officers to conduct their respective duties. They are appointed by the superior or sometimes with the approval of the general body.

Than and Satra:

Than is a sacred place of public worship and *satra* is the centre of preaching religion. In *vaishnavite* circle the places where the principal apostles of Assamese *Vaisnavism* worked and died and where some of their relics have been preserved are called *than*. In the post Sankardeva period, the holy places where some religious leaders passed came to be called *than* (Sacred Place), sometimes a temple is erected at such a place and this is called *than-guru*. Even the places where Sankardeva stayed for a few months are also called *than*, for example- *Bordowa Than*, *Barpeta Than* etc. In *kalasamhati* the places of cremation of religious heads are called *than* by the disciple. Thus the word *than-satra* is used

to substitute each other. The word *than* (sacred place) also used to be applied to a *satra* and the compound *than-satra* could also be substituted for *than* or *satra*.¹⁶ But some *satras* of Norowa group, the things is different. For instance in *BasudevThanNorowaSatra*, both characteristics of *than* and *satra* are prevalent and *pujari* is appointed for serving devotees in *than*. The devotees regarded the *than* as a secret place rather than a part of *satra* and worship in a different way which is not seen in the other *satras*. On the other hand it also follows the *satra*'s principles.

Neo-Vaishnavism during post Sankardeva period:

After the death of Sankardeva a significant development and changes came to the movement. Under the disciples of Sankardeva the *satra* institution reached its definite shape and spread the religion in different parts of Assam and the main stream of *Vaishnava* order got divided into four sub-sects or *samhati*.

Division of the order into four Sub-Sects of Samhatis:

Sankardeva nominated Madhavdeva as his successor to hold charge of the order. But Domoderdeva (1488-1598) a Brahmin follower did not accept Madhavdeva as successor and finally the main stream of *Vaishnava* order got divided. Gradually it divided into four Sub-sects or *samhati* - *brahma samhati*, *nikasamhati*, *kalasamhati* and *purushasamhati*. The term *samhati* is a synonym of the term *sangha* which means an association. The process of the historic sectarian divisions of Sankardeva's vaishnavism took place in lower Assam and was complete by the close of the 16th century.

Brahma Samhati :

As said earlier Sankardeva nominated Madhabdeva as his successor on the basis of his personality. After the death of Sankardeva, Madhabdeva carried on the proselytizing activities as well as the cultural tradition as initiated by his *guru*. But a section of *Vaishnav* led by Damoderdev seeded and did not accept Madhavdeva's leadership. D.Nath mentions that after the death of Sankardeva, two important and equally competent personalities in the field however led finally to the division of the faith with Damoderdeva deviating from the stream and creating his own branch later called BrahmaSamhati.¹⁷ In this sect the predominance of Brahmanical elements are seen a number *satra* affiliated by *brahma samhati* were established in course of time in various parts of Assam. Principal among these *Satras* of *brahma samhati* are Aunati, Dakhinpat, Garmur, Putbousi etc.

Kala Samhati:

Unlike his Guru-Sankardeva, Madhavdeva did not nominate anybody to succeed him as the supreme religious head. According to *Gopal Ata Charit*, Madhavdeva's real successor was Gopaldeva.¹⁸ Also the other leading disciples like MathuradasBurha Ata and Purusuttama Thakur claimed to be the real successor of Madhavdeva and formed their own division. Gopaldeva formed a new sub-sect which came to known as the *kala-samhati*, with a predominantly liberal attitude towards tribal societies, Gopaldeva nominated twelve '*acharya*' in order to preach the message of the *kalasamhati* in different directions. The *satras* under the *kalasamhati* propagate their teachings mainly among the tribes and the digressed people.

Purusha Samhati :

The *purushasamhati* derived its name from the name of Purushottam Thakur eldest grandson of Sankardeva. As such being a direct descendant of the founder of *Neo-Vaishnavism* in Assam, he claimed for himself the position of the supreme religious head of the *Neo-vaishnavite* order. He tried to bring his family authority on the sect and considered Sankardeva as the only *guru* of the *Neo-Vaishnavite* order. He appointed twelve of the principal followers as apostles to initiate disciples in different parts of central and eastern Assam. Purushottam Thakur nominated his younger brother Chaturbhuja Thakur as his successor at his death bed.¹⁹ The *purushasamhati* emphasized on *nama* or chanting. The followers of the sub-sect observe Brahmanical rites and most of the *satras* affiliated to the sub-sect, image of Vishnu is found.

Nika Samhati:

Mathuradas Ata a disciple of Madhavdeva founded the last and in his own order *nikasamhati*. The word '*nika*' means pure or clean. Strict discipline in respect of food, dress, manners and other religious affairs had to be observed by the followers of this sub-sects. The followers of the *samhati* consider Madhavdeva as their *guru* and Sankardeva as the *param guru* or *guru* of the *guru*.

Thus, the post Sankardeva period *Neo-Vaishnavism* got divided into four sects. The main reason of this division was the question over the headship of the *apostles'* seat and minor ideological difference among the disciples.

CONCLUSION:

Thus the *bhakti* movement was a religious cum social reform and taught monotheism, i.e. belief on a personal God Lord Krishna. The most popular of method of his worship is devotion called *bhakti*, i.e. emotional love of the God. The organisational structure of the *bhakti* movement in Assam is the common prayer hall called *namghar* and the monastery called *satra*. Numbering in hundreds, these monasteries are generally independent of each other and under the controlled of a *Satradhikar*.

Sankardeva reached his faith, giving a new and simple interpretation of the doctrine of *bhakti*. He was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing in a powerful spiritual life in Assamese people. He took the movement as a weapon to fight against the multiplicity of religious beliefs and accompanying social evils. Thus his contributions to the society and the people, laid a deep and permanent mark in Assam in the 15th -16th centuries which still persists as a dominating force in the minds of the Assamese people. The relevance of his teaching has not diminishing even today, rather, it is felt to be of great importance to wipe out all odds and evils of the present unrest of the society of large.

After the death of Sankardeva, the main sect of movement came to be fractionalising in to different sub-sect called *samhatis*. It was started by Damodardeva with the creation of *brahma samhati*. The main reason of this division was the question over the headship of the *apostles'* seat and minor ideological difference among the disciples. Despite minor difference among the sub-sects their fundamental teachings are quite similar initiated by Sankardeva.

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