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 bhaktimovement 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 Sankadeva. Worship of Vishnu as a faith existed in Assam since early times as proved by epigraphy, iconography and literature. 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. Seventeen persons are believed to have accompanied Srimanta Sankardeva vaduring this sojourn, among whom the names of Ramarama and MahendraKandali (Sankardeva’s teacher) are generally
mentioned. 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 that was pulsating in the heart of northern India and manifesting itself in devotional songs. 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.

After listening to the discourse on the Bhagavat Purana by Jagadisha Mishra of Tirhut, Sankardeva was 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 holy men and taking of sole refuge in him, was the greatest religion of men. 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 society and 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 numerous Gods 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.

Sankardeva 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 Majuli Island, where he met Madhavadeva (1498-1596) in the year 1522 A.D. his most intimate disciple.

However Sankardeva could not stay there for a long term. He left for Kamarupa and Kochbihar and spent the rest of his life Kochbihar and passed away in 1568 A.D. During the life time of Sankardeva the satra institution did not grow up as a full-fledged institution. It was under the disciples like Madhabdeva, Damodardeva, Badula Patna 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 divided and 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 ekasaranais “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,

\[
\text{anya deva devinakaribaseva} \\
\text{murtikonechaiba tar}, \\
\text{prasadunakbogrihekunapasiba} \\
\text{bhaktihoibe byovisyar}.^9
\]

(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, Kaivatras, 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 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 use 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 (sad+tra) or an instrument which helps to liberate the weight to form the above notion about satra. M. Neog mentions that the word sattra was possibly applied in Assam Vaisnavism to mean an assembly of devotees in analogy to brahma satra. 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.

The word sattra very naturally became satra in Assamese. In Assam, where Sankardevastayed 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 satraof Sankardeva but there is no reference to the system of "charihi" (cloisters for monks) like the later day satras. However biographies of the 18th century, specially the kathaguru charita, describe the existence of namghar, manikut chari hati. 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 Jayadhvaj Singha.

The principal house on the campus of a satrais the nam-ghar or kirttana-ghar. Sometime kirtanghar is divided into two parts; the main hall and the manikut, where scripture is kept. Prayer service dramatic performance and general discussions a held in the main hall. There are namghars in almost all Hindu villages in Assam in the Brahmaputra valley. The head of the satra institution is called mahanta, adhikar or satradhia. 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.* 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 *samhatis*.

**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's successor and finally the main stream of *Vaishnava* order got divided. Gradually it divided into four Sub-sects or *samhatis* 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 Sankardevas 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 *Vaishnavas* led by Domoderdeva deviated from the stream and creating his own branch later called BrahmaSamhati. In this sect the predominance of Brahmanical elements are seen a number *satras* 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-Sankareva, Madhavdeva did not nominate anybody to succeed him as the supreme religious head. According to *Gopal Ata Charit*, Madhavdeva's real successor was Gopaldeva. 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 massage 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. The purushasamhati emphasized on nama or chanting. The followers of the sub-sect observe Bramanical 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-sect. The followers of the samhaticonsider 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 preached 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.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


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