

Philosophy of Srimanta Shankardeva and His Neovaishnavism: A Philosophical Study

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"We have learnt to fly in the air like birds and swim in the sea like fish, but we have not learnt the simple art of living together as brothers". (Martin Luther King Jr.)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sankardeva (1449-1569), an immensely gifted genius, blessed this pristine land of Assam in the 15th and 16th Centuries with his theological teachings, blended with various colours of social and cultural elements. However, this valley on either side of the mighty Brahmaputra was not a set stage for him to let the essence of Bhakti movement flow smoothly. The people in this region were curled in the wreaths of Tantraism, illiteracy, lingering amidst caste discriminations and socio political segregation and conflicts. Faith, culture, society and the prospect of a future of a greater integrated nation were in a pandemonium. Sankardeva not only spread the cult of Bhakti Movement in Assam but also enriched the people socially, culturally and laid the foundation of a greater Assamese nation. Assam presented a very grim scenario in Pre Vaisnavite period. Spirituality looked wanting in religion and socio-political rivalry and opportunist purposes worsened the conditions of the people. This condition is called a low ebb in faith society, culture and prospect of a strong future nation. The greater Assam of Su-ka-pha was a blurred vision. Sankardeva and his neo vaisnavite movement provided a new lease of life to the people. So, we have made an attempt to call this a resurrection of faith, culture, society and national integrity. To estimate the daunting task accomplished by Sankardeva first the condition of Assam before his advent is discussed and then how he accomplished it are discussed.

Aims and Objectives:

This paper Endeavour's to focus the role of Sankardev and his Vaisnavism in resurrection the Assamese people's faith, culture, conscience and national integration.

This paper also makes an effort to focal point the state of Assam before and after his advent.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on secondary data collected from secondary sources i.e. research paper, research articles, reports etc. published in journals, periodicals and few websites in the internet. Some information is also taken from Kirtanghosa of Sankardeva and books written about Sankardeva by some authors. The paper is descriptive in nature.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Brahmaputra valley was a land of amalgamation of both Aryan and Non- Aryan culture. Hence, the land was having diversity in its perennial flow of spirituality and faith. Since prehistoric time the worship of Lord Shiva have been the prime cult of religious practice but with the evolution of time the interest of worshipping Lord Shiva was wreathed in the coil of Tantric practices. The worship of Shakti took an inhumane turn. The condition of the time is rightly described in these lines of Guru Charit:

E dexot purbokale nasila bhakati/ Nana dharma-karma loke korila samprati/

Nana deva pujoyo karay boli daan/Hax saga para kate axankhya pramamn/

The Tantric way of worship turned into highly licentious and bloody affair. The Kamakhya temple in the Nilachal, Kamakhya of Hatimura and Tamreswari temple were the centres of shakti worship. Shaktism demanded the offering of blood to the deity. The Kalikapurana contains a very detail description of sacrificial rituals. The concept of Bhogi-as it was mentioned in Sir Edward Gait's description of tamreswari temple-clearly authenticates the practice of human sacrifice too. A Bhogi was a man selected for sacrifice to the God, who was given free access to have sexual contentment with any female of the society. The Bhogi and the practice of the Devdasi were actually the patriarchal approaches to consider women as mere objects for male eroticism.

Scriptures such as kalikapurana, Joginitantra, Kulanav Tantra authenticate such a nadir in spirituality. Here are a few lines of Kulanav Tantra:

Amisava sauravahinang jashya mukhang vabet /prayachitti
Sabarjyacha pasureba na sangsaya

Apart from Saktism, a system of later Buddhism known as Vajrayana had taken root in Assam. It was associated with rituals, sorcery and necromancy. In actual practice, the Vajrayana system was against religion and morality. It defined nirvana as 'mahasukha' and permitted indulgence in the five ma-karas. As Dimbeswar Neog said religious rites included madya, mamsa, matsya, mudra, maithuna and it was even permitted to have sexual relationship with any woman except the mother.¹ There was now a combination of the orthodox Nath cult of Hatha yoga and Buddhist tantricism. The religion was devoid of purity and sacred spiritual essence.

On the other hand, the caste-system had become so tyrannical that it had rattled the very foundations of the society. The Brahmana priests and pandits who had managed to attain for themselves in the high seats in the helm of power did everything they possibly could to maintain their stranglehold on society. All people in the Koch kingdom, for instance, were required to follow the caste system, perform their functions and observe other customs and manners, as directed by Siddhanta Vagisa. Those who went against it were severely punished by the king and were boycotted by their own people.

The great bulk of the population had no light of education and there was a conflict of interest between the literate few and the illiterate many. This fact was exploited to the hilt by the Brahmanas who lost no time in prohibiting the lower strata from studying (even viewing) the religious texts. Thus religion had become practically a closed system with the Brahmanas possessing all the 'proprietary' rights over it. Such social disparity exaggerated the political differences between various tribes as well. Ahoms, Koch, Kachari, Chutia etc ethnic differences made a possibility of a greater nation a far cry.

As a tributary to the Vaisnavite Movement of India, Sankardeva propagated neo vaisnavite movement in Assam in the 15th and 16th centuries. His philosophy may be said to have been influenced by Vedanta philosophy and advaitic of Sankaracharya, but with the importance of a personal god who can be achieved by devotion, Sankardeva preached with a self-engineered path of Bhakti. Advaitic Sankaracharya believed in 'Ahang Brahmani' but Sankardeva didn't say "Ahang". He interpreted the Brahma or Brahman and Atma of Upanishada opting for Saguna Brahman. The term Brahman for Sankardeva was synonymous to god and it is without form.

"Tumi satya brahma/tomat prokaxe jogot eto ananta
Jogotot matro,tumihe prokaxa/ontorjami vogobonto"
(Kirtanghosa, Vedasthuti)

Sankardeva postulated **Him** as an impersonal super-entity being the creator, sustainer and destroyer of this universe. But common man ascribes form and qualities to him for devotional purpose. There are three concepts of god in Sankardeva's philosophy are – the absolute (Brahman), the perfect creator, sustainer and destroyer and one as a God of flesh and blood who can be intimate and become source of inspiration and courage. These three facets are the three modes of realizing god. Sankardeva accepted the concept of personal god in relation to the world. He described it more or less in human form. He called this God Narayana, Bishnu or Hari.

"xomosto kasthote ogni asonto biyapi
Ghorixona bine tangko nedekhe kodapi
Xehimote asa Krishna xoware hiyat
Bhokoti bhine koito nuhike xakhyat"¹

Though it has a personality it is beyond the ephemeral reality and he sang
Jodyopi bhokti noybidh madhabar/shrabana kirtana tatte oti.

The concept of maya plays an important role in Sankardeva's religious philosophy. Maya is the inseparable power of god and is responsible for this manifold universe of world appearance. He describes Maya as a part of God and similarly all living beings are but parts of God.

"Othara jibana dhan joubon jaya
Bhokoti birodhi bixoyo sob maya
Krishna kingkara ohi sankara vana
Bine hari bhakati tarani nahi ana"

It is due to ignorance we lose perspective of life by succumbing to ethereal imposed reality in guise of maya. But when we become conscious of the existence of Jivatma and Paramatma our salvation is attained. However,

1. Neog Dimbeswar, Vaishnava Dharmor Aatiguri, p-57.

Sankardeva did not ask people to give up the world to attain mukti. He preached an objective approach to life by being conscious of the Oversoul.

Sankardeva tried to give a new life to humanity by rescuing them from the scourge of irrelevant and prejudices dogmas. He wanted to build such a society which would be based on humanity, devoid of any distinction in caste or creed, language or habitation, royalty or peasantry. In the broad sense, his whole ideology was based on three main principles, i.e. liberty, equality and fraternity. Sankardeva was highly praised because he could destroy the age old caste barriers which had ruined the social structure of the country. He renounced that 'Nahi Bhakatit jati ajati bichar, hari bhaktit samastare adhikar'. According to him, one should not have to be from privileged class for reciting Krishna nama, because everyone can set Krishna nama in his heart and consciousness. But it must be mentioned here that it was not an easy task for Sankardeva to break down the shackles of a society which was based on a strong caste system. By establishing Naamghar he provided an opportunity to all sections of people to practice religious discourses together. Naamghar is a great museum of the nation which put the temple imposed prohibitions out of our social practice. Sankardeva wanted to liberate the marginalised section of the society saying - Bishnu baishnabara kinchiteko nahi vedo. In this manner Sankardeva preached a faith in which god and men were assimilated into one. Most importantly, the saran system as prescribed by the Geeta was administered to all irrespective of caste creed and language. This was a purely democratised concept of equality propagated by Sankardeva through his Ek Saran Naam Dharma.

“Brahmanara chandalara nibisari kul”

“kukuroko khay heno mless gone

Xio xuddho howe harir kirtane”

(Kirtan Ghosa, 117)

“Chandalo harinam lowe matro

Koribe usito jagyara patro” (Kirtan Ghosa- 118)

.He succeeded in breaking the shackle of religious disparity in the society by a purely liberal concept of universal fraternity.

Parar dharmik nihinghiba kadasit

Kariba bhaktak daya khakarunsit. (Bhakti Pradip, 141)

And he even seemed to realize a greater existence of living being by saying.

“Poxu xorioto ase jana eto bixoyoro joto xukh

Jito dheer hoi tejiya bixoy torok xonxaro dukh”

(Bhaktiratnakar, 38)

Sankardeva ushered in a humane and democratic approach to faith and provided everyone with the opportunity to realize the essence of oversoul within him. But this would not have been possible if he had not also taken up the arduous task of introducing the illiterate people with the sacred books and their philosophy. Prior to Sankardeva the literature comprised of various scriptures of Tantricism and Shakti cult. Besides this the Sarjyageet, Shrikrishna Kirtan of Chandi Das were found to have originated in Assam. But in its true sense, in the ancient form of the Assamese language the writers like Madhav Kandali, Hem Saraswati and their contemporaries translated the Ramayana, and some Puranic and other legendary verses. However, those works were in no way deliberated for resurgence of faith as it was the case with Sankardeva. Maheswar Neog envisaged upon this fact by quoting Madhav Kandali “doivo bani nohe eto loukik he kotha”². Many of the texts earlier had more weight age of Sanskrit as well. It was Sankardeva who tried to divulge the common men and their consciousness with the essence of bhakti and mukrti by “Ek dev, ek xev”, through putting the kernel of Shrimadvagawat in simple intelligible language. Sankardeva took up the responsibility to translate the sayings of the Bhagawata and the Geeta into Assamese. He used Brajaboli language as his medium, since it was the most prevalent language among mass of the entire Indian eastern part. By doing so, he accomplished half of his task. Sibanath Barman rightly said about Sankardeva that- he did not accomplished literal translation of Puranas, rather he took the kernel and fashioned it with local elements. The very essence of his Ek Saran Nam Dharma is pillarised in Kirtan Ghosa. The two parts of Urekha Barnan and Namaparadh are taken from Brahmapuran and Padmapuran. The part of Pasanda Mardan was taken from various slokas of Bhagawat Puran. The remaining parts of it are the matters included in Bhagawat Purana. Kirtan Ghosa is enriched with various ‘Rasa’ however, Bhakti Rasa is supreme. Another magnificent creation of Sankardeva is Gunamala. It is simplified version of Srimadbhagawat. Besides these Sankardeva translated 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 8th, and 10th parts of Srimadbhagawat into simple Assamese. Bhakta pradip, Anadi Patan, Nimi Navasidhi are some other religious books of Sankardeva. These books proved to be the guiding lamp for the people since, Sankardeva’s faith also

inculcated through its various “bidhis” of ‘Sarana’ character building, discipline, hygiene and various interpersonal relational matters too.

Sankardeva was such a treasure of humane faculty which led him to the role of an aesthetic reformer also. Here, the word aesthetic is used to refer to Sankardeva’s contribution in the field of drama, fine arts and music. In Dr. Naghen Saikia’s words –

“Sanskrit natokor oitijyo prak sankar jugot asomot onuxrito huar xomvabona nui koribo nuari. Bhaskar Barmar rajsabhat seena poribrajok hieu-en-Tsang r xonmanarthe ayojan kora nrityo-geetor ullekhe Asomot prasin sastriya nritya geetor aru ovinoyor prosolon korar ingit bohon kore. Todupori Sanskrit tol xomuhot Bharatar natya sastra aru Sanskrit natok je pathyokromot ontorbhukto hoisil xei bixoye xondeh nai. aanhate ojapalior dore onusthan asomot prak-sankar jugor porai prosolito hoi ahise. ei kotha o smoroniyo j sankardevar pitri kusambar bhuyan o sangeetot parodorxi asil. ullekjhugyo j sankardeva botris bosor boyoxot logot keibajonu xongi xoho Bharatbarsha r tirtha xomuh bhromon koribor babe ulai. teo uttar Bharatbarshar prai xokolubur tirtha bhraman korar kotha Gurucharitot pua jai ru digholiya koi teo orissar purit roisil. ai xomoy sowat teo nrityo-geet-obhinoyor bibhinno ansolik rupor logot Bharatiya Sastriya nrityo-geet-obhinoyor sakhyux porisoy lav koraru xujog ghotisil. Nrityo-geet-badyo-natok aru obhinoy xomporke prasin Asomor oitijyor pora pua xomol ,tirtha bhramanar jogedi lav kora sakhyux obhigyota aru natyo sastroke dhori sastra xomuhor odhyoyon ai ataibilakei natyokolal dhormo prosaror madhyom hisape byobohar korar upojugita xomporke teok j protyoy daan korisil xei xomporke xondeh nai.”³

But outside the periphery of Sanskrit drama the only extent dramatic mode of performances was Ojapali and Puppet Plays. It was Sankardeva who gathered from the granary of Sanskrit dramaturgy the elements of sloka, bhatima, nandi, sutradhar and the division of act to compile the form of dramatic expression which is known as ‘Ongkiya Bhaona’. However, he didn’t follow Sanskrit dramaturgy to the letters. One significant deviation is the sutradhar which he introduced in “nandi” unlike the Sanskrit plays. He also masterly crafted acting and music into his place namely- Patniprasad, Kalia Daman, Keligopal, Rukminiharan, Parijat haran, Ram Vijay. Sankardev initiated this dramatic journey with Sinha Jatra.

“Charit puthir mote teo bhramanar pora ahi Bordowat Gokul Brindabon adir ji biboron dangi dhorisil xei biboron xuni xokoluwe krishnaleela sao bolat teo “Sihna jatra”r ati obhinobo porikolpona kori uliyale. pandit Maheswar Neoge likhise,”Gurugrihot satrorupe ji kabyo aru natyor gyan aharon korisil aru baro bosor tirtha bhramanar ji obhigyota lovisil, tar uproot bhitti kori “Sihno” namere prothom ongko ba naat likhi tar jatra ba bhaona kore. ai sihno jatrai asomiya sangeet aru natyokolar ek obhutopurbo obhinoy-adhyay aru Bharatiya sangeet aru natya sahyar buronjeer e ati notun paat mukoli kori diye.”⁴

Sankardeva created this special kind of drama for the purpose of spreading cognizably the message of god among the common people. This purpose was somewhat similar to that of the origin of English drama. The elements of Sanskrit drama are mixed with the essence of Bhaktism and common people were attracted thereto with its dance music and songs. The attraction eventually yielded in the essence of Bhakti and the common people without any dexterity in theological text merged into such rasas.

Untill the advent of Sankardeva dance form in Assam had a restrained ambit with only the temple centric religious dance and folkdance. Sankardeva mingled the classical form of dance to device a kind of dance form which is called Satria Dance. However, it is the Bor Geets which touched the spiritual cord of the mass. Borgeet helped in spreading neo-vaishnavism more than other aesthetic element of Sankardeva. Dr. Banikanta Kakati said that these songs were like winged arrows, wherever it landed it created the cult of Vaishnavism. Narayan Thakur came to Sankardeva’s saran after listening to ‘man meri saranehi lage’ sung by a bhakat. Similarly Chilarai came to Sankardeva after listening to a Borgeet sung by his wife - (gurucharit). Dr. B.K. Kakati called these noble numbers, like those of Herrick’s holy religious verses. Kaliram Medhi called them great songs. The extant Borgeets of Sankardeva are 34; of Madhavdeva is 157. These aesthetic songs having the cadence of classical tone, restrained imagination and rhythm, they are truly Borgeets. These songs are based on 13 ragas and various tals. Besides Borgeets, Sankardeva composed Bhatimas. Sankardeva is also the introducer of various musical instruments such as Khol. The Charit Puthi nicely described how he first endeavored khol-

“Boloram atoi axiya tekhone/kholor jukhoko dila

Troyodox angulo baam vage janadahine no angulo koila”(Charit puthi)

He also used Bhortal from Bhot .To architecture; Sankardeva also brought changes for a better and simple demeanor. From the previous troublesome concrete architecture of temples Sankardeva shifted to simple bamboo made Namgharas. This engineered a locally available structural foundation for the mass.

3. Saikiya Nagen, Baikuntha Dutay- Sankardeva & Angkiyanat, Souvenir 85, p- 120.

4. Ibid, p- 121.

IV. CONCLUSION

As it is known to have been said by Mahatma Gandhi “A great Vaisnavite revival under Sankardeva in the 16th century has made Assamese people kindly, tolerant and human. There is no sign anywhere of that from untouchability which is found in Northern and Southern India”, Sankardeva with his multifaceted talent redefined the role of a religious leader. He succeeded in resurrecting the people’s faith and national integrity by accomplishing literary as well as cultural advancement. Sankardeva came to the Assamese society as a savior. He spread Neo Vaisnavism in Assam and resurrected the whole society refurnishing its faith, culture, social structure and integrity. This obviously makes him a National Hero of this pristine Brahmaputra valley.

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