



Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and Role of Satra and Namghar in Assam : A Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In the 15th century AD the social fabric of India was torn by all round degradation and cultural distortion and corruption permeated all section of the society, right from the ruling class to the priestly class. Various malpractices were committed in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure. There were people who loosely adhered to Vaishnavism or Saivism and there were others who practiced Saktism bordering on extreme Tantricism. The followers of these cults indulged in evil practices like animal and human sacrifices, magical rites, spells and the like. The poor and downtrodden people became victims of these ghastly practices. It was at this juncture, that the great spiritual leader, social reformer, playwright and composer- Srimanta Sankaradeva appeared on the social scene of Assam. He was a multi-faceted genius who gave a direction to the chaotic Assamese society by initiating a fresh approach to the existing Vaishnava religion that gave rise to a set of new values and aided in social synthesis. Vaishnavism has been constantly playing a significant role in the process of assimilating diverse elements- indigenous and non-indigenous into the Assamese culture. The movement evolved new institutions of Satra and Namghar which began to serve not only as the instrument spreading the faith, but also helped to sustain and to stabilize Vaishnavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social and cultural life. With its dynamic philosophy of inclusiveness Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism has given birth to a new Cultural Nationalism focused on a national identity shaped by cultural traditions and language, not on the concept of common ancestry or race. The Cultural Nationalism was brought forward to the indigenous people with the help of Satras and Namghar which has a major role to play in the preservation and development of the indigenous culture of the region.

Keywords : (Neo-Vaishnavism, Cultural Nationalism, Assamese, Satra, Namghar,)

I. INTRODUCTION

Assam is the home of different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures and speaking different languages and dialects. The population of Assam is a broad racial intermixture of Mongolian, Indo-Burmese, Indo-Iranian and Aryan origin. At a time, they got themselves integrated as a population and have given birth to the greater Assamese nation. The amalgamated Assamese identity was initiated by the Great Vaishnava Saint Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva with his Neo-Vaishnavite Movement. Assam Vaishnavism has been constantly playing a significant role in the process of assimilating diverse elements- indigenous and non-indigenous into the Assamese culture. The movement evolved new institutions of Satra and Namghar which began to serve not only as the instrument spreading the faith, but also helped to sustain and to stabilize Vaishnavism by making it a part and parcel of Assamese social and cultural life. With its dynamic philosophy of inclusiveness Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism has given birth to a new Cultural Nationalism focused on a national identity shaped by cultural traditions and language, not on the concept of common ancestry or race. The Cultural Nationalism was brought forward to the indigenous people with the help of Satras and Namghar which has a major role to play in the preservation and development of the indigenous culture of the region. [1]

II. METHODOLOGY

The study involves the qualitative and analytical method of research on the basis of both primary and secondary sources which contains the official records, proceedings, related books and journals, reprint of published papers, soft copies included web pages, pdf files (e-reprints) downloaded from the websites. The study will be based mainly on the primary sources, while secondary sources will be consulted wherever and whenever it is found necessary.

III. A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF NEO-VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

"Cultural Nationalism" is a form of nationalism in which the nation is defined by a shared culture. It is an intermediate position between ethnic nationalism on one hand and liberal nationalism on the other. Cultural nationalism will thus focus on a national identity shaped by cultural traditions and by language, but not on the concepts of common ancestry or race. If one can define the concept of "cultural nationalism" as the above, then the teachings of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva can rightly be described as an intergrationalist philosophy. As the doyen of cultural Renaissance, harbinger of Bhakti Movement and a strong proponent of Vaishnavism, Srimanta Sankaradeva took on the orthodox elements of the society. He had an inclusive and integrationalist approach whereby, he inculcated that one single thread of cultural unity i.e. Vaishnavism unites the whole Assam with the rest of India. [2]

In the 15th century AD the social fabric of India was torn by all round degradation and cultural distortion and corruption permeated all section of the society, right from the ruling class to the priestly class. Various malpractices were committed in the name of religion, which vitiated the social structure. There were people who loosely adhered to Vaishnavism or Saivism and there were others who practiced Saktism bordering on extreme Tantricism. The followers of these cults indulged in evil practices like animal and human sacrifices, magical rites, spells and the like. The poor and downtrodden people became victims of these ghastly practices. It was at this juncture, that the great spiritual leader, social reformer, playwright and composer- Srimanta Sankaradeva appeared on the social scene of Assam. He was a multi-faceted genius who gave a direction to the chaotic Assamese society by initiating a fresh approach to the existing Vaishnava religion that gave rise to a set of new values and aided in social synthesis. The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva in Assam

in latter period of the 15th Century ushered an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form, in literature as well as in the vocal and visual arts. The uniqueness of the movement lay in the fact that unlike other contemporary cults in the rest of India, Srimanta Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism rested not on a discursive reasoning and abstract thinking but its emphasis was more on ethnic integration, social reforms and spiritual upliftments through an innovative mode of religious conduct based on indigenous elements of the region, at a time when the society in Assam was in a turmoil fragmented and faction-ridden as it was. It was revolutionary in the sense that Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam meant not only a religious faith but a way of life. It encompassed their social, cultural and religious spheres even as it brought about a change in the very outlook of life and the world. Neo-Vaishnavism stands out among the different Bhakti-cults of India in terms of its unique and innovative character, which found expression in the move to create an egalitarian civil society based on the shared values of fraternity, equity, humanism and democracy. This new creed of fact started by Srimanta Sankaradeva is officially known as Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma. Sankaradeva preached devotion to a single God, Lord Krishna or Vishnu. [3]

III.1 Srimanta Sankaradeva's philosophy of Neo-Vaishnavism

In his magnum opus *Kritan Ghosa*, Srimanta Sankaradeva stated all living beings as the creation of one God:

"Kukura srigala gardhabaru atma Ram janiya sabako pari kariba pranam"

And no distinction should be made on the basis of caste regarding the prayer of God:

Kirata Kachari Khasi Garo Miri

Yavana Kanka Goala

Asama maluka rajaka turuka

Kuvacha melechcha chandala

Ano jati nara Krishna sevakara

Sangata pavitra haya

Sankaradeva visualized an equal society, where members from all sections of life irrespective of caste, tribe and community will be able to sit together for the prayer of God and dine together. This great and reformist idea of the saint truly reflects itself when proselytized members from Naga, Mishing, Garo and many other tribal communities of the valley to form the embryo of an equal society. [4]

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

IV.1 Role of Satra in the development of Assamese Culture

The hallmark of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam is the evolution of two distinctively unique institutions, viz., The SATRA and the NAMGHAR, both of which began to serve not only as the instrument spreading faith but also intimately associated with the social as well as the cultural life of the Assamese society. The Satras of Assam are the most distinguished and influential socio-cultural institution of the state. Satras propagated Neo-Vaishnavite Movement and can be traced to the time when the movement initiated by Sankaradeva was still in its nascent stage. Today the Satras are the fountainheads of Assamese culture and heritage. The cultural history of Assam in respect of fine arts and craft, of education and learning and of literature and heritage since the beginning of the 16th century till the advent of the British developed centering around the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement which in turn found expressions through the institution of Satra. For centuries, certain Satras have preserved the cultural traditions of the movement initiated by Sankaradeva in their pristine purity. They have relentlessly encouraged the arts and craft, like dance, drama, music, book-illustration and the making of decorative objects for the beautification of the Satra interiors- the Satriya Architecture. [5]

The Satras over centuries has become intimately connected with the Assamese life and culture paving way From Majuli to Koch Behar, the Satra dominates the social landscape of Assam and the entire state is integrated one religious whole by this network of Satras. Today, the number of Satras in Assam is well over 500 with numerous Vaishnava householders affiliated to one or the other Satra. The preservation of the Satras is a matter of great importance, more so in the light of the fact that they contain manuscripts, artifacts and antiques of immense historical value as well. [6]

IV.2 Role of Namghar in the genesis of Assamese Identity

Namghar-Satra network provided a well-organized and yet decentralized religious structure that is a unique feature of Vaishnavism of Assam. In 1503 A.D., Sankaradeva constructed the 1st Namghar with the help of the initial followers. He composed the prayers himself. Recitations from the Bhagavata and religious discussions were held in this Namghar. Sankaradeva was conversant with the raga-based music and composed his devotional songs- the Borgeets based on ragas. He popularized his cult with the help of a pantomime where he developed a genre of philosophy, art and music in the form of Borgeets, Anikya Nats or Baonas. The Namghar served as the ideal platform to showcase these art forms and attract the common mass to identify with the philosophy of the Neo- Vaishnavism. The Namghar signifies two principles- Equality of mankind and Recognition of the worth and dignity of all things alive.

The existence of the Namghar is noticed in almost all Assamese villages so much so that the identity of village folks is closely tied to the Namghar they attend. In fact, the Namghar came to serve as a forum of not only religious but socio-cultural activities of the community. For the last five hundred years the Namghar has been serving as the village public hall with the multifaceted role of a village prayer hall, a cultural centre, a village court and a village parliament, thereby providing a common forum for the villagers to assemble in an atmosphere of goodwill and cooperation. The ideals of Sankaradeva of an equal society, where members from all sections of life irrespective of caste, creed, tribe and community will be able to sit together for the prayer of God and dine together was fulfilled by the evolution of the Namghar.

IV.3 Namghar as a community prayer hall

The name itself signifies its role of a prayer hall for the word 'Naam' means prayer and 'Ghar' means house. So the Namghar is also known as the "House of Prayer". The Namghar has been designed in such a way that people from all spheres of life can enter and take part in the congregational prayers and attain salvation by taking refuge in God (Deva). The Namghar is constructed without any walls and sometimes with only half walls so as to symbolize the ideals of equality of all mankind irrespective of caste, creed, tribe, religion or language. The Naam Prasangas (congregational prayers) are according to the Eka-Sarana traditions. The 'Naams' are led by a leader called the 'Naam Loguwa', who sits at the end of the central region facing the sanctum sanctorum. The west end of the Namghar often leads to an independent room – the Manikut which houses Singhasana, a wooden throne. A sacred book by either Srimanta Sankaradeva or his disciple Mahapurush Madhavadeva is kept on the throne. An Akhyoy Banti (bell metal lamp) is kept in front of the shrine.

IV.4 Namghar as a Centre for Preservation of Indigenous Culture

Srimanta Sankaradeva composed Bhaonas (a theatre form centering on the theme from the Bhagavata-Purana and the Ramayana) where people from all walks of life can take part in the enactment of the Bhaonas in the Namghar. No discrimination on the basis of caste, class or religion is made while distributing the roles in the Bhaonas held in the Namghar. The village folks contribute in cash or kind according to

their capacity to make the Bhaona a success. The staging of the Bhaonas in the village Namghar brings all the village folks under a common cultural umbrella.

IV.5 Namghar as a Proto-type Parliament

The foundation of Local Self Government was laid down in the 15th Century by the Great Saint Srimanta Sankaradeva. The eminent feature of the Namghar is that it recognizes the importance of the collective wisdom and social progress through participation of all for reconstruction and stability of the villagers. Srimanta Sankaradeva conceived the idea of community development and Panchayati Raj much before the concept was brought by the British Raj. A general body consisting of the eldest members of each household of the village is formed and is known as the Raij. The Raij takes decisions on various issues of their community life, be it reconstruction of the Namghar on the establishment of educational institutes. The Namghar thereby provides an effective forum of decentralized planning and decision-making. By facilitating the involvement of the whole village in the decision-making process for the determination of social goods and allocation of resources to achieve them, the Namghar is ensuring the development of the people, by the people and for the people.

IV.6 Namghar as a Village Court

The Raij tries out cases of moral or social delinquency. The parties in dispute appoint their own Raij –Medhi or the Barmedhi from their own Satras to try out their cases. Punishments according to the nature of the offence are meted out and the rulings are binding to both the accuser and the accused. There are certain limitations also regarding the nature of the cases tried as such criminal cases are kept out of the jurisdiction of the Namghar and minor cases of moral and civil in nature are tried.

IV.7 Namghar as a Community granary & a place of shelter during natural calamities

It serves the purposes of community belongingness with having a community granary wherein the villagers contribute a portion of their production for community use. During flood and other natural calamities also the Namghar provides a place of shelter to all the people of the village. [7]

V. CONCLUSION

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that with its dynamic philosophy of inclusiveness Sankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavism has given birth to a new Cultural Nationalism focused on a national identity shaped by cultural traditions and language, not on the concept of common ancestry or race. The Cultural Nationalism was brought forward to the indigenous people with the help of Satras and Namghar which has a major role to play in the preservation and development of the indigenous culture of the region. In the genesis of the Assamese Identity, the Namghar is one of the major pole bearers, playing the multi-faceted role of Cultural Centre, Proto-type Panchayat, and Forum for Decentralized Planning and Decision-making.

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