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Sankardeva And His Post Vaishnavism

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Abstract:

The Bhakti Movement popularly called in Assam as Vaishnavite Movement was launched by Sankardeva (1449-1568AD) and his disciple Madhavdeva (1489-1596AD) in the 16th century. They gave Assam Vaishnavism a new interpretation and its distinctive character. The movement headed by Sankardeva was not only a religious reform movement, but also a great socio-cultural revolution of Assam. After passing away of Sankardeva in 1568AD, four panth came to Assam Vaishnavism and subsequently it got divided in to four main panth which is known as Sanghati. This paper has been attempted to study the history of the Vaishnavism in the post- Sankardeva period. In the conclusion of the paper it is revealed that it was the ideological differences for which Vaishnavism of Assam got divided. In spite of this division, the Sanghatas played very pivotal role in spreading and stabilizing the Vaisnavite Movement in Assam. The panth established a network of Satras throughout the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and practically converted more than half of its population to Vaishnavism.

Keywords: Bhakti Movement, Neo-Vaishnavite Movement, samhati or sanghati, Sectarian division, Satras

INTRODUCTION:

The Bhakti Movement popularly called in Assam as Neo- Vaishnavite Movement was launched by Sankardeva (1449-1568AD) and his disciple Madhavdeva (1489-1596AD) in the 16th century. They gave Assam Vaishnavism a new interpretation and its distinctive character. The movement headed by Sankardeva was not only a religious reform movement, but also a great socio-cultural revolutionary. Sankardeva introduced a creed, adhering to the main principles of 'Bhakti' which could revolutionise the entire face of the life of the people and lead to the formation of a broader civil society. It made an attempt to unite in ancient languages of sanskritise that diverse castes and tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley which had succeeded to a large extent in forming a socio- culture to identified later as culture of Assamese. Immediately after passing away of Sankardeva in 1568AD, a great division came to Vaishnavism in Assamese culture and subsequently it got

divided in to four main panth or sub-sects popularly known as Sanghati. This research paper has attempted to identify the history of the Vaishnavism in the post- Sankardeva period.

Methodology: The method of this research paper is analytical and historical studies. For the purpose of my study the major sources the of information are gathered from the Assamese Chronicles(Buranjis) and biographical works of the Vaishnava saints of medieval Assam (charit puthi). Secondary sources in the study collected form of articles which is published by different authors in different periodicals, magazines, souvenir etc. and several books has also consulted to compiling the primary sources. To find out the real picture of the post- Sankardeva Vaishnavite movement sources are not available which is difficult to compiling the final one.

Vaishnavism in the post –Sankardeva period:

The history of the Vaishnavism in the post –Sankardeva period is remarkable not only for the expansion of the faith in different parts of Assam, particularly in Upper Assam but also for the panth within the Assamese Society. Vaishnavism has been significant changes in the post-Sankardeva period due to internal cause's and ideological thinkers between the disciples of Sankardeva. Sankardeva could not achieve success in propagating the new faith in entire Assam due to the illness where he left Koch kingdom. Disciples of Sankardeva Madhavdeva also chiefly concentrated his propagation to lower Assam by establishing new Satra at Barpeta. Similarly some respected distinguished Vaishnava saints, who received initial inspiration from Sankardeva, exercised their power to influence the people of Assamese Society. These saint runs through the entire Assam, extolling the merits of Bhakti and giving discourses to the people on ethics, morals and righteous living and their own saintly life inspired the people and their teachings and his discourses illuminated them. After the death of Sankardeva , his Vaishnavism order got divided in to four main panths called Sanghatis. They were Brahma Sanghati, Kala Sanghati, Purusha Sanghati and Nika or Nistha or Nitya Sanghati. Thus in spite of its strong and egalitarian foundation, Vaishnism of Sankardeva sect failed to continue its strength and unity, due to its socio-cultural and socio-political ideology.

The term Sanghati was a employed in the sense of groups of people of Assam Vaishnavism group. In this paper We find the used of the word only in the post- Sankarite Vaishnava literature. It was probably derived from the word 'Sanghattana' which means joining, unification. It is sometimes compared to that of the Budhist 'Sangha' but its relation to Sanghati was not appear to be very close. The word was used particularly by the later group of biographers with various forms like Sanghati. Subsequently, the term Sanghati gained its momentum from the time of Madhavdeva's demise. The other group of Damodardeva, another senior follower of Sankardeva, and a contemporary of Madhavdeva, came in to existence in times of Madhavdeva. Damodardeva's ambition to the headship or charge of Guru of the order after the death of Sankardeva was the driving force that led to organize and propagate a definite schism known as Damodariya. In the time of early biographies, this group was never termed as Sanghati and then find the word sangpradaya or simply sangprada instead of Samhati. Dvarikanath Dvij, has tried to explain the evolution of Sanghatis in a fantastic or mythological way. He has mentioned only three Sanghatis, viz., Brahma, Kala and Purusha. Sanghati. The evolution of the Nika Samhati, however, has been narrated by him separately.

Background of the study: Sankardeva did not nominate any one among his disciples to succeed him to the headship of his order till the close of his life when he nominated his dearest disciple Madhavdeva to the seat of the headship. But that too was almost in private, not even known or intimated to his eldest son Ramananda who was with his father during the last days of the saint. All the biographical works maintain that both Madhavdeva and Damodardeva came into clash immediately after the death of Sankardeva who died at Koch Behar in the year 1568. Declining to accept the authority of Madhavdeva as the head of the order of Vaishnism, Damodardeva established separate Satra, initiated disciples, and became it's a Acharya i.e. the Adhikar and

sheltered refuges from the Satra of Madhavdeva. It is further stated that in a face-to-face debate between the two stalwarts, Damodardeva not only rejected the authority of Madhavdeva to head of the order, he also asserted that he had no obligation even to Sankardeva as he was not established by him as the head of the any panth.

Brahma Samhati— Damodardeva's ambition to get the leadership of the order after the demise of Sankardeva led to the first division of the Vaishnava panth. The death of Sankardeva brought in its trail the question of succession to the headship of the order. Sankardeva had nominated Madhavdeva as the spiritual successor, instead of nominating his sons. It is seen that criterion of the nomination was neither high birth nor relationship, but the spiritual accomplishment, scholarship, organizing ability or personality of the nominee. Madhavdeva who used to move with Sankardeva like a shadow, and therefore, was intimately known to the Guru than any of his disciples. It is narrated in the biographies of Sankardeva that when his son Ramananda approached his death- bed seeking spiritual instruction, the saint is said to have directed his son to approach Madhavdeva on whom all his spiritual strength and energy devolved. But immediately after he had taken the charge of Guruship, a section of the Vaishnavas under Damodardeva seceded from the order disowning Madhavdeva's leadership. That was the beginning of the process of separate panth. Damodardeva even did not go to attend the Saraddha ceremony of Sankardeva, which was held at Patbausi under the leadership of Madhavdeva. Madhavdeva, accused him of harboring excommunicated people, and Damodardeva denied any obligation on his part in this regard, and at the heat of the moment even denied the authority of Sankardeva's Bhakti-Ratnakar. This was too much not bearable for Madhavdeva, and he declared a saperat panth between himself and damodardeva.

Damodardeva founded a new panth of Vaishnavism which came to be known after his own name i.e. Damodariya. Damodardeva severed all connection with Madhavdeva and introduced some extra mantra, rituals, the outward show of which attracted many Brahmins as well as a large section of the common people to follower. He was introduced worship of minor gods and observances of Vedic and Brahmanical rituals rites.

Damodardeva's act of seceding away from the main body has been described by almost all the biographers of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva. Harideva, another Brahmin disciple of Sankardeva is also said to have started a new schism afterwards. The followers of Damodardeva and Harideva claimed independence and later on these two groups are connected as falling under the Brahma Samhati.

The Brahma Samhati comprising two sub sections (Damodari and Haridevi) and consisting of the most affluent Satras of Assam is naturally the most influential of the Sanghatis. Most of the Satras affiliated to this sanghati are headed by Brahmins, though non- Brahmin heads are not altogether negligible. Brahmanical rites and rituals are observed in this Sanghati side by side with devotional practices. Some of the prominent Satras of this Sanghati are said to be a administered even tantric diksha. Some Satras of this order admitted diksha after initiation or ordination (Sarana). It is to noted that in Sankardeva's faith, there is no diksha, and instead of that the process of ordination is called Bhajana, not diksha.

The followers of this section of group have tried to establish a link between this sanghati and the Vaishnavism of Bengal saying that Damodardeva was initiated by Chaitanya himself. But religious teachings and practices by Damodardeva widely differ from those of Chaitanya. Moreover, the early biographers of Damodardeva , viz. Ramaraya and Nilakantha have indirectly acknowledged the indebtedness of Damodardeva to Sankardeva. The Brahma samhati lays special emphasis on Deva (God) than the other three fundamental elements (vastu), viz. Guru, Nama and Bhakta. So they encourage the necessity of worshipping the idol of Vishnu the stone symbol of Vishnu Narayana, in their Satras. In the later period, this sub sections of people preceded one step further when the worship of other god and goddess are also tolerated.

Other three Sanghatis-

Madhavdeva outlived Sankardeva by twenty eight years and during this period he carried on the proselytizing activities as well as the cultural traditions initiated by his Guru. But immediately after the death of Madhavdeva there grew three more subsects within the main body of the order. It is known from the different Vaishnava sources that Madhavdeva did not nominate anybody to succeed him as the supreme religious head. At the same time, there was none among the principal disciples who could command an unflinching allegiance from all sections of devotees. Damodardeva had already seceded during the life time of Madhavdeva. Narayandas Thakur Ata, the friend and colleague of Madhavdeva, was then too old to shoulder the responsibility of keeping together the different sections of the devotees. Naturally, the disciples found themselves divided in to three sections under the leadership of Gopal Ata alias Bhawanipuria Gopal Ata, Purushottam Thakur and Mathuradas Burha Ata respectively.

Kala Sanghati- The Kala sanghati owes for its origin to Gopal Ata (1541-1611 AD) of Bhawanipur. The followers of this sanghati claim that the founder of this panth was nominated by Madhavdeva as his successor. Gopal Ata was one of twelve apostles (Dharmacharyas) nominated by Madhavdeva. Gopal Ata established a Satra at Kaljhar, a place situated at a few miles distance from Bhawanipur where he died in 1611 AD at the age of seventy.

Gopal Ata nominated twelve Acharyas to preached the message of the Bhakti in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. The notable branches of the Kala sanghati which greatly contributed to the development of the sub section are Dihing, Mayamara, Gajala and Ahataguri. The Mayamara or Moamariya branch of Satras founded by Aniruddhadeva and the Dihingiya branch of Satras founded by Yadumanideva deserve special consideration for their historical importance.

The main feature of the Kala sanghati is that it keeps absolute faith in the Guru. To the followers of this sub section, the Guru is God in human form. It is stated that Gopaldeva brought to the forefront the doctrine of Guruvada. That the followers of this sub-section did not bow their heads to anyone but their Gurus are the liberal view in religious matters. The next important fact is that the softening of the rigour of caste distinction where the practice of inter-dining and inter- marriage were not prevalent, yet no distinction was made between one disciple and another on grounds of caste. In this Sanghati, Aniruddhadeva, a Kayastha by caste, used to cook food and serve meal to all devotees who resided within the Satra compound of Gopal Ata. The majority of the Mataks are Ahoms, Chutiyas and (Kaivatta) Doms, but there are certain members of the Kalitas, Keots and Koches amongst them. All these castes except the Kaivatta (Doms) inter- marry". It is a fact that inter-marriage or inter- dining is not prevalent in any of the Vaishnavite sections. But it is also a fact that the Kala sanghati is more liberal in its attitude towards these social problems. Another important feature of this sanghati is that the influence of Brahmanical rituals has been reduced to a negligible position. Even the Brahmins affiliated to this sub-section did not perform the Vedic sandhya or mutter the gayatri mantra. But the Brahmin disciples of this sanghati vehemently denied it. The upper class Hindus of this sanghati are seen to observe the vedic rites even today also. Brahmanical rituals have not been uniformly cast off by all sections of its disciples, but the sphere of their influence has been limited to unavoidable rites like those of marriage and death.

The other characteristics feature of this sanghati is primarily responsible for bringing to the fold of Vaishnavism the tribals and socially backward communities and thus giving them an opportunity to satisfy their spiritual urge. Here it is easy to follow devotional practices attracted many people to this group and therefore, the number of disciples of this sanghati increased by leaps and bounds. The Guru is considered to

be the image of God and therefore the religious heads of the Mayamara Satra have been designated as murti (image). Aniruddhadeva, the founder is called Adya –murti (the primal image).

Purusha Samhati- The Purusha Sanghati derived from the name of Purushottam Thakur, the eldest grandson of Sankardeva. After the death of Madhavdeva, Purushottam, the eldest grandson of Sankardeva claimed the apostolic headseat on the ground that he was the real successor of Sankardeva. Thereafter, he started to propagate the faith on a separate line, which, in course of time, came to be known as Purusha sanghati. Purushottam Thakur regarded Sankardeva as the only guru of the faith and give more importance to nama element of the four fundamental things (vastu). Thus name of the sanghati owes its origin to Purushottam Thakur. The orthodox circle of this group explains that the term Purusha is derived from Purusha Narayana , who is supposed to be its first initiator. Others holds that the name is derived from Mahapurusha , the honorific epithet applied to Sankardeva . In this panth Sankardeva is a initiator, because during the time of Sankardeva the sanghati division of Assam Vaishnavism did not come in to existence. Purushottam and Chaturbhuja, the grandsons of Sankardeva are considered as founders of this sanghati.

According to the Vaishnavite tradition; the Purusha samhati lays special emphasis on Nama which is one of the four fundamental elements in the practice of devotion. Chanting and singing in praise of God and meditating on his various names and forms are considered acts of special merit according to this panth. This is why the Satras of this sub-section developed various ways and modes of singing or chanting congregational prayers, such as pal-nama (chanting prayers in succession throughout night), uthanama (chanting of prayers with rhythmic movements in standing posture) etc. The followers of this sub-section observe Brahmanical rites and in most of the Satras affiliated to this sub-section, images of Vishnu are found. Another important feature is that though this group gives much emphasis on Sankardeva as the only guru and lays special importance on nam-kirtana but Madhavdeva also occupies the same exalted place as that of Sankardeva. Both of them are considered equal; as the popular term ‘dujana guru’(the two gurus) is generally used to mean them.

Nika Samhati- The Nika sanghati has come in to existence much later than the other three samhatiss. The very name Nika (pure, clean) points to the conclusion that it originated immediately after the formation of other three sub-sectionss. The Nika Sanghati possibly derives its name from the fact that its adherents pay great attention to rules of outward cleanliness and other formalities. It is also known as Nitya Samhati. The necessity of organizing a cleaner sect arose when other sub sectionss appeared to have gone somewhat astray from the original path chalked out by the first two Gurus. Therefore, Padma Ata who was the youngest of Madhavdeva’s chief disciples and who was also saddled with the responsibility of the religious headship in eastern Assam thought it necessary to evolve a proper code of conducts for the Vaishnavas. So, some modern writers like to trace the origin of this Sanghati to Padma Ata only. However, Padma Ata got immediate response from Mathuradasa of the Barpeta Satra who was also no less anxious to purify the sect by laying stringent rules and conduct of life. They were also helped by Keshav Charan Ata , a close companion of Padma Ata throughout the latter’s religious career. These three , viz, Padma Ata , Mathura Ata and Keshav Ata are the considered the trio of the Nika Sanghati . The founders of this sect evolved a set of conducts and rules for their followers which were meant to purify Vaishnavas in body and mind. For its exclusive attention to cleanliness of mind and body, the sub-section came to be known as Nika or nikka i.e., pure. The followers of this sub-sect are required to observe strict discipline in respect of food, dress and manners and in all religious matters. They never take food prepared by others, never take even a betel-nut without taking bath and never put on a piece of cloth that has not been washed or dipped in water daily. Even fuel is sprinkled with water before it is actually put in to fire. These conducts of everyday life are uniformly followed in all Satras affiliated to the Nika Samhati. In this Sanghati there is the negative attitude towards the practice of image worship. The worship of the scripture is a marked feature of this Sanghati though the worshipping a scripture is also present in the

Purusha and the Kala Samhatis, it is more prominent in the Nika Sanghati. Principal Satras of the Nika Sanghati-

Conclusion:

Thus, according to the scholar, Vaishnavism in Assam got divided in to four sub-sections/panth mainly due to the question over the headship of the apostolic headseat. The sub-sections founded by the above apostles differed in outward religious observances, but the fundamental teachings did not differ very much. But we can say that it was the ideological differences for which Vaishnavism of Assam got divided. In spite of this division, the Sanghatis played very important role in spreading and stabilizing the Vaisnavite Movement in Assam. The sub-sections created a network of Satras throughout the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and practically converted more than half of its population to Vaishnavism.

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