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NEO Vaishnavism in Assam: Contributions of Sri Damodardev

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Abstract

The Neo Vaishnavism movement in Assam was led by four prominent leaders-Sankardev, Madhavdev, Haridev and Damodar Dev. However, there are two different waves of the movement in Assam. Firstly, 'Ek Sharan naam dharma' propagated by Sankardev and Madhavdev. Secondly, 'Sanatan Vaishnav dharma' by Haridev and Damodar Dev. The 'Sanatan Vaishnav dharma' initiated by Damodardev differs from the Ek sharan Dharma introduced by Sankardev, although Damodardev was a disciple of Polymath Sankardev. Damodardev was a religious leader, a polymath, and a social reformer. This article is an attempt to study his significant contribution in the Assamese society of 14-15th century. His Neo Vaishnavism was a crucial phenomenon in this aspect through which he reformed the Assamese society from its prevailing evils. In this article, an attempt will also be made to discuss the ways in which he propagated Neo Vaishnavism in Assam. We will also delve into the ways his movement offered an alternative and simple form of worshipping Lord Krishna, so that people from all sections of the society could relate to it. Further we will look into how it contributed towards making people learn the Assamese art and culture. All these aspects will be studied using various secondary sources.

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Introduction

Neo Vaishnavism first began as a movement in South India, where it was introduced by the Alvar saints, under the leadership of Ramanacharya ^[1]. He propagated Vaishnavism among the masses as a simple way of worshipping God. This was the period, when Hinduism in entire India was struggling with its internal challenges: its rigid ritualistic form of worship and the caste hierarch. Hence, Vaishnavism emerged as a reform movement in the society to rid Hinduism of its present lacunas, making it easier for common people to worship God. Ramanacharya's Vaishnavism sought to bring this reform in three ways: Gyanmayi Bhakti, Pancharatrar Karmamay Bhakti and the Premamay Bhakti mentioned in Vishnu Purana and Harivansha.

Rest of India also didn't stay away from the impacts of Vaisnavism. The waves of Neo Vaishnavism spread across India under the leadership of different saints. For example, Ramananda carried it to North India from South India in 1415 ^[2], Kabir in Saptadeep and Navkhanda ^[3], Vallabhcharjya in Mathura, Vrindavan and Gujrat in sixteen century ^[4] and Chaitanya Dev in Bengal.

Parallally, in the context of Assam, Srimanta Sankardev, followed by Madhavdev, Damodardev and Haridev, were the leaders who propagated Vaishnavism. They are reminisced by people even now for their remarkable contributions.

Objective

- The primary aim of this paper is to bring into light about Damodar Dev, the Assamese polymath, who propagated Neo Vaishnavism in Assam.
- Further an attempt will be made to discuss about his contributions towards the Assamese community.

Methodology

Secondary sources are used for data collection. The data are qualitative and are presented in a descriptive manner.

Discussion

It is noteworthy that the Neo Vaishnavism dharma (religion) in Assam got bifurcated into-one, mahapurushiya; two, Harideviya and Damodariya. The mahapurushiya dharma was introduced by Srimanta Sankardev and was later followed by

his pupil Madhavdev. It is also known as 'Eksharan naam dharma'. On the other hand, Harideviya and Damodariya dharma, also called 'Sanatan Vaishnav Dharma' has been introduced by Haridev and Damodar Dev.

Polymath Damodardev was born in 1488 in Nalasa village of Bardowa, Assam. His parents were Sadananda and Sushila Devi. According to different Charitas, Damodardev belonged to one of the seven Brahmin families that came to Assam during the reign of the King Durlabh Narayan^[5]. Initially, they lived in Hajo (Assam) and later with upgradation in royal status, shifted to Bardowa (Assam). Further, having faced the cruelties of Tantric Brahminism, Damodardev, like Sankardev, shifted to Patbaushi where he met Polymath Sankardev. The latter accepted him as a pupil and Damodardev after that worked for the promotion of Vaishnavism.

Under Sankardev's guidance, he started engaging in Bhagavat Charcha (Bhagavat discussions and dialogue) to earn knowledge related to the Shashtas. He further went to spiritual tours to know more about the subject. Parallely, Damodar Dev also started sowing seeds of Vaishnavism in Assam, later becoming one of the prominent propagators of the religion. He composed religious songs and wrote several religious books, with the assistance of his pupil, Baikuntha.

Damodardev, like Sankardev believed in worshipping Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu and a sign of true happiness who can be worshipped in idol form. He propagated the methods of worship, which are outside the Vedas and emphasized on 'Naam dharma'. In fact, all the four Vaishnavite saints of Assam believed "Naam-Kirtan" (religious recitation or narration) as the ideal way of worship.

However, as mentioned above Damodardev gave rise to a different wave of Vaishnavism from Sankardev's Eksharan Naam dharma. Different sources mention that by adding some new elements to the existing norms of Eksharan naam dharma and by relaxing few others, he formed the 'Veidic Sanatan Bhagvati Vaishnav Dharma'. He is adherent of the principle that there should be coherence between knowledge, Karma (duty) and bhakti (worship). In order to achieve this, he himself conducted as well as urged his followers to conduct sixteen rituals including Vandana (worship), Puja, Yagya (Yajna), Shraddha, marriage rituals and so on. He also voiced for caste demolition. These elements were completely absent in the Mahapurushiya dharma.

The Srimad Bhagavat Shastra is the pillar of the movement propagated by Damodardev. His religious ideologies revolved round the principles of devotion, knowledge, work ethics, naam dharma, Yagya (Yajna), dharma kavach as mentioned in the Bhagavat.

People from all sections of the society embraced this sect, king or the masses, Brahmin or non Brahmin, rich or poor and hence it attempted to establish egalitarianism. The polymath also worked to spread good humanitarian values among the people to create a stable, ordered and peaceful society. Initiatives were taken to eradicate social division, immorality, superstition. These included, religious propagation, offering sharan (one who surrenders in front of the lord), performing diksha (performing the initiation rites), establishing satras (religious centres) and naam ghar (prayer house). His disciples divided the task of spreading his ideas across all part of Assam, from east to west and from north to south. His favorite disciple, Bhattadev, was appointed to propagate them in middle Assam.

Damodardev was not only a religious leader but also a polymath, social reformer. Many satras were established in

different parts of Assam under him, including the Patbaushi satra, which is one of the prominent satras of Assam. The satras established under him are called Damodariya Satras. A total of 258 satras were established under him, although now only 240 managed to stand the test of time^[6]. The word satra literally means an orphanage and a yajna which has been going on for a long time. It is composed of Naam (Naam Kirtan), Dev (Lord Krishna), Guru (teacher) and Bhakt (devotee). These satras were not only religious institutions where cultural and religious activities took place but also talks on economic conditions of the society held. He aimed at building an economically stable society through these discussions at the satras. Moreover, the satras are also institutions of disseminating the skills of music, arts, like making facial masks that are used in dramas, making things with bamboo etc, among the people.

Another point where the dharma propagated by Damodardev differs from the one of Sankardev is that, in the former, there exists idol worship, while the latter strictly prohibited it. All the satras established in Assam under Damodardev have got idols of lord Vishnu established and accordingly there exists methods of worshipping the deity in each of them. He himself worshiped the 'Salagram' (a stone worshipped as a form of Lord Vishnu). However, the saint was strictly against sacrificial form of worship.

Damodardev also showed immense respect towards women and was empathetic towards them. After losing his wife, he did not marry for the second time, as was suggested by many sources of his time. According to him if a widow cannot remarry, then a man should also not marry after the demise of his wife^[7].

He also strongly believed in merit and considers that only the deserving one should get the opportunities. Therefore, he, instead of choosing his own nephew, appointed Bhattadev (his student) as the operator of Patbaushi satra. He further encouraged collective working and hence appointed several of his students across different parts of Assam to propagate the religion. In addition to this, he ensured that the disciples under him are well versed in the Shastras. In order to achieve this, he also built a library in the Baikuntha Satra, which consisted of numerous books related to Vaishnavism. The librarian for the same was Parbananda (his student) and another of his disciples, Balram, was given the responsibility to chant and read these books in front of the devotees.

Conclusion

The rise of different Gurus and their roles have been significant in the Indian civilization. The history says that whenever any society turned chaotic, with a rise in immorality; injustice, there was seen the growth of a polymath or any other religious gurus who worked for the society, towards uplifting it again, to get back its stable form again.

The word Guru includes, 'Gu' means darkness or lack of knowledge and 'Ru' means light and knowledge. Therefore, Guru is the one who guides people to the path of knowledge and light, away from darkness. They show the society the right path and hence knowledge cannot be sought without them. Our parents are our first Guru, who have guided us since our birth and have made us human. The school teachers too are our Gurus who teach us, enhance our knowledge.

Damodardev was the Guru of Neo Vaishnavism in Assam, who played a crucial and inspiring role in establishing and developing the religion in Assam as a Guru.

He established numerous satras and initiated discussions on satriya culture, religion as well as economic issues. He accepted people from different communities as his disciples and enlighten them with the importance of lord. Thus, he created a socially integrated society. He worked for disciplining the society, stabilising it, and also urged people to educate themselves and learn art and culture. His advices towards the devotees, his students are a reflection of his charismatic personality, simplicity and his devotion towards god. Although he was from a Brahmin family, he always treated people from other castes equally.

To further propagate the ideologies of the 'Vedic Sanatan Bhagvati Vaishnav dharma' of Damodardev, 'Sodou Assam DevDamodar Sangh' was formed in 1977. This organization has been working for the propagation and preservation of this religion and the values associated with it. They work with an aim to establish the message of brotherhood among the people, so that an integrated society can be developed, only then the motive of the Guru will be met and the society will continue to seek his blessings.

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