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The Impact of Srimanta Sankaradeva Among the Muslims of Assam

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Abstract

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva is one of the towering personalities of Assamese culture, literature and social life who brought about renaissance in Assam in the medieval period. A versatile genius Srimanta Sankaradeva was the founder of the Neo Vaishnavite movement in Assam. He was a great innovator and social organiser who reorganised the Assamese society which was plagued by numerous social ills and superstitions. At the organizational level, he tried to bridge the gap between different castes and communities in society. This included all the ethnic communities including the Muslims. An ideal example Srimanta Sankaradeva liberal attitude is his Muslim disciple namely Chansai. At Srimanta Sankaradeva's initiative a number of Thanas and Namghars were established for preaching "Exa Sarana Nama Dharma" which gave opportunity of all the people in society to come together under one roof irrespective of caste, creed or religions belief. This secular thought enshrined in the teaching of Srimanta Sankaradeva has inspired the Muslim masses of Assam to express their respect towards great social reformer and saint of Assam by lighting candles in many Satras, Namghars in Assam. It symbolises the social unity and integrity among different religions in Assamese society. At same holy shrines in Assam where this religious influence is being seen till date, there the custom exists where both the Hindus and Muslims meet together for greater social welfare and good will among all members of both religious community. Srimanta Sankaradeva welcomed disciples from all sects of society including the indigenous tribes and Muslims into his fold and placed them all in equal footing. This Research Paper is an attempt to throw light on these significant aspects of the personality of Srimanta Sankaradeva.

Keywords: Sankaradeva, Hindu, Neo Vaishnavism, Islam, Assam, Religion, Muslim.

Introduction

In Assam, the Bhakti or Neo-Vaishnavite movement was launched by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciples Sri Sri Madhavadeva in the 16th century. During 12th-13th century to 16th century, Vaishnavism evolved all over India. The Vaishnavism spread and created mass awareness among the Indians. This revolution was concentrated in Neo-Vaishnavism and contemporary religious society were reformed with the ideology of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Srimanta Sankaradeva was a sole personality, who brought the renaissance of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. By the propagation of Srimanta Sankaradeva the Neo-Vaishnavism spread in Assam with a new horizon. This research paper has a humble effort to how Neo-Vaishnavism had influenced contemporary Muslim society of Assam.

Objectives

- To find the influence of Srimanta Sankaradeva on Muslim of Assam.
- To find out the communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims in Assam.
- To find out the Muslim disciples in the Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam.

Data Source and Methodology

Data Source

The study is based on secondary data like records of Government departments, Books, Journals, Periodicals, Souvenir, Internet.

Methods

To fulfill the objectives of the study description methods are used to interpret the result.

Islamic Disciples in Neo-Vaishnavism

Among the main 120 disciples Srimanta Sankaradeva, Chandsai was one of the prominent disciple. Chandsai was a follower of Islam. He worked as a royal tailor in Koch regime. He migrated from Rangpur to Kochbehar during the reign of Koch king Naranarayana. As to practice religious customs and tradition the new pattern of religious dress were essential; therefore Chandsai was sent to Patbaushi by Chilarai.

Sri Sri Madhavadeva was a main disciple of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva. Yavan Jaihari was one of the main disciple of Sri Sri Madhavadeva. Interestingly at first Yavan Jaihari was a follower of Islam. The third Muslim follower of Neo-Vaishnavism was Dheli Dorji. Sri Sri Madhavadeva was a disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Gopaldeva was a disciple of Sri Sri Madhavadeva and Aniruddha was a disciple of Gopaldeva. But Aniruddhadeva was a main Guru of Mayamara Thul. Deli Dorji was a main disciple of Aniruddhadeva. Though some Islamic followers become the disciples of liberal Neo-Vaishnavism preachers; but no evidence are available in the documents of the Satra, Namghar, Sashipat etc. But if not available evidence, then also during 1626 A.D. to 1891 A.D., there were some Satra grown up among the Muslim in upper Assam. As a proof, being a followers of Islam, there were many people who titled themselves as Deka, i.e. Akan Deka, Aual Deka etc. It can be assumed that from 1626 A.D. to 1891 A.D., many Muslims of Assam took "Sarana" (initiation) in Thanas, Satras, Namghars etc., which were formed on the ideology of "Eka Sarana Nama Dharma".

Moyez Fakir has been lighting candles and lanterns in Ghilajari Satra for forty years, located near Hawli in Barpeta district. Local Muslim people also donated two bighas of land for the Satra. Ismail Hossain participated in perform of "Rambijay" in Natun Kamalabari Satra. Some Islamic participants perform salat in Satra premises and later on, participated in Nam-Kirtan in the same Satra. In 1940 Amir Hussain took initiation with Pitambar Devagoshwami of Garmur Satra in Majuli. Amir Hussain's permanent home was on the premises of Garmur Satra. Garmur Satra along with Saru Garmur Satra are open to all religions and castes including Muslims. In 1995, Sahabuddin Ahmed took initiation with Kamalakanta Goswami in Kamalabari Satra. After devotee of Neo-Vaishnavism his name is as "Kamallasan Bhakat". Omor Ali took initiation with Sivaprasad Goshwami as disciple of Neo-Vaishnavism in Na-Mati Satra and keeping his names next as Jairam Atai. After taking devotee of Neo-Vaishnavism, he spent his life at Na-Mati Satra. There is also a Muslim man named Babul Khan who took Neo-Vaishnavite religion in the Sri Sri Ishwarhati Satra in Suwalkuchi. Apart from the Satras, many Namghars have to take initiation and perform Naam-Kirtan.

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva and Chandsai

Chandsai was the royal tailor of the Koch king Naranarayana. At first, he abused Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciples. Chilarai, brother of king Naranarayana and his wife Kamalapriya were disciples of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Therefore, Chilarai sent Chandsai to Srimanta Sankaradeva to sew the clothes for Srimanta Sankaradeva and his disciples for performing the dance and "Bhaona". By the order of king,

he needed to take the body measure of the saint for stitching the jacket of Srimanta Sankaradeva. When Chandsai arrived at the Bhela house, he saw a divine glow around him. Chandsai even saw that Srimanta Sankaradeva had four arms. Immediately, he changed his wrong impression on Srimanta Sankaradeva and went to Sri Sri Madhavadeva. Chandsai began to lamented that so long he had a wrong impression about the saint. He now understood that Srimanta Sankaradeva was an incarnation of God. Chandsai left his family and started living with Srimanta Sankaradeva thereafter. Thus Chandsai become a favourite and beloved devotee of Srimanta Sankaradeva along with Sri Sri Madhavadeva, Govinda Ata etc. Therefore, despite being a Muslim, Chandsai even defeated Brahmin scholar in scriptural discussion, looked after the Patbausi Satra, lighting candles and distributed offerings. Chandsai was also found as an extraordinarily intelligent scholar stated in the "Guru Charita", "Sriguru Charita" and "Katha Guru Charita".

Sri Sri Madhavadeva and Yavan Jaihari

The favorite and beloved disciple of Sri Sri Madhavadeva was Yavan Jaihari, though he was followers of Islam. The Islamic name of Yavan Jaihari was Jahur Ali, lived in near Baghbar and Hadirachauki in Mahghar. After hearing the divine power and solid personality of Sri Sri Madhavadeva from Narayana Das Thakurata, Jahur Ali first saw him in a dream and approach to him and initiated as disciple of Sri Sri Madhavadeva in Sundardia Satra. The Satradhikar of Barpeta Satra, Mathura Das Buraata taught him the Dharmasastra. Yavan Jaihari engaged as caretaker of Sundardia Satra, where he died at the age of 80 years. Later on, his descendants keeps relationship with Sundardia Satra and they donated offerings to the same.

The Sankari Tradition and Hindu-Muslim Relation

Srimanta Sankaradeva introduced liberal religion by eliminating racism in Hindu society. This idea found in Islamic Sufism. By the efforts of Srimanta Sankaradeva communal harmony arose between Hindu and Muslim of Assam and they lived close together during medieval period. Even their dress codes were also surprisingly similar. Srimanta Sankaradeva was a preacher and a social reformer. He preached a new message of human equality and devotion among all communities and irrespective to caste and race. His religion influenced to minimize the caste discrimination. Perhaps, that is why, despite being a Muslim, Chandsai became a devotee of Srimanta Sankaradeva.

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva and Azan Fakir

Azan Fakir (Shah Miran) strengthened the spread of Islam through Sufism in Assam. He learned the Assamese language and made contact with the cultural life of Assam. He became especially interested in the Neo-Vaishnavism. His Zikir and Zari have similarities with Bargeet, Ojapali. His Zikirs during this period include Sri Krishna, Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Gopaldeva, Mahanta, Auliya, Vakata etc. There is a Zikir of Azan Fakir, e.g.-

"Sankaradeva a riti	Madhavadeva a piriti
Gopaldeva a sarupar mani,	
Srikrishna re moni	kanthate pindhi loi
Brahmandat logai gol dhani."	

Thus many Muslims of Assam devoted on a new journey with the religion and culture of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva from the early twentieth century.

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva and Harmonious Heritage

Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva emphasized on spiritual and moral aspects along with cultural heritage. Therefore, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva is not only the religious Guru but also social and cultural Guru of Assam. There are many ethnic groups in Assam i.e Nagas, Bhutias, Garos, Karbis, Misings, Kaivartas, Brahmins, Kayastas, Koch-Rajbongsis, Kacharis and including Muslims converted to the religion of “Eka Sarana Naam Dharma” or Neo-Vaishnavism due to Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva’s vast cultural achievements and generosity of religious philosophy. Ananta Kandali of Brahmins, Purnananda of Kaivartas, Chilarai of Kochs, Damodar of Bhutiyas, Ramai of Kacharis, Narahari of Ahoms, Govinda of Garos and Chandsai of Muslims took initiation with Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva and helped to established “Eka Sarana Naam Dharma” or Neo-Vaishnavism as a universal religion.

There is no system of idol worship in the religion of Neo-Vaishnavism. In contrast, Neo-Vaishnavism is based on the philosophy of “Eka Deva Ek Seva Ek Bine Nai Keva”. Therefore, it is important to understand that the theology of Sankaradeva is exactly the same as the Islamic doctrine of “La Ilaha Illahlahu Muhammadur Rasulullah” that Allah is One, there is no second creator except Allah. In the “Bhakti-Pradeep”, Sankaradeva says as-

“Parar Dharmak Nihinghiba Kadasit,
Kariba Vutak Daya Sakarun Sitta.
Huiba Santa Sitta Sarvadharmat Batsal,
Ohi Bhagabhata Dharma Jana Mahabal.”

“Bargeet” and Ankiya Bhaona” of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva seems to emphasized the importance of coordination.

Conclusion

From the above discussion we may conclude that the Neo-Vaishnavism era, which was shined by the Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva, really a glorious events of Assam history. During that period in the society casteism and discrimination among the different caste and communities are normal phenomenon. The spiritual feelings bound the society with the feelings of Oneness. The momentum of Neo-Vaishnavism not only influenced in Assam, but also flourished all over India among the different religious followers. It is a matter of great pride for all Assamese to have such a religious, cultural and social leader born in Assam and enriched the harmonious heritage of national life. Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva, who propagated a doctrine of “Universal Social Brotherhood”, created conditions for harmonious living of people of diverse castes, communities and creeds. Even Islam was not looked upon as an alien element. Mir Jumla’s chronicler was surprised with the assimilation of the Muslims with the indigenous inhabitants. Hindus paid homage to the Muslim preachers and the Muslims were participated in the Nama-Kritanas. Thus, the Neo-Vaishnava hymns so influenced the Muslims that Azan Fakir composed his Zlikir in the same line. Hence, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva, may called as builder of modern Assamese society.

Glossary

Sarana-	Initiation
Mahapurusha-	Great Man
Bargeet-	Neo-Vaishnava devotional song, Composed by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva.
Guru-	religious leader or religious preacher.
Ojapali-	Right hand assistant, Ojapali focuses on the stories from the Epics and Puranas.
Bhaona-	A traditional form of entertainment, with Neo-Vaishnavite religious messages, prevalent in Assam, India.
Dorji-	Tailor.
Zikir-	Islamic prayer, to remember Allah, Composed by Azan Fakir.

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