

The Sixteenth Century Renaissance and Sankaradeva

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The fifteenth century A.D. witnessed the birth of new ideas leading to the rise of new religions, founded on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti, which at some places of India took the shape of a revolutionary character. In the easternmost part of the country this reforming movement was initiated by the great saint-poet **Sankaradeva** (1449-1568 A.D.). Because of its disregard of traditional religious rites, rituals, ceremonies and other formalities and its indifference to caste, creed or color divisions, the Bhakti Movement in general, was opposed by most of the Brahmins. The Vaishnava Bhakti movement also grew in other parts of the country, but it was Sankaradeva alone who gave it a distinct shape and character of its own. He, by his manifold activities, has succeeded in establishing the cult of Bhakti with a new interpretation suitably fitted to the people of the soil. As the fountain-head of the movement, Sankaradeva has left a deep impression on Assamese life, literature and culture.

In political and economic spheres, the position of that part of the country at that period was at very low ebb. Prior to, and even during the period of Sankaradeva, there was rise and fall of about half a dozen dynasties such as the Khens, Kochs, Kacharis, Chutiyas and the like. The predecessors of Sankaradeva founded small kingdoms known as Bhuyan Rajyas. After the fall of the old Hindu kingdom, there were many principalities with their potentates where frequent rifts occurred within themselves. The Ahoms came in the thirteenth century A. D. and established their kingdom in the easternmost part of the place.

The earlier name of the place during the period of epics and the *puranas* is referred to as Kamarupa and Pragjyotisa. The *Kalika-purana* gives the topographical features and describes the boundary of the place as being situated between the river Karatoya in the west and the Lalita-Kanta in the east. Similar accounts are available in the *Yogini-tantra* also. From these accounts it may be seen that Kamarupa or Pragjyotisa included roughly the present Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan, Rangpur and Cooch Behar. The capitals of Kamarupa and Pragjyotisa were shifted from place to place at different periods. According to the *Kalika-purana*, the original inhabitants of Kamarupa were Kiratas (*Siddhesi yogini pitha dharmah kairatajah matah*). But the present Assam's inhabitants are composed of diverse tribes and races, mostly Aryans and Mongoloids. The place being surrounded by hilly tracts and with many rivers, it was not possible even for the mighty Mughals to invade and conquer the territory even though they tried to do so as many as seventeen times at different periods of history.

The Ahoms established their empire in the eastern part and had many wars with the Kacharis and other powers whom they ultimately subjugated. The Ahoms tried to absorb all petty kings, rulers and their kingdoms into their fold. As they grew in power and extended their territory westwards the place also came to be known as Asam after the name of the ruling tribe. Gradually they became successful in bringing the whole of the Brahmaputra valley under their domination. But the inhabitants included many tribes and races of diverse faiths, creeds and various distinctions in their way of life.

It was **Sankaradeva** who, through the propagation of his new found faith brought them together and gave a new life and culture to the people. In his translation of the *Bhagavata-purana-BK.II*, Sankaradeva has enumerated a list of tribes who inhabited in different parts of Assam in that period. They include: Kirata, Kachari, Khasi, Garo, Miri, Yavana, Kanka, Gowala, Asama [Ahom], [Muluka], Rajaka, Turuka, Kumara, Mlechha, etc. Thus the Vaishnava order in its primal glory saw the Garo, the Bhota and the Yavana saying prayers to **Hari**, and the Miri, Ahom and Kachari securing salvation through Rama-Nama, as **Madhavadeva**, the apostolic successor and chief disciple of Sankaradeva tells us in his *Nama-ghosa*.

From the earliest times, the place was a centre of Saiva and Sakti worship. Even the forefathers of Sankaradeva and other Bara Bhuyans are said to be Sakti worshippers. Debased form of Buddhism (crypto-Buddhism) also infected the society and stray traces of it is yet found in some remote corners of Assam, particularly among some people in the form of *Gopidhara*, *Bar Seva*, *Rati Khowa*, etc. Other people also have their own creeds and faiths which might have been numerous and varies from tribe to tribe.

Whenever there is decline of righteousness and unrighteousness is in the ascendance, for establishing Dharma, Mahapurushas or Saints are born from age to age. In the fifteenth century, the Hindus of India were in a great social quandary. Tantricism in its naked form accompanied by animal sacrifices and other vices got the upper hand. Casteism was dominant. A bulk of the population was treated as outcast and untouchables. The all-pervading God was locked inside the temple. At that critical moment of religious crisis, many Saints arose in different parts of the country. **Ramananda**, **Kabir**, **Gyaneshwar**, **Tukaram**, **Ramdas**, **Mira Bai**, **Guru Nanak**, **Sri Chaitanya** and **Sri Sankaradeva** were some of them. They started the Bhakti Cult.

Sri Sankaradeva of that galaxy of Saints has left a permanent mark on the religious, social, literary and cultural life of Assam. His Bhakti derived inspiration from *Bhagavata-purana* and the practice of its teaching blossomed in the north eastern region of India through his personality. He could integrate by his preaching and practice the different castes, religious groups and races living in different parts of Assam whether in the hills or in the plains, whether they came from one kingdom or the other. Assam was then divided into three sovereign kingdoms and each of these enjoyed complete independence in all respects.

Sri Sankaradeva was born in A.D. 1449, and passed away in 1568 at the ripe old age of 120 years. He remained active till the last days of his life. He came of a non-Brahmin family. He maintained a high level of excellence in all his activities. His rich and versatile personality poured forth in impassioned poems, songs and dramas. He translated the *Bhagavata* and preached the message of Bhakti in the language of the people. He married at the age of 23 and functioned both as a house-holder and a preacher. To him **Sri Krishna** was a vital living and life-giving force.

Sri Sankaradeva built a lasting foundation for the Bhakti Movement among the people. He set up *Sattras* or monasteries from where his preaching radiated. He started the institution of *Namghar* even in the tiniest and remotest villages where the *kirtana* brought Bhakti to the door of the common mass of people. The media of both music and drama were powerfully employed to win over the people to the teachings of the *Bhagavata* and, through its numerous narratives, love and devotion for the One Supreme God were instilled in the hearts of the people who thronged the *Namghars* in the villages.

Sankaradeva de-linked Bhakti from any objective representation of God [i.e. in the form of idol etc.], preferring to give to the *Bhagavata-purana* itself the pride of place in his *Sattras* and *Namghars*. His gatherings were open to all sections, castes and classes of the people with the result that he not only had brought a great religious reform during the long period of his preaching and practice but had also ushered in a great *social* upheaval which has left its imprint on Hindu society in Assam as a whole.

He deliberately chose the language of the masses as the medium of his writings. His extensive and effective use of it for the theme of religion has also placed him in the front rank of the creators of Assamese literature. He composed voluminously and he himself sang, chanted and enacted what he composed. This gave his compositions the vigor and vitality of life. Music and drama took new birth in his hands. *No other single person in Assam's history has made a greater contribution than Sri Sankaradeva to the cultural progress of the people.* The glorious age of Sankaradeva has been described as a period of religious, social, literary and cultural renaissance in Assam which commenced in the fifteenth century.

Sankaradeva wrote more than thirty volumes in Assamese which included dramas and the translation or summary of as many as eight books of the *Bhagavata-purana*. He also wrote *Ramayana*, *Uttara Kanda* and *Rama-Vijaya*. His most popular composition was the *Kirtana-ghosa* which is held in high esteem and respect as the main scripture by the Vaisnavites of Assam. His deeply devotional songs of classical type (*Bargita*) had an enthralling effect on the masses. The only book he wrote in Sanskrit was the *Bhakti-ratnakara*. This work describes the ethical and religious doctrines of Vaishnavism as propounded by him. *His poetical compositions, besides his prose works or dramas, come to nearly 15,000 verses.* Each one of them is superb in literary quality and deeply emotional centering upon the eternal theme of Bhakti. Sri Sankaradeva enacted and preached this theme creating an emotional upsurge as he moved from place to place during his long and active life.

Sri Madhavadeva was his principal disciple. The *Nama-ghosa* composed by this great disciple holds a unique place in the devotional literature of Assam. **Sri Sankaradeva** and **Madhavadeva** cannot be separated from one another. They are complementary to each other. They were like twin-brothers working for the fulfillment of one and the same mission with one common purpose. Sri Sankaradeva nominated Sri Madhavadeva as his successor. But Sri Madhavadeva did not nominate anyone as his successor. He enjoined upon his followers to elect, after him, somebody from among themselves from time to time to conduct the affairs of the *Sattra*.

The followers of Sri Sankaradeva are known as *Mahapurushiyas*. The philosophy of the religion of Sri Sankaradeva centers on *Nama-Kirtana*. His teaching is that **Lord Sri Krishna**, Who was his Worshipful Deity, dwelt only there where the single-minded devotees of Him sat and sang His Name (*Nama*). The only way to worship Hari, the un-manifest God, is to chant **His Name**. He is all-pervading. He cannot be found by performing any ritual or ceremonies. He is formless.

He gave *Bhakti* a place superior to liberation (*mukti*). *Mukti* occupied a secondary position in his religion. **Love towards God** was the Supreme Theme of His teaching.

His was a universal religion meant for all people of India. *The concept of one India was foremost in his mind.* Sri Madhavadeva said, "Glory to Kali-yuga! Glory to you born with this human body, glory to Bharatavarsha where you are born! Forsaking *tapa*, *japa*, *yajna*, etc., [obtain God by simply] resorting to the Feet of Hari and continually chanting His Name".

Sri Sankaradeva wrote, “Even gods covet to be born as mortals in Bharata-varsha. But if we, who have the fortune of being born here, do not resort to ***Eka-Sarana Bhakti*** and surrender to Lord Krishna and Krishna alone, we shall be throwing away the invaluable *chintamani* (philosopher’s stone) that we have in our possession”.

He was against casteism. A few quotations from his teachings will make this clear: -

“Those who are interested in the Name of Lord Krishna, for them a high caste like Brahman is not required; simply, one should recite the Name of Hari; there is no barrier of caste-distinction in Devotion or Bhakti”.

“Worship all creatures just like Vishnu; God should be conceived in all creatures”.

“A low-caste devotee is superior to the *devatas* (gods)”.

“By remembering the **Name of God** even the lowest of the low may obtain liberation”.

Sankaradeva recognized the existence of Paramatma even in animal life: -

“The soul of a dog, a jackal or of a donkey is God; knowing this, serve them all”.

“When all the objects of the world appear as Vishnu, the Supreme God, immediately *jivanmukti* is attained”.

“All creatures should be treated as one’s own self and this is the best of all tenets”.

God does not take into account to which caste a man belongs, nor does He care whether one is pure or impure. But whenever one utters His Name with all the devotion he commands, he gets closer to Him. **It is Harinama and Harinama alone** that can give liberation and nothing else. In this life or the next, there cannot be liberation without Bhakti.

Sri Sankaradeva stressed in his teaching ***the worship of One and only One God*** and none else. For an illustration, I quote here a short anecdote from the writings of Sri Sankaradeva: -

Indra, the king of gods, one day, saw an outcaste lady, cooking beef mixed with wine, covering the cooking-pot with a human skull. Indra was amazed to see this and asked the lady if there could be anything more impure than what she was cooking. The lady was surprised to find that this simple truth was not known to Indra. She replied that the impurest of the impure were those who indulged in the worship of deities other than Hari. Lest the shadow of anyone like that touched her food, she was covering it with the skull of a human being.

Here may be attempted a brief comparison of Sikh religion with the religion preached by Sri Sankaradeva. Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism which was founded by **Sri Sankaradeva** in Assam and Sikhism founded by **Sri Guru Nanak Dev** in the Punjab have special coincidence, which is very significant. Sri Guru Nanak Dev was Sri Sankaradeva’s contemporary. Both preached *Eka-sarana-dharma*, complete surrender to one and only one God.

Assamese *Namghars* and *Sattras* and Sikh *Gurudwaras* and *Dharmasalas* have much in common. The spirit of mutual appreciation between the Vaishnavas in Assam and the Sikhs of Punjab must be due to the common bond of Nam Jap, Nam Kirtan, Nam Smaran, Scriptural Readings and the Sat-sang which characterize the religious practices and devotional endeavors of both. The similarity between the constitution of Assamese *Sattras* and the Sikh *Gurudwaras* with the system of election is also not without significance.

The distribution of *prasad* after the prayer, discounting of caste distinctions, absence of idols and images and pictures, congregational singing of *kirtan* or *bhajan* and chanting of the Name Divine are other features commonly shared by the two traditions.

Let me conclude with an English rendering of a verse by Sri Madhavadeva: -

“Srimanta Sankara is, as it were, the tree that fulfils all kinds of desire (kalpa-taru) of the devotees of Hari. Verily, verily do I say I have no other Great Guru than Sri Sankaradeva”.
