

Sankaradeva: A Revolutionary Reformer

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Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.), the Vaishnavite Guru of Assam is not only the greatest religious preacher, but also the greatest revolutionary social reformer ever born on the soil of Assam. As a matter of fact, all great religious prophets of the world, Jesus Christ, Hazarat Muhammad, Gautama Buddha, are essentially great social reformers. And **Srimanta Sankaradeva** of Assam is also no exception. All these great prophets and preachers were born into societies full of religio-social evils that were about to axe at the super-structure of society. When chaos became the order of the day and all irreligious practices predominated in the name of religion, these supermen raised their heads with the message of new faith and social justice. What is said by **Lord Krishna** in the *Gita* regarding His incarnation has proved axiomatic in the case of every prophet and preacher of the world. And Lord Krishna's famous saying, "O Bharata! Whenever there is a blemish on the Truth, and untruth comes to predominate, I have an incarnation to protect the truthful, to destroy the evil-doer and to establish the rule of *dharma* in the world". The *dharma* or religion of the Gita is a force that binds all together for a pure and harmonious social living. So anything that mars the purity of living can never be termed as religion, whatsoever be the claim of its votary.

Srimanta Sankaradeva was born into a society, where all sorts of evil practices, resulting from Saktism, Tantricism and decadent Buddhism, were rampant. And the so-called 'priests', guided by their own extremely selfish motive of loaves and fishes exercised their dominance over the politics and sociology of the time. Not to speak of countless evil practices justifying their selfish ends, these Judases had brought about such degradation in human dignity and status that men could be butchered just like goats and buffaloes at the altars of gods and goddesses. And a reign of terror prevailed in Assam in the name of religion.

The most tragic outcome of the Vedic heritage was the ugly concept of casteism in which the so-called 'upper' castes closed all doors of wisdom and devotion to the so-called 'lower' castes. The 'lower-caste' people were deprived of all prestigious positions in the society; even their very presence in religious institutions or ceremonials was an act of pollution leading to sin. Being deprived of social justice, the downtrodden were awaiting the coming of a Messiah.

And the Messiah came in the person of **Srimanta Sankaradeva**, to rescue the downtrodden and to establish truth and social justice in (the form of) a new socio-religious order. Clearly therefore, the task before Sankaradeva was simply revolutionary.

Social Revolution

The greatest of social reforms ushered in by Srimanta Sankaradeva is the equal recognition of man irrespective of caste, creed and status through the propagation of his **neo-Vaishnavite faith**. The 'lower caste' people got due recognition for the first time in the social history through the heart-searching message of the Great Guru. When there was thus a call for social justice and equality of man, Sankaradeva became the Savior of the Masses. But the Savior was not tolerated in his own soil by the corrupt socio-political system of the time and the great revolutionary had to shift base from Asam to Koch Behar for the propagation of his new faith, under the sheltering wing of the great king Naranarayana.

It is interesting to note in this connection that although there is the remnant of casteism in Assam, it is not in the same criminal proportion as in other parts of India. The social evil of untouchability against which **Mahatma Gandhi** had to wage a crusade in the twentieth century India was severed at the root by **Sankaradeva** in the fifteenth century Assam. The great Vaishnavite preacher had in his religious fold *bhaktas* (disciples) from all sections of the society including the Muslims, and class distinction was fully and finally abolished in his monotheistic faith of ***Eka-Sarana-Hari-Nama-Dharma***. In the present day India where atrocities on the **Harijans** are going on, there is a very great need of spreading the message of Srimanta Sankaradeva among the misguided sections of the society.

Secondly, Srimanta Sankaradeva established a **new democratic social order** with the *Namghar* (the Prayer House) at the base and the *Satra* (central monastery) at the top. His preachings and messages were conveyed to the masses through this democratic channel. The *Namghar* has become the solid base of the Assamese society in many a respect. It is the common meeting-place of the villagers not only for the congregational prayer or *kirtana* (singing of the Lord's Name), but also for the maintenance of social justice. And the foundation of this social order is so firm and deep that it has withstood all political upheavals like the removal of the age-old monarchies and the establishment of the colonial rule of the British imperialists. In fact, this democratic edifice of the Assamese society, with its base laid deep down in the village community, has been so designed that it has got absolutely nothing to do with any political changeover of the land.

Thirdly, Srimanta Sankaradeva kept his neo-Vaisnava faith aloof from the pull of politics of the time. His avowed principle was that he would never be the Guru of a king. Although Sankaradeva received patronage from King Naranarayana of Koch Behar, he refused to accept the king as his disciple. When the king gave him an ultimatum, Sankaradeva, it is said, preferred breathing his last to his acting as guru of a king.

Had Sankaradeva willed to dominate over the politics of his time, he could have done it quite easily, and Naranarayana would have acted as the propagator of his new faith as Asoka or Harsavardhana did in the case of Buddhism. But Sankaradeva kept his religion away from the political order; he did not realize any immediate gain but his greatest gain is that his democratic religion has remained pure and unshaken, withstanding all political storms that swept over Assam.

Fourth, Srimanta Sankaradeva's religion is most liberal and tolerant. It is also the simplest and easiest way of attaining God. Economically, *it is the most viable*. It may be called the religion of the common man. Moreover, there is no room for any hostility between different 'classes' of people in the name of religion. Even the Saktism and Tantricism learnt the lesson of humanism from Sankaradeva's faith and these decadent Hindu faiths have been considerably modified.

Cultural Revolution

Srimanta Sankaradeva had also brought about a Cultural Revolution in Assam. He had opened not only the door of religion for the laity but also that of literature, art and culture, for all. It is the tremendous fortune of the Assamese that Sankaradeva was born in Assam to lay the firm foundation of their language, literature, dance, drama, music, art and culture as media for propagating his faith. And for this widespread socio-religio-cultural appeal, he has become ultimately the Common Guru of the entire Assamese. What His disciple **Madhavadeva** says of Him in this light is really very significant:-

“Tahanta binai nai nai nai amara Parama Guru”

(There is no other, no other, no other Supreme Preceptor for us apart from Him).

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