

Sankaradeva and the Tribals of North-East India

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The Sankaradeva Movement had a very benign influence on society in Assam and its impact in fostering a feeling of brotherhood between the people of the 'hills and the plains', between tribal and non-tribal, was the most significant in the sociological context. Without a shade of doubt, it was the Sankaradeva Movement which, for the first time, proclaimed loudly and unequivocally, both in theory and practice, the equality of man and integrated society like never before in Assam. From the 'air-conditioned' comfort of the 21st century, this sometimes becomes difficult to appreciate. But we must remember that, in medieval times, 'humanism', 'equality', 'fraternity' etc. were terms that had not yet seen the light of the day. Sankaradeva and the other apostles of his Movement had to encounter stiff resistance from the 'protagonists of orthodoxy' in implementing their agenda of social change. This 'stiff resistance', we also have to remember, often took the form of prosecution, persecution and murder. The royal ears were continually poisoned by persons intolerant of the faith of Sankaradeva and the progressive ideals which he stood for. For instance, in the matter of dining together, it was 'alleged', *Koibartta kalitā koch brāhman samasta / Ekelage khāi dudh chirā kol jata* (the Kaivarttas or fisher-folk, the Kalitas, Koches and Brahmanas all take their food sitting together). But Sankaradeva was undeterred. As a writer has stated, no force proved sufficient enough to stop him. "He was a force by himself".

www.tributetosankaradeva.org presents a paper on this important integrative aspect of the Sankaradeva Movement. The reader may see also: -

1. http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/religion_inclusive.htm
2. http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/satra_role.htm#bond

An outstanding feature of the Assamese Hindu society is that it is remarkably free from the scourge of virulent casteism that afflicts Hindu societies in most other parts of India. What lies behind this rather unusual phenomenon? One obvious and rather facile explanation is that "the greater portion of the so called Hindus of Assam are converted aborigines with whom caste has never acquired that degree of fixity which it has attained elsewhere" (Edward Gait: 1891 Census Report). This is, however, more or less true of some other parts of India as well; but nowhere else is the Hindu society as free from irrational caste prejudices and barriers as in Assam. Again, it is significant that there is practically no Harijan problem in Assam. while atrocities on Harijans has always been,

and still remains, an evil fraught with dangerous possibilities, Assam can legitimately take pride in the fact that not to speak of atrocities on Harijans, even the practice of untouchability in Assam has been only minimal. Then, there is the extra-ordinarily clean record of Assam as far as religious communalism is concerned: Hindus and Muslims have been living here through the ages in an atmosphere of amity that is hardly to be met with anywhere else.

All these pleasingly positive traits of the Assamese social setup would not have been there but for the enduring benign influence of the greatest son of Assam, **Sri Sankaradeva** (1449-1568), whose advent is rightly regarded as the most important single event in the history of the Assamese society. He it was who had galvanized the people of this region with his message of devotion to one supreme God and of love and compassion towards fellow men; he it was who had unified the diverse racial, social and cultural elements of the region with his wonderful capacity for synthesis; and it was he again who had imbued the newly-welded society with the spirit of liberalism and open-heartedness that have stood the test of time.

It is true that Sankaradeva was a saint-preacher whose primary mission was to spread in the north eastern region the message of the neo-Vaisnavite movement, with its accent on liberalism and humanism, which had been sweeping over northern India in those days. But the unparalleled genius of Sankaradeva did not keep itself confined within the boundaries of religion and spiritualism: it spilled over in an abundant flow into the field of literature and art, enriching Assamese culture with invaluable treasures. And as indicated above another direction in which his genius was channelised was the reform and reconstruction of the society on democratic and humanitarian lines.

*kukura srgala gardhabaro atma Rama
janiya savako pari kariba pranama.*

Even the souls of the dogs, the srgalas and the asses are verily God. And knowing this, salute them all.

Thus proclaimed Sankaradeva. What soaring heights of spiritual idealism! But what is most remarkable in case of Sankaradeva is that his idealism is steeped in an extraordinary degree of scientific objectivity and mature awareness of social realities. Of particular significance is his concern for and involvement with the tribes that make up a sizeable proportion of the population of this region, which were mostly kept out of reckoning by orthodox Hinduism. In the teeth of malicious opposition from the protagonists of orthodoxy, Sankaradeva boldly came out with the declaration that in the matter of devotion to the Lord all are equal and there could be no caste and race distinctions.

**kirata kachari khasi garo miri
yavana kanka goala
asama maluka rajaka turuka
kuvacha mlechcha chandala
ano jata nara Krishna sevakara
sangata pavitra haya**

The Kiratas, the Kacharis, the Khasis, the Garos, the Miris (Misings), the Yavanas, the Kankas, the Goalas, the Asamas (Ahoms), the Malukas, the Rajakas, the Turukas, the Kuvachas, the Mechas, the Chandalas, and all others become pure in the company of the servants (devotees) of Krishna.

The references here are not only to the so called lower castes within the Hindu fold but also to the tribes of the region as well as to the *Yavanas* and *Turukas* (Muslims) who are outside the pale of Hinduism. As is well known, the north-eastern region is dominated by various groups of *Kirata* affiliation and Sankaradeva's particular mention of many of them - the Kacharis, the Khasis, the Garos, the Miris (Misings), the Ahoms, and so on - not only speaks of Sankaradeva's knowledge of the ethno-social background of the region but is also a measure of his genuine concern for its people.

Sankaradeva had made his religion extremely simple - free from all ritualistic complexities, excessive rigours and banal formalities. His great disciple **Madhavadeva** gave cogent expression to this attitude in his famous work, the *Nama-ghosa*.

Harinama kirtanata nahi desha kala patra

niyama samjama eko vidhi

In the singing of the Praise of God, there are no rules of place, time, qualifications, rituals and rigours

There is reason to believe that one of the motives of Sankaradeva in keeping his religion so simple was to keep the door open for all ‘non-believers’ including the tribals who had no organized religion and who might otherwise be scared away by excessive organizational rigours*. Sankaradeva also took a soberly tolerant view of the customs of the tribals, normally frowned upon by orthodox Hinduism; and this is brought out in the following piece of his writing.

kukura khaya henaya chandala
shuddha haya atishaya
soma pana kare jito maha ajna
tara prati tushta haya
[...]

Even the *chandala* who eats dog-meat becomes highly clean and the utterly ignorant who drinks liquor pleases God when His Name is remembered, sung, heard or respected by them.

It was not that Sankaradeva was simply “favourably disposed” towards the tribals from a distance. Far from it. In practice he inspired, welcomed and embraced into his fold large number of his tribal people. What is more, quite a number of his favourite lieutenants were tribals, and they occupied a place very near to his heart.

A small incident associated with the name of **Madhavadeva**, Sankaradeva’s greatest disciple and spiritual heir, is very significant for its bearing on the spirit and

* Such a supposition does not seem warranted by facts. Sankaradeva’s religion is based on scriptures such as the *Srimad-Bhagavata* and the *Gita* which advocate the sole utterance of the Lord’s Name by entering into His refuge (eka-sarana) as the only religion *for all people* in the Iron Age. And thus, on all classes of people, (tribal as well as non-tribal) Sankaradeva enjoins the ‘simple’ path of chanting the Name, free from all ‘ritualistic complexities, excessive rigours and banal formalities’ – editor,
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attitude towards the tribals with which the Master must have imbued his truest and dearest follower.

Govinda, a *Garo* who had risen to be an *atoi* (a devotee of high status) was a favourite of the Guru.

As is common with tribal people here, Govinda's Assamese was not very refined and correct; he could not make proper use of the superior and honorific terms in addressing people of status and addressed everybody, including the Guru, by the inferior term. Some sticklers for norm among the attending *bhakats* (devotees) of Madhavadeva noticed this and on one occasion when Govinda was visiting the Guru, advised him to be particular about the use of the superior and honorific terms of address. Govinda left for home, obviously much disturbed, and returned few days later with some loads of presents. On seeing him Madhavadeva lovingly asked, "So. Govinda, you are here again?" "Yes", replied Govinda. "I have come to address thee (using the same inferior term *tai*) as you (using the superior term *tumi*)". The compassionate Guru said with a smile, "Govinda, I do not get so much of pleasure when others address me as *tumi* as I do when you address me as *tai*". What a wonderful example of the understanding or faith in the human goodness that abounds in the tribals' heart.

These are the teachings and examples Sankaradeva has left for us. Although coming across five hundred years from hence, they have not lost their relevance. They are worthy of emulation even today with just a little adjustment in keeping with the present context.

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