

# The Vaishnava Movement in Assam by Sankaradeva



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## Abstract

The word 'Bhakti' literally means devotion to God and as a religious concept; it means devotional surrender to a supreme God for attaining salvation. The doctrine has been traced from both the Brahmonical as well as Buddhist traditions of Ancient India. It was for the first time in the South India between the seventh and tenth century that 'Bhakti' grew from a mere religious doctrine into a popular movement based on religious equality, led by popular saints or poets and reached its climax in the tenth century and it was revived a philosophical and ideological movement by a wondering scholars.

In course of time, many ideological differences entered in to the vaishnavite fold. Among them, the issue of Vedic rite, idol worship, spiritual superiority of the Brahmins and so on. As a result towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these differences resulted into the emergence of four sanghatis (order) of satras. This fission within neo- vaishnavite movement is attributed to the inroads of the ruling claim into. The satras received massive land endowments, man power and other gifts from the ruling clan and make themselves a very powerful institution. The institution which was religious in nature became a feudal institution with their structural formation. The satradhikars (head of a satra) came to enjoy almost all the royal prerogatives. With such developments most of the satras lost their original progressive, reformist trust and become subscribers to the royalist religious ideology that barred shudra sabots from proselytizing Brahmins and neo- vaishnavism no longer remained a people's religion which enabled to unite all the people of the Brahmaputra Valley irrespective of their caste, creed and religion and welcomed to create a higher and wider plane of cultural or societal identification.

**Keywords:** Vaishnavism, Sankaradeva, Bhakti, Satra and Namghar.

## Introduction

The greatest name in early Assamese literature is that of Sankaradeva and he has left his stamp on Assamese literature and culture, on Assamese religion and way of life. He was a poet saint, religious teacher and social reformer all in one and his influence on Assamese life and literature is comparable to that of Tulasidasa for the people of the upper Gangetic Valley.

During his long life, there were six great contemporaries in the religious world of India – Chaitanya of Bengal (1485-1533) , Vallabhacharya of Andhra and Vrajamandala (1479 -1531) , Kabiro of Banaras (1398 -1518) , Nanak of the Punjab (1469 -1539) and Tulasidasa in the United province (1523 -1623). Sankaradeva's Eka – sarana Dharma or Mahapurusa sect as it also called agreed more with the robust and manly path favoured by Kabir and Nanak and later by Tulasidasa : it was the path of a man's straight forward faith in his Master, without his assuming the nature of a woman. It was also democratic in its nature, inculcating communal worship with as simple a ritual as possible.

The Eks-sarana Dharma of Sanharadeva deserved to be better known in other parts of India, but each area developed its own form of a common pan- India Vaishnava religion of faith in a loving God and this coupled with Assam's isolation, probably prevented a wider spread of the Eka-srana faith in lands outside Assam.

In Ancient time, in this region, various religious sects like Buddhism , Viasnavism , Saivanism, Saktatism and Indigenous Tribal religions are exited from early century A.D. North – East India is an important place in not only India but also South –East Asia since eight century A.D. It is strategically located in areas of India where in diverse

civilizations, religions and cultural met in past. Since the Gupta period, north – east India linked with South –East Asia through various trade roots. The cross – road of Assam and Bengal, it was probably connected with Burma via land – routes through Gomati, Surma and Cachar valley. From north part of Asia, the Chinese people and different Indo – Mongoloid race came from same route. They spread over the whole of north East India and extended up to Coochbehar, present West Bengal. Vaishnava sect is fully phased elopement in Assam, Manipur and Tripura from the 15<sup>th</sup> century on wards as Bhakti Movement.

Sankaradeva is said to have lived for the uncommon span of 120 years eras; Assamese tradition places his birth in the year 1449 A.D. and his death in 1568A.D. ( similarly, another great saint and mystic and poet of Medieval India, Kabir is said to have lived also for 120 years : 1398 to 1518 A.D.)

This is ignorant of historical facts have often represented that Sankardeva's school of neo – Vaisnavism in Assam is an offshoot of the Caitanya movement in Bengal. This is misconstruction and misrepresentation of real historical facts. Sankardeva was born in 1449 A.D. Caitanya was not born when sankara set out on his pilgrimage. When Caitanya turned an ascetic in 1510 A.D... Sankara's Vaisnavism was in its full swing. Sankara could not have met Caitanya during his first pilgrimage. But during his second pilgrimage from Barpeta he met Caitanya about 1530 A.D. at puri. There was not any conversation between them as Caitanya was then observing silence and therefore by pouring water from his kamandalu , Caitanya indicated that devotion to God is continuous and directed to one channel only like the flow of running water was his creed. Sankara did not long survive after his return from the second pilgrimage.

He died in Cooch-Behar in the year 1568A.D. after having attained a very long life of 119 years. The idolization of the female element of Radha which formed the marked feature of northern Vaisnavism and of the Caitanya movement in Bengal, Radha is important cult but it is total absence from Sankara's Vaisnavism. Caitanya's conception of madhura rasa or love relations between the lover and the beloved as the mode of worship of God by his devotee to which he gave prominence , does not find favour in Sankaradeva's school of thought. There is neither the combined worship of Radha and Krishna of Caitanya, nor of Gopi – Krishna of Vallabhacharya. Nor of Rukmini – Krishna of Namdev, nor of the Sita – Rama of Ramananda. The Eka – Sarana of the Gita superimposed upon the idealism of dasya – bhakti with satsanga or companionship with bhaktas of the srimadbhagavata and the Hanumantikatha,i.e., the unwavering and firm devotion and allegiance to one and the only one God as of Hanuman to Ramachandra is the main plank of Sankara' creed. Self – surrender to the supreme to the supreme God, Sri – Krishna, who is the creator, supporter and destroyer and who is the Lord and Master of Kala (time) and Maya (manifestations) and to him alone and not to any other minor god and goddess.

The chanting of the names of that Great God and the meditating on him are the instructions on which Sankara's Vaisnavism stands. Through essentially based upon the Srimadbhagavata , it has nothing of doctrinaire about it. It gives prominence to the chanting of Rama's and Krishna's names as well as the other thousand names of the creator and recognises in so many symbols of that one state of supreme bliss of the liberated soul.

In a pluralist society and in the time of the rapid globalization, one particular creed may not satisfy the spiritual need of the humanity. Any attempt of doing that is bound to fail and give rise to the conflict. But through interfaith dialogue we should try to reach what Dalai Lama calls the 'core' of the religious tradition i.e. loves and compassion.

#### **Objective o the Study**

1. To find out the relevance of Sankaradeva's concept of Vaishnavism in today's India.
2. To examine Sankaradeva defined his ideal society as Vaishnavism.
3. To find out Sankaradeva's dream about Krishna is related with his concept of the supreme God.

#### **Conclusion**

The vision with which the early reformer (Sankaradeva) and his immediate successes of the Vaishnavite movement organized the movement, gradually effected by the entry of many personal and Brahmanical elements into the fold of the neo-Vaishnavite movement and narrowed the scope o the movement. The tribal and lower caste people who were welcome by the early preachers to the fold of it gradually lost their faith in like any other religion; the feeling of devotion is prevalent in Indian religious tradition since antiquity. But 'Bhakti' or devotion as a means of salvation had assumed special significance in the medieval period of the Indian History. It has brought many changes in the socio-religious life of the Indian people and so it is termed as 'Bhakti Movement', the movement and had to organize movement within the neo-vaishnavis itself, which was a movement organized only for establishing equality in the society. Both mainstream satra institutions and the breakaway fractions must adopt a more liberal and people-sensitive social approach which would entail an appropriate agenda for the socio-economic uplift of the backward people (D. Nath.2011). Only such a policy might reunite all the ethnic groups' of the Brahmaputra valley once again.

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