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POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The Bhakti Movement popularly called in Assam as Neo- Vaishnavite Movement was launched by Sankaradeva (1449-1568) and Madhavdeva (1489-1596) in the 16th century. The Bhakti Movement that had swept over entire India since its birth in South India in the 6th century ACE also came to Assam in the 16th century ACE. The beginning of the Bhakti movement can be traced back to the 6th century A.D., when the Saiva Nayanars and the Vaishnava Alvars of Tamilnadu in south India were composing Bhakti hymns to worship God in a simple way. The Bhakti religion was, as a whole, a new form of religion that advocated caste-equality in the field of religious practice. The most notable preceptors were Ramananda (1299-1410) of Allahabad, Kabir (1440-1518) of Varanasi, Nanak (1469-1538) of Lahore, Chaitanya (1485-1536) of Bengal, Mira Bai (1498-1546) of Mewar, Dadu Dayal (1554-1603) of Ahmedabad. Approximately at the age of thirty-five Sankaradeva went on a pilgrimage and he visited almost all the holy places of India. At these holy places, he came into contact with Vaishnavite teachers of various schools. After travelling over India, Sankaradeva brought Bhakti concept in to Assam. The objective of the paper is to study the political and religious background of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam.

KEY-WORDS: The Bhakti Movement, Neo-Vaishnavism, Bhakti hymns, Political and religious background.

The *Bhakti* Movement popularly called in Assam as Neo- Vaishnavite Movement was launched by Sankaradeva (1449-1568) and Madhavdeva (1489-1596) in the 16th century. The movement headed by Sankaradeva was not only a religious, but also a social reform

movement. Adhering to the main principles of '*bhakti*' this movement brought to the forefront the subaltern class of the society by granting them equality with the higher classes in the religious plane. It also brought about an intellectual revolution by way of bringing the scriptural knowledge to the people through large scale translation of the religious scriptures in the Assamese vernacular. Sankaradeva instituted worship of books replacing image and ritualism; and left a permanent legacy of it through the *satra* institution which rose to more than a thousand in number after his time. The objective of the paper is to study the political and religious background of the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement in Assam.

METHODOLOGY

The method of this research paper is analytical and historical. For the purpose of the study, major sources of information are gathered from the Assamese Chronicles (*Buranjis*) biographical works of the Vaishnava saints of medieval Assam (*charit puthi*), epigraphic and archeological sources. Secondary sources in the form of articles published by different authors in different newspapers, periodicals, magazines, souvenir etc. and books are also be consulted to supplement the primary sources. In order to find out the picture of the background of the *Bhakti* movement in Assam, not only the available sources scrutinized carefully, but attempt has also been made to see things as objectively as possible.

The Background of the Neo- Vaishnavite Movement in Assam:

The Bhakti Movement that had swept over entire India since its birth in South India in the 6th century ACE also came to Assam in the 16th century ACE and revolutionized its socio-religious life. It is popularly known in Assam as the Neo- Vaishnavite Movement. The beginning of the *Bhakti* movement can be traced back to the 6th century A.D., when the *Saiva Nayanars* and the *Vaishnava Alwars* of Tamilnadu in south India were composing *Bhakti* hymns to worship God in a simple way. The *Alwars*, a group of twelve South Indian poet-mystics flourished between the sixth and the ninth century A.D. in the Tamil country. Devotees of Mal (the Tamil name for Krishna and Vishnu Narayana), composed thousands of stirring hymns that they sang while moving from place to place.¹ They thus propagated Vaishnavism by bringing out the message of theistic Vedanta to the notice of the masses through their poetical works highlighting the divine glory and deeds of Lord Vishnu in His various *avatars*.² The greatest of the *Alwars* was Nammalvar, also called Sathakopan (7th century ACE).³

On the other hand, an attempt to make *bhakti* a social reform movement was first made by Ramanuja (1027-1137). He strongly advocated monotheism and *bhakti* as the real way to worship God. One of his disciples Ramananda brought the message of *bhakti* to north India. Sankaradeva (1449-1568) brought the Bhakti Movement to Assam. Approximately at the age of thirty-five Sankaradeva went on a pilgrimage and he visited almost all the holy places of India. At these holy places, he came into contact with Vaishnavite teachers of various schools. The Bhakti religion was, as a whole, a new form of religion that advocated caste-equality in the field of religious practice. The most notable preceptors were Ramananda (1299-1410) of Allahabad, Kabir (1440-1518) of Varanasi, Nanak (1469-1538) of Lahore, Chaitanya (1485-1536) of Bengal, Mira Bai (1498-1546) of Mewar, Dadu Dayal (1554-1603) of Ahmedabad and who protested caste inequality. When such developments were going on in the other parts of India, Sankaradeva was travelling over India. Struck by such developments, he brought it to Assam. As in many other parts of India the ideological spirit of the Neo-Vaishnavism is based on *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Gita*. It enjoins complete surrender to one Supreme God in the form of Vishnu or Krishna. Based on simple way of *bhakti*, the Bhakti Movement led by Sankaradeva in Assam is better known as Neo-Vaishnavite Movement. It is also called *Eksaraniya Nama Dharma*, meaning initiation to a personal God who is the sole and Supreme, and reciting his name in praise of Him. As based on the teachings of the *Bhagavata Purana*, it is also called *Bhagawati Dharma*. It is also popularly called as the *Mahapurushiya dharma*, because both Sankaradeva and his chief apostle Madhavdeva were extolled to the status of *Mahapurusha* or saints by their disciples.

Political Scenario of the Brahmaputra Valley at the time of Sankaradeva

The time of Sankaradeva was one of political multiplicity in the Brahmaputra Valley with a number of smaller states formed by a few tribal communities. The eastern areas of the Brahmaputra valley was ruled by the Chutiyas, a powerful section of the Bodo race, whose kingdom was bounded on the west by the river Sisi, a tributary of the river Subansiri, on the east by the Brahmaputra and on the north by the hills and on south by the river Burhi-Dihing.⁴ The capital of the Chutiya kingdom was at Sadiya. They ruled from the beginning of the 13th century till the subversion of their kingdom by the Ahoms in 1523AD. The Chutiyas successfully ruled in the Eastern most part of the Brahmaputra valley up to 15th century. They had tried to resist the growing power of the Ahoms for about three hundred years since 13th century. But they finally failed to resist the Ahom power in the first half of the 16th century.

Like the Chutiyas, the Kacharis also of the same Bodo stock, were ruling during the 13th century over the territory from Dikhow in the east to the Kapili in the west with Dimpur on the bank of the river Dhansiri as its capital.⁵ According to Gait-“ In the thirteenth century it would seem that the Kachari kingdom extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra, from the Dikhow to the Kallang , or beyond, and included also the valley of the Dhansiri and the tract which now forms the North Cachar subdivision”.⁶ Like the Chutiyas, the Kacharis too soon came in to the clashes with the uprising Ahoms who had already advanced in their territorial expansion towards the west. During the reign of Ahom king Suhungmung(1497-1539), the Kacharis came under the vassalage of the Ahom kings.⁷ Thus the plains tract of the Kachari territory in the Dhansiri valley had fallen to the hands of the Ahoms.

To the west of the Chutiyas on the north, and the Kacharis on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, were a class of independent or semi independent petty chiefs called Bhuyan with their respective domains.⁸ They were a class of feudal landlords. The word ‘Bhuyan’ is equivalent to Persian *Zaminder* and Sanskrit *Bhaumik*, meaning ‘land lord’. According to Gait- “each Bhuyan was independent of the others within his own domain, but they seem to have been in the habit of joining their forces whenever they were threatened by a common enemy”.⁹ The Bhuyans did not have any common ethnic identity. These Bhuyans played a significant role in the country’s socio-economic history in the middle ages. Though most of them were Kayasthas, there were references to Brahmin, Daivagnya and Kalita Bhuyans too. Whenever there was a powerful king in the centre, the Bhuyan would offer him their allegiance; and they would withdraw it again when a weaker prince came to power.¹⁰ For having close relationship with the cultivators, they could determine the fortunes of their overlords. The Bhuyans were constantly at war with the Ahoms and the Kacharis in the east, and with the Koch kings and the Bhutiyas in the west and north respectively.¹¹ By the beginning of the 17th century, the Ahom rulers subjugated the Bhuyans and occupied their territories.

To the west of the Chutiya territory lay the Ahom kingdom. The Ahoms were a group of Tai-Shans coming from upper Burma. The Ahoms appeared in Assam in the beginning of the 13th century under the leadership of Sukapha (1228-1268) and established a small kingdom between the rivers Dihing and Dikhow by subduing the local tribals like the Morans and the Barahis. It is found from the chronicles that it were the Morans and the Barahis who first used to address the Ahoms as ‘Asam’,¹² a term from which the Tai kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley got its name.¹³

The western part of the Brahmaputra valley was ruled by a few dynasties during the course of the 14th and 15th centuries and the kingdom was known as *Kamatarajya*. The most important dynasty that ruled in the 15th century at Kamata kingdom was the Khen; its last representative Nilambara was overthrown by Hussain Shah in 1498.

By the end of the fifteenth century AD, a new power, viz, the Koches; under the leadership of Visva Simha, came to be the dominant political power in western Assam. Visva Singha was succeeded to the throne by his eldest son Malladeva or Naranarayana (1540-1585).

Thus in the 15th century, the whole Brahmaputra valley was divided into several kingdoms. The Chutiyas, the Kacharis, the Ahoms, the Bhuyans and the Kamatas ruled in different parts of the Brahmaputra valley. The political condition of the medieval Assam was unstable; as there were constant frictions or conflicts among the ruling dynasties to acquire superior power over the entire Brahmaputra valley. But finally the Ahoms became victorious and they occupied most of the territories of the upper Brahmaputra valley. Ahom king Suhungmung Dihingia Raja had conquered the Chutiya kingdom in 1523ACE. , pushed back the Kacharis up to Kapili valley in 1536ACE and subjugated the Bhuyans.

Religious Scenario of the Brahmaputra Valley at the time of Sankaradeva

Since the political condition of Assam at the time of Sankaradeva was unstable. The society also with heterogeneous castes and tribes having their own customs, manners and faith lacked unity. The political instability helped to bring about a chaotic condition in the religious sphere also. Assam, in the 15th century, presented a motley picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The majority of the people belonged to non- Aryan tribes having distinct manners, customs and religious beliefs.

The religious life of the people of Assam was a mixture of all sectarian beliefs- Saivism, Saktism, Tantricism, Buddhism and Brahmanical Hinduism. There were various centres of religious practices, such as the Kamakhya and Hayagriva Madhava temples in Guwahati and Hajo in Kamrup and the temple of Tamreswari was that all practices here involved animal sacrifice. It was the custom at the temple of Tamreswari at Sadiya that human sacrifice is to be made annually. Sir Edward Gait has given a clear idea about such religious practices.¹⁴ Most practices involved esoteric methods of involvement of sex and participation of women. Even in the temple of Haygriva Madhava lavish sexual practice was prevalent.

As against this there was a section of Brahmans who with the help of the state tried to maintain caste system very strictly. These Brahmans who had settled in the land during the days of the old kingdom of Kamrupa, belonged to various Vedic *sakhas*, and practiced caste.

Under the circumstances the religious life was one of Brahmanical-non-Brahmanical mixture, and a Buddhist-Saiva-Sakta-Tantrika combined.

Conclusion: Thus, it is under this political and religious scenario that Sankardeva started to propagate the Neo- Vaishnavism in Assam. There was no common religion among the people in the state, which could unite them and show the real path of salvation in an easy and simple way. In such a situation that Sankaradeva brought and taught *Bhakti* religion in Assam.

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