

“NEO-VAISNAVISM AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ASSAM”

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Abstract

Assam is a land of diverse religions, beliefs and cults. Mahapurushiya Bhagawati Dharma or Neo-Vaisnavism which is the major religion of Assam today developed only in the early part of the sixteenth century as a response to the Indian Bhakti movement. The Bhakti movement started by Srimanta Sankardeva popularly known as Neo-Vaisnavite movement has a great importance regarding the formation of Assamese culture. Neo-Vaisnavism had its impact on the status of women and also in the material life of the people. The time of Srimanta Sankaradeva's advent was a horrible time. Women had no honor in those days. A woman could be taken by the Bhogi (a man selected for sacrifice before the deity) at any time. That situation arose from the Tantriks. Making woman the object of enjoyment in the name of the Sahajiya path of the Tantrik cult gave rise to adultery among some people. Srimanta Sankaradeva redeemed woman from that degraded state and elevated her to equal status with man in the performance of the religion of devotion. In this paper I will try to find out the status given by the Bhakti Reformers and how far the women of Assam influenced by them.

Keywords: religion, beliefs, cults, bhakti movement, neo-vaisnavism, bhogi, reformers.

Introduction:

It was the neo – vaishnavism which brought profound changes to the Assamese Society. It must be admitted that before the rise of neo-Vaishnavism, though some religious faiths and beliefs were prevalent, it was not possible on the parts of the people to get them involved in the religious ceremonies directly without a priest or guru. This gap was filled by Sri Sankardeva, the propagator of neo-vaishnavite ideals in the early part of 16th century. The basic tenets of Sankardeva's religion are Eksarana nama Dharma or worship of one God only through prayer. The worship of deities other than Vishnu is forbidden by him. As there was simplicity in the religious performances taught by him and equality among all disciples, so his religion became very popular in the society. Sankardeva based his teachings primarily on the Bhagavata Purana. Which deals with the life and teachings of Lord Krishna and hence his creed is also known as Bhagawati Dharma. It was based on the principles of Bhakti or undivided devotion to God. To make the tenets of the Bhakti, cult understandable to the common people, Sankardeva translated several Skandhas of the Bhagavata into vernacular language and wrote many metrical episodes, dramas and hymns to popularise his creed.

He also used the media of art, like dance, music, theatrical performance of devotional plays composed by himself. He established the community prayer hall known as namghar, where the members of the village could assemble for daily or occasional prayers. In his official head quarter at Bordowa, he first established one such namghar. This institution became the nucleus of the Valshnjava organisation and later on along with the Vaishnava monastery called Satra, this spread throughout the three states of Assam, Kamrupa and Koch Behar existing in the Brahmaputra valley at that time. The door of Sankardeva's religion was opened to everyone irrespective of one's caste or creed. Amongst his disciples Govinda was a Garo, Joyram a Bhutiya, Ghand Sai a Muslim, Paramananda a Wishing, Narahari an Ahom, Morari and Chilarai, the famous Koch general. Later on, the plain tribesman like the Kacharis, Koches, Rabhas, Chutiyas, Wishing, Ahoms, Mataks, Morans etc. were brought into the Vaishnava fold. According to Vaishnava teaching, the most efficacious methods of cultivating the state of devotion are the acts of listening to (Sravana) and chanting (Kirtana) the names of God especially in the company of devotees (Satsanga). The Bhagavata Purana and other sacred Sanskrit texts which were rendered into homely Assamese verses are chanted during the worship by the congregation. This part of the service is called nam or namamprasanga. Every nam has four parts e.g. Bargeet, Ghosha, Kirtana and Upadesha. Likewise, the neo Vaishnavism propagated by Sankardeva in the period of our study rendered significant service in forming a united and healthy Assamese society.

Objectives

- The main objective of this paper is to find out the status of women during medieval period of Assam through Sankaradeva.
- To trace the Sankaradeva's effort for the upliftment of women of medieval Assam.

Methodology

The study is descriptive in nature and carried out based on various primary and secondary sources available on status of women and neo-vaishnavism.

Neo-Vaishnavism and the Status of Women:

Neo Vaishnavism had its impact on the status of women and also on the material life of the people. The Vaishnava reformers were advanced agriculturists and artisans. They taught people advanced mode of cultivation. They had also advocated a patriarchal society. At their initiative, zhuming was giving way to ploughing and as a result, women lost their main role in cultivation, as ploughing could not be done by them. This had indirectly made them subordinate to man. Vaishnava reformers like Madhavadeva, who advocated Puritanism, considered women as a source of temptation and therefore passed derogatory comments on women. This is learnt from an incident narrated in the Katha-Guru-Charita. Once, Sankaradeva proposed to Madhavadeva to marry his daughter Vishnupriya. Madhavadeva flatly refused and requested him not to repeat the proposal. His attitude towards women can be gleaned from his following comment.

'Mayamai bisai , posupakhir sarirate pai
Aka lagi asha bharasa kara nai'

Meaning - This is a temptation which existed in the bodies of birds and animals. I am not hankering after that.

Again

'Bihmai bih bahnit nepelava'

Meaning- please drags me not to the fire of poison and pain.

But Sankaradeva on his part was somewhat liberal in his attitude towards women. He had great respect for his grandmother Khersuti, who brought him up*. He had also led the life of a householder and did not encourage celibacy. But he had restriction in giving initiation to women which is clear from his own statement made before king Naranarayana, who wanted to get his initiation. Sankaradeva replied that he never wanted to be guru of the Brahmanas, the Kings and the women. He perhaps feared that a woman would not be able to observe the tenets of his religion going against the will of her husband, as laws lay down by him were very strict. Sankaradeva was skeptical about the independent entity of women. He thus wrote in Rukmini Haran Kavya

'Swavabate tiri jati, nohe swatantari'

Meaning - independence is not the nature of women.

In the chapter of Hara Mohana in the Kirtana, Sankaradeva describes woman as a source of temptation and hence be avoided.

'Ghor stri Mahamuni g; maya anoru sarba m'ayate
Katekhe Darsane kare top, jop,
Jani yajni jone kaminir hare kut-chi t,
Chit jog bhanga erai sanga'

Meaning 'women are the greatest sources of temptation in all their forms. They can pierce a man's heart at a single glance and by their very appearance can break his meditation and disturb his thoughts. Knowing all these the wise avoids the company of women.

Sankaradeva stressed upon the chastity of women and described a chaste woman or sati as one who had not glanced at any person other than their husband. In other words, he advocated seclusion for women. This is clear from the story of Radhika sati narrated in the Katha-guru- charita and some Assamese Buranji. The story relates that, when several attempts to build a spur in a flood affected Bhuyan village went futile, the people approached Sankaradeva. The latter replied that the attempt would be successful, only if a jar filled with water to the brim brought by a Sati or Santi (meaning a chaste woman) in a leaked vessel could be put to its place of foundation. Sankaradeva then appeared in the village and the task was performed by a low caste (Kaivarta) woman called Radhika. She admitted that she could not

hold all the water in the pot because once accidentally her eyes fell on her husband's elder brother. Radhika was hailed as an ideal woman and became an example to her fellow sisters.

Vaishnava reformers also taught the tribal woman, who was never accustomed to veils to cover their heads at the time of prayer. Gradually all married tribal women used to cover their heads. In the upper circles, those women were looked with regards, which were devoted to their husbands, confined themselves to the four walls of their homes and spent their times in religious discussions, Harigati, the wife of Mukunda Ata, a Vaishnava reformer, was one among such women. Sulochana, the queen of the Kamata King was also very virtuous. In a like way, Swargadeo Jayadhaj Singha's mother was respected by all for her virtuous qualities.

There were women who could evidence their mental and intellectual caliber and could claim rightly an honoured position in the Vaishnava order. Most prominent among them was Kanaklata alias Lakshmi Aai, who was the first of the three wives of Chaturbhuj Thakur, a grandson of Sankardeva. She was a very accomplished and efficient lady. She greatly contributed for the propagation of the Vaishnava faith. She was also the first woman to become the head of a Vaishnava monastery who even appointed other persons as superiors. When her husband nominated Damodara, a minor, as his successor she put Damodara and other disciples under her care. After her husband's death, Kanaklata, along with some other female members of her family proceeded to the Ahom Kingdom and settled at a place near Bardowa, which henceforth came to be known as Aibheti. She had initiated many people of the locality to the vaishnava faith and deputed twelve disciples, six Brahmins and six non brahmins to different parts of Assam to propagate the new faith. The twelve satras, established by these twelve apostles, came to be known after her name as *Kanaka bara janiya satra*.

Kanaklata later moved to the north bank of the Brahmaputra for missionary work. Following Kanaklata, other grand daughters-in-law and also the grand daughters of Sankardeva established Satras. The monasteries established by the latter were called *Sri Sankar Jiyari Vamsar Satra*, meaning 'monasteries founded by Sankardeva's female descendants.

Again Padmapriya, the daughter of Bhavanipriya Gopal Ata, is credited to be the first Assamese Woman poet who even composed *bargits*. The pious lady Dayal, wife of Telekrishna, acted as a medhi over one hundred and twenty queens and could recite in a very sweet tone the Namghosa and the Kirtana. Sankardeva's wife Kalindi Ai also commanded a special position in the Vaishnava order. She was highly respected by Madhavadeva and all other disciples of Sankardeva. She had survived till she was hundred and forty years old. At her death bed she had instructed the assembled Vaishnava apostles to write a biography of her husband, which was very faithfully done by them. A copy of this Gurucharit has been preserved in the library of the Gauhati University.

The common women too could evidence their proficiency in reciting the Vaishnava texts and in performing Vaishnava hymns. In course of time, this became an additional qualification for a girl for her marriage and any woman having that proficiency was respected by all. It has been mentioned above how a common woman pointed out to Sankardeva, his omission of the Vaikuntha Briksha, while he was drawing a scene of heaven. In the initial stage of the propagation of the new faith, wives were making their husbands free from their duties in order to make them enable to attend the Namkirtana. It is related in the Katha-guru-charit that -an old couple of the village, Sundari, in lower Assam, arranged among themselves that the wife would manage the household duties and the husband would daily attend the Namkirtana held by Gopal Ata and his disciples during the day times and would recite the verses to his wife in the evening. One day, however the old man failed to recite the verses, at which, his wife refused him food and drink till he would go back and learn the verses. The poor man then went to the Satra and related his plight to a disciple, who felt pity on him and taught him the verses again.

After the establishment of the Namghar women used to attend prayers there regularly and participated in the religious discourses. They also witnessed the Bhaona or religious theatrical performances to get religious instruction through them. Such popular Medias moulded the temperament and outlook of the people for spiritual enlightenment. It was perhaps for this reason that theft, robbery and such other crimes were very unusual in medieval times and Assam gained a reputation as a land of religious recital and prayer. This reputation spread as far as Rajputana, so that, when Raja Ram Singh of Ambar was asked by emperor Auragazeb to lead an expedition to Assam, he was advised by his mother and wife to decline the appointment, as it would disturb the religious habits of the people.

It may be noted in this connection that intelligent ladies in the royal circles sometimes used the Vaishnava texts to overcome certain delicate issues. The Borkunwari or chief consort of an Ahom Swargadeo, named Sudaipha or Parbaitya Raja (1677-79) A.D: was the daughter of the then Premier Atan Buragohan. According to the customs prevalent in the country, when a queen rose to the status of Barkunwari, all officers and ministers were to show their respect to her by lying prostrated on her feet. When her father had to do it like wise, she felt it very delicate and thought of some means to evade it. Accordingly, she put a Vaishnava text, Ratnawali, written by Madhavadev, on a raised tray before her. The father lay prostrate before it and thereby the queen eased her filial conscience and satisfied her royal appeasement.

Despite all this, it cannot be asserted that women in general were treated as equal with men in the Vaishnava order. The apostles of Sankaradeva were somewhat reserved on the point of treating men and women on an equal footing. Some later apostles went a step further and treated woman as inferior to men. This is more propounded in the Borpeta Kirtan Ghar. There women are still prohibited entrance to the prayer hall. They cannot have a look at the Satra deity and are to. Witness the religious recitals performed there from outside. This is really a humiliation which the Assamese women till today is tolerating. But, as stated, women of talent and intelligence overcame the obstacles placed by religious beliefs and rites and also by social institutions and contributed their share to the progress and prosperity of the country.

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we can mention that for the upliftment of the status of women, Sankaradeva made an utmost effort. The time when Srimanta Sankaradeva started his reform activities was a very adverse period in the history of Assam. He was faced with opposition at every step. The feminists of today do not have to face such inconvenience. So, even the utterance of a single word in support of women's honor in those days was equivalent to writing a book on the topic in current times. We can judge the contribution of Srimanta Sankaradeva to the feminist movement only if we proceed with such a comparative assessment. Srimanta Sankaradeva certainly deserves the status of a pioneer in the movement of feminism on that criterion.

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