



The Socio-religious Impact of Neo-Sankaradeva Movement under the Aegis of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha among the Tea Garden Community: A Case Study of Mezenga Tea Estate in Titabar Co-District under Jorhat District, Assam

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Abstract:

The Neo - Vaishnavite movement preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva, like all dynamic religious movements, made its impact on numerous aspects of life in Assam, and influenced not only thought about the nature of the Supreme Being, but stirred far-reaching and revolutionary ideas in all spheres of the human relationship, to which it gave a new humanitarian and idealistic direction. This movement was further carried forward in a reformed manner by Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha after its establishment in 1930 and had a massive impact all over Assam. It has impacted the tea garden community also which itself is a heterogeneous group consisting of diverse castes, groups who spoke different dialects, practiced different customs and professed different religions. This study investigates the socio-religious impact of Neo-Sankaradeva movement propagated by Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha among the tea garden community with special reference to Mezenga Tea Estate situated in Titabar Co-District under Jorhat district of Assam. The study is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data have been collected through schedule-cum-questionnaire interviews by visiting the targeted tea estate and interacting with the respondents. For the secondary data the previous literature published and unpublished and sources available in the internet related to the area of the study have been consulted.

Key Words: Neo-Sankaradeva Movement, Tea garden community, Socio-religious Impact.

1. Introduction:

Assam is the largest producer of tea in India and the tea produced in this region is the finest in the world. Though the species grew widely in the hills and forests of Assam since time immemorial but the organized tea plantation in Assam is associated with the colonial period. The recorded history of tea industry in North East India is nearly 170 years old and it can be traced back to 1837 A.D. as the first experimental tea estates in Assam was established in 1837 at Chabua in Dibrugarh district in upper Assam. But latter on the first tea company, namely the Assam Tea Company started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam and it is followed by Jorhat Tea Company in 1858. With this history of organized tea industry in Assam, the history of the tea community of Assam also develops. The tea industry requires huge manual labor force for the ground work. As there were shortage of labour during the initial stage so the planters had to hire huge numbers of people from different regions of colonial India. The people were imported from different places, e.g. the Mundan & Gonds from Bihar, Santals, Tantis & Bhumij from Bengal & Bihar, Orangs from Bihar & Orissa, Goalas from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh & Uttar Pradesh and Bogas from Tamil Nadu (Kar, 2005). These people had different culture, dialects, rituals, religious beliefs with different identity. But, in due course of time they started to assimilate with the local people and adopt the local culture leaving behind their own cultural traits. This assimilation grew a new identity among the people of different identities which is now regarded as tea garden community.

But it is more interesting that Assam is the home to different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures and speaking different languages and dialects since time immemorial. It was Srimanta Sankaradeva who initiated the assimilation of the Assamese society into one identity through his Neo – Vaishnavite movement. After that the teaching and preaching of the great saint has been playing a significant role in inclusion of different ethnic groups, indigenous or non indigenous into the inclusive Assamese cultural identity throughout the ages. In due course of time the Neo – Vaishnavism preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva encompassed all the boundaries and meant not only a religious faith but a way of life. The hallmark of that movement in Assam is the evolution of another movement in the region that is the Neo – Sankaradeva Movement started by various eminent personalities and pioneer organizations spreading all over the nation. This movement over last several decades has intimately connected with the whole Assamese society. One organization very closely related to this movement since its inception in 1930 is the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha. It is now one of the most distinguished and influential socio – cultural and religious organization of the state and beyond that. The Sangha has initiated various positive steps for the preservation of the cultural tradition of Neo – Vaishnavite movement propagated by the great saint Srimanta Sankaradeva among the masses. It has relentlessly encouraged the assimilation of the Assamese society into one whole on the basis of the philosophy of the great saint. The impact of this movement upon the tea garden community is immense during the last several decades. It has various positive aspects which can be seen from the changes occurred among them in the social values, cultural awareness, economic aspects and so on. Generally the term social condition denotes a situation of an individual or a community in the society in relation to their level of education, income, occupation. On the other hand, Wikipedia denotes that it is a person's standing or position in society, determined by their occupation, earnings, education and family

background. Braveman opined in 2010 that the social conditions include not only the quality of houses, homelessness, and educational attainments but also poverty, unemployment, wage levels, lack of control in organizational work, racial-residential segregation and other forms of discrimination. So in this respect, it is much needed to assess the social condition of the people of tea garden of the study area with reference to the reformative measures of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha based on the teachings and principles of the great saint.

2. The Area of the Study:

The area under study is the Mezenga Tea Estate located in Titabar Co-District under Jorhat District, Assam. It is situated about four kilometers away from co-district headquarter Titabar and about thirteen kilometers away from district headquarter Jorhat. It is under Bebejia Gram Panchayat of Titabar Development Block. The nearest railway station is Titabar. It shares the same latitude and longitude coordinates with Titabar which is 26.6017°N and 94.1996°E. The demographic pattern of the Mezenga Tea Estate in Titabar, like other tea estates in the region, is primarily characterized by a large workforce of laborers. While historical data points to poor socio-economic conditions, including low literacy and poor sanitation, the community is experiencing gradual changes towards improved education and survival strategies in the current days.

3. The Objective of the Study:

The objectives of the present study are as following –

1. To study the impact of the Neo – Sankaradeva Movement propagated by Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha among the tea garden community.
2. To study the transformational impact of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha as an organization among the people of the study area from the socio-cultural and socio - religious point of view.

4. Significance of the Study:

Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha established in the year 1930 is undoubtedly the largest organization of Assam that aims for the preservation of the philosophy of the great saint with the pure and proper measures. The contributions of this organization in the sphere of Neo – Sankaradeva Movement during the pre and post independence period are immense. It has been working since its inception for the preservation, restoration, research, promotion and the socio economic development of the common people irrespective of caste and creed following the humanistic values of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The organization has been working in all sphere of the society irrespective of caste, class and creed. The present study aims to study a significant aspect of the movement that is the transformation of the people of the study area under the influence of the reformative measures of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha.

5. Materials and Method:

Research methodology is the most important aspect of research work and is a way to systematically solve research problems. It facilitates the research work and provides reliability and validity to it. The information collected for the purpose of the study is based on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data include information gathered from firsthand experience acquired through survey, field verification and conversation with the key informants. Intensive observation was also made to acquire

necessary information. Secondary data was obtained from various published and unpublished sources like relevant literature, news papers, journals, related websites, social media and others. The nature of the present study is explorative and the whole work has been done by descriptive as well as analytical methods. It is a process of natural investigations that seeks to understand social phenomena within the natural setting. It focuses on what of social phenomena and relies on direct experiences of humans in their everyday livelihood throughout the stipulated time frame in the context of the study and the study area.

6. Result and Discussion:

The emergence of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha as a transformative independent Vaishnavite organization during the early twentieth century was a very historic incident in the history of Assam. The cause of the emergence of a parallel organization in line with the existing Satra institution is known to all and it is a matter of discussion during the recent several decades. Its formation and gradual proliferation is regarded as the first event in the socio - religious history of Assam which has brought a major shift within Vaishnavism preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva. It has taken out the Vaishnavite ideology of the great saint from the custody of the Satras and tried to spread the humanistic values of the “Jagat Guru” among the masses with some reformative measures. The whole process can be viewed as a part of the Neo – Sankaradeva movement which has clear proximity with the humanistic approach of the Neo – Vaishnavism preached by the greatest soul Assam has ever produced. He was not only a saint but also a social reformer who played a pivotal role in shaping the greater Assamese society irrespective of caste and creed. He sought to unite the diversely separated Assamese society of that time through spiritual devotion, cultural revival and social harmony. All of his contributions were so much influential that he was capable of creating a united society devoid of caste based discrimination. His philosophy holds immense significance in shaping and promoting social equality.

The present study aims to focus on the transformative approach of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha constituted to carry forward the reformative measures of the great saint from the humanistic point of view challenging the caste based discrimination in the society. This particular institution has a profound socio – religious and socio – cultural impact upon the whole Assamese society. It has been playing a crucial role in fostering communal harmony, social equality and cultural resilience among the masses. Special focus has been laid upon the tea garden community with due reference to the case study of the targeted area.

Just like the other tea gardens of Assam the people of Mezenga Tea Estate of Titabar co-district under Jorhat District migrated to this place during the Colonial rule from various regions of the country and carried various dialects initially. From the respondents it has been known that their original places of inhabitation were different parts of South India, Orissa, Jharkhand and West Bengal. They had their own indigenous folk cultures and they used to celebrate different festivals and religious occasions. But in due course of time they adopted the Assamese language and assimilated into Assamese culture. They used to maintain a close contact with the wave of socio - political consciousness among the tea garden community of entire Assam during the period when organizations like Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) and All Assam Tea Tribe Students Association (ATTSA) were established. From socio – religious point of view they assimilated the Hindu elements into their traditional religious practices at the very first stages of

transformation. But in due course of time few households of the study area were influenced by the Vaishnavite philosophy of Sankaradeva and had taken refuge to Ek Sarana Nama Dharma through Dholar Satra. The seed of the socio – religious transformation started from that incident and during the middle of 1980s the “Mezenga Seuji Prathomik” was established under the aegis of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha. Some of the respondents and leading persons of the area very strongly agrees that the phenomena have a very positive impact upon the every aspects of their life. At present there are about 155 households in the tea estate and ninety eight percent of them are devotees of Sangha. It can't be said that the socio – economic condition and the educational scenario of the people of the locality were very low and worst when they were not under the umbrella of Sangha. But it was not so organized and modified in comparison with the present scenario. When interviewed, one responsible citizen of the locality who is also a member of the “Mezenga Seuji Prathomik” and an office bearer of the local self government (Aanchalik Panchayat) accepts and describes this point with examples.

The legacies of social responsibilities, economic consciousness, educational and cultural awareness were there in the mind of the people of the area from earlier times. Late Gajen Tanti was born and brought up in this tea garden who was a Cabinet Minister in the capacity of Labour Minister in Sarat Chandra Sinha Ministry. He was also the General Secretary of Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS). Mr. Nogen Kurmi is a central member of that organization who also holds the position of General Secretary, Titabar branch. It is a pioneer organization among the community which has a long history of several decades. But this type of consciousness was limited among few elites. From the respondents it is clearly known that the after scenario of transformation to Sangha is totally different. The first and foremost change can be seen among the common people is the negativity towards the alcoholism. Another respondent very responsibly accepts that as about ninety eight percent of the households are under the umbrella of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, this tea garden is fully alcohol free tea garden at present days. It is also visible from the socio – economic condition of the people of the locality. The youths are fully inclined towards education, cultural up gradation and compete with the mainstream society with high success ratio. Illiteracy and superstition have been totally eradicated from the mind of the common people. People are very organized and perform all the rituals following the guidelines of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha. Representation can be seen in all sectors among the people of the locality. There are adequate numbers of people in the government sectors and most of them are teachers. There are industrialists who hold very high positions in the social scenario of Titabar subdivision and few of them are even reputed industrialists of Jorhat district. Mr. Sibaram Kurmi and Mr. Pran Kurmi are foremost among them who are the owners of tea factories, petrol pumps and organized brick fields. Mr. Pran Kurmi was also the member of Jorhat Zilla Parishad Council representing Titabar Zilla Parishad. Respondents mention about Mr. Dhiraj Gowala who currently holds the position of President of Assam Tea Tribes Students Association which is a very influential organization among the people of tea garden community. They have also mentions about other couple of names who holds different positions in the district and state level political and other organizations. Among them Mr. Gopal Rao was interviewed who served two different terms as the President of Gaon Panchayat and the Councilor of Titabar Aanchalik Panchayat agrees that the political representation of the people of the locality is not stereotype. Several

citizens and youths of the study area hold different positions in different organization including ruling, opposition, and right, left and so on. He also mentions that all these people are very closely entangled with the social domain of Titabar in particular and Assam as a whole. They view everything from democratic point of view of Sangha formed under the influence of teachings and preaching of Srimanta Sankaradeva. People of the locality are of the opinion that the influential persons of the area very closely associated with the development and spread of the philosophy of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha in the prathamik level and at the same time in the district level. Their works in that direction can also be seen from the religious and developmental works done by them. They specially mention about Mr. Sibaram Kurmi, Mr. Pran Kurmi, Mr. Prema Gowala and Mr. Pradip Kurmi, Mr. Kamal Gowala, Mr. Narayan Mirdha, Mr. Biman Rai, Mr. Horupuna Kurmi etc. Among them Mr. Prema Gowala and Mr. Pradip Kurmi are the members of the central committee of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha representing Titabar Zilla Committee. They have lots of contributions towards the organization and promulgation of the philosophy of Srimanta Sankaradeva following the constitutional values of Sangha among the masses of their own community and even beyond that. The dropout ratio in the academic scenario is nil and most of the people of the locality are well educated and economically viable. The people strongly believe that this transformation is the result of the resort to the philosophy of Srimanta Sankaradeva following the guidelines formulated by Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha on the basis of the teachings of the great saint. Just like the other communities of the area they are so dedicated towards the organization that the 19th edition of annual conference of Titabar Zilla was organized in the locality with the hospitality from the Mezenga Seuji Prathamik with lots of spirituality and showcases.

It must be accepted that besides the reformative measures of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha there are some other factors that work as catalyst in the process of the socio-economic development of the area. The common scenario in the state is that the ethnic background of the tea garden workers is diverse and the fact that they speak different languages makes them marginalized in mainstream society. The geographical locations of the gardens are away from the mainstream inhabitants, which further isolates the tea community. Workers seldom get an opportunity to interact with people beyond their communities and their kinship is also confined to their own ancestral ethnic lineage. Their life choices are scuttled, opportunities limited, and their social status, undermined. All this cumulates into the systemic marginalization of this community. The people of the study area come from different ethnic background no doubt but they have close proximity with the people of the mainstream nearby society. Just like most of the tea gardens, the geographical location is not away from mainstream inhabitants. It is easily accessible through basic transportation facilities. The people can easily travel to the district and co district headquarters. School and college education facilities are just four to five kilometers away from the study area. As the people of the previous generations were very conscious about sanitation and healthcare facilities kit has impacted the present situation in the society. It can be assumed that because of all these aspects the present society in the study area has been transformed to a society with upgraded civic sense and socio-religious profile is shaped on the basis of the values and teachings of the great saint.

7. Conclusion:

In the light of the above discussion it can be opined that the Neo – Sankaradeva Movement under the aegis of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha has influenced a huge amount of masses in Assam and beyond that throughout the ages since its inception. It has significantly influenced the Assamese society following the ideals of the “Jagat Guru” of an equal society where people from all sections of life irrespective of caste, creed, religion and social distinction can sit together for the worship of God and other socio – religious activities. The area under study is a perfect example of that transformation where there is the reflection of the humanistic values of the philosophy of Srimanta Sankaradeva. The people are very much conscious about that and they strongly believe in the fact that the transformation is the result of their resort to the commandment of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, the greatest socio – religious organization of the state and beyond that.

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