

Vaishnavite movement and new social Structure of Assam.

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Introduction:- Assam, the Queen of Beauty and Wealth, has been attracting people of the other parts of the country and neighbouring states since immemorial. Rabindra Nath Tagore, the world poet and Seer, sang in his poem 'Bharatathirtha'---

"Keho nahi jane kar ahwane kato manusher dhara

Durber srute alo kutha hote, samudre halo hara|

Hethay arja, hetha onarja, hethay drabirh chin-

Sak-hoon-dal pathan mugal ek dehe halo leen||

This view of the poet is truly applicable to Assam. People came from different parts of the country and other states, settled here and formed a great nation. So the population pattern of the medieval times in Assam was something like garlic, reflecting oneness in the midst of disunity and diversity, as if a sea of humanity tied by an unseen bond of unity. A new social structure emerged due to the impact of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in the medieval period in Assam.

Castes, Sub-castes, Professional castes and tribes in Assam during the medieval period:- Chronicles, genealogies and inscriptions are the main sources of the social life of Assam. These sources refer to the following castes, sub-castes and professional castes--- Brahmins, Daivajnas or Ganakas, Kayasthas, Kalitas, Kochas or Rajavanshis, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Keots, Salios, Kumaras, Napitas, Suris, Chamaras, Dhobas, Yugis, Haris, Chandalas, Jolas, Kshatris, Vaishyas, Natas, Bhatas, Telis, Thatharis, Sonaris, Kamsyaris, Shankharis, Baniyas, Sutaras, Muchis, Shilakutis, Malis, Rajakas, Shilpakaras, Chuneris, Salais, Tokaras, Haddis, Dombas.

Tribes:- Bodo-Kachari, Garo, Khasi, Karbi, Lalung, Tiwa, Jayantia, Mishing, Dimacha, Khanti, Doaneah, Taiphaks, Turung, Aitaniya, Nara, Chakma, Mesh, Pawi, Aka, Adi, Tangda, Miri, Wanchoo, Pudang, Serdukpen, Naga, Nakte, Singhphow, Kanyak, Sema, Synteng, Chin, Lusei etc.

Muslims:- As a result of the invasions of the Turki-Afgan adventurers and fortune-seekers and the Mughals from the west many soldiers belonging to Islam, sometimes as prisoners of war and sometimes as prisoners of war and sometimes on their own behalf, stayed back in Assam after the military expeditions were over.

A determining factor of social or caste status was the profession adopted or implemented employed in pursuing professions. A few of the sub-castes considered lower in the social status in the medieval period, have now attained higher status due to rapid social mobility in the caste hierarchy.

Laws, customs and rites followed:- The Brahmins, the Kayasthas, the Daivajnas, the Kalitas, the Keots etc. followed the laws and customs prescribed by the smritis. The Ahoms accepted Hinduism. Some of them followed Vaishnavism and some of them followed Saktism and worshipped

Hindu deities according to their newly professed faith. They did not totally discard their old faith and customs. Tribesmen spread over the entire valley were governed by their age-old customary laws, practices and institutions. Hindus were mainly divided into three sects—Siva, Sakta and Vaishnavas. With the coming of the neo-Vaishnava cult, Siva worship was a very important aspect of Hinduism in Assam.

Conditions prevailed in Assam during the medieval period:- Assam was torn by casteism, religious fundamentalism, violence and ethnic clashes. Political turmoil, instability, uncertainty and social degradation featured Assam during the medieval period.

The highly ritualistic and priest-ridden religious rites of Brahmanical religion were considered unsuitable for the majority of the people who belonged to the non-Aryan ethnic groups with little or no knowledge of the Sanskrit language in which Brahmanical rites and rituals were conducted.

Arrival of Shankaradeva:- at this juncture Shankaradeva was born in 1449 A.D. in the Siromani Bhuyan family at Alipukhuri [Bordua] who ushered in the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam and Coochbehar.

Vaishnavism in Assam before Shankaradeva:- The seed of Neo-Vaishnavism was sown in the soil of Assam before the birth of Shankaradeva. The Vasudeva cult was popular in Assam. The names like Vasudeva, Shankarshana, Kamadeva, Harideva and Aniruddha indirectly point to the prevalence of the Vasudeva cult before the advent of neo-Vaishnava.

The monotheistic bhaktic cult which the neo-Vaishnavite reformers brought to the forefront was also not unfamiliar to a section of people. This is evident from the writings of the pre-Sankarite poets like Hemasarasvati, Harihar Vipra, Madhava Kandali and Kaviratna Sarasvati who flourished in the 14th and early 15th centuries of the Christian era.

Sankaradeva and the neo-Vaishnavite movement:- When Sankaradeva set out for pilgrimage throughout the length and breadth of India, he witnessed neo-Vaishnavite movements led by his predecessors in different regions of India. After his return from his long pilgrimage, he engaged himself in propagating the new faith based on the Bhagavat-purana and the Gita. He got all the major elements of his Ekasharaniya Dharma from the Bhagavat-purana and the Gita. This Dharma was well-received in his native place at Bardowa. This new faith was kept wide open to all communities. No discrimination was made on the basis of castes and status while conferring initiation or ordination. It attracted unsophisticated masses. Dramatic performances were regularly held to attract a large number of adherents to the devotional fold.

He took simple Assamese language instead of Sanskrit as the medium of mass instruction in order to let them know the principles and essence of religion. He felt that the Sanskrit language was a bar to religion and cultural unity among the tribal people. He tried to tie them all in the Assamese language for the religious and social unity.

His "Kirtana" united all the sects and communities irrespective of castes, tribes, clans, languages, races, high and low. His messages broke all the barriers of casteism and won the heart of the masses by sowing the seeds of equality---

"Samasta bhutate byapi aso mai hari

Sobako janiba tumi bishnu buddhi kari I

Brahmanar Chandalar nibisari kool
Datat chorat jar dristi ek tool II
Neesat hadhut jar bhailo ekman
Tahake se pandit bulia sarbajan I
Kukur srigal gardabharo Atmaram
Jania sobako pari kariba pranam II”

He expressed scientific socialist thoughts by allowing all the tribes of Assam equal status in enjoying religious rites:

Kirat kasari nasi garo-miri , jawan kanka gual I
Sama muluk rajak turak, kuvas mlechsa chandal I
Anu jato nara Krishna sevakar, sangate pavitra roy II”

He gave a full form of the indigenous culture through the uses of Kholā, Mridanga, Gayana, Bayana and presentation of dances songs and actings.

Vaishnavite movement and new-social structure of Assam:- A new society was reconstructed with Bodo-Kachari, Chutiya, Moran, Ahom, Miri, Keot, Kalita, Brahmana, Daivajna, Kayastha, Muslims, Buddhas, Hill-tribals, Plain-tribals and all the castes, sub-castes, races, clans and communities due to the impact of neo-Vaishnavite movement started by Srimanta Sankaradeva who was a scholar without arrogance, persuasive in argument, humanistic in outlook, a staunch believer in monotheism, an acute social reformer and a successful religious preacher.

Neo- Vaishnavism extolled Shravana and Kirtana. They are not subject to the restriction of time, place and persons. Namagharas and Satras established by Sankaradeva had and has much impact on the socialcultural life of the people of Assam. Namagharas, known as the museums of the culture of the Assamese people, bound all and built the plinth of the great Assamese society which is free from religions exploitations

Conclusion:- A new Assamese society with all castes, sub-castes, tribes, races, clans and communities emerged through songs, dances, lyric, literature, bhaona, nama-kirtana, ghosha, bargeet, angkiya-nat, namaghar, kholā, mridanga, tal, bhaj-ghar, doul-yatra, culture, wealth, capital, moral ethics, non-violence, sacrifice etc. All these are the fruits of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam.

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Summary of Seminar Paper:

Topic:-Vaishnavite movement and neo-social structure of Assam

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Assam, the queen of Beauty and Wealth, was torn by caste-ism, violence, religious fundamentalism, superstitious beliefs, darkness of ignorance, political uncertainty and many social evils during the medieval period when Sankardeva was born. Srimanta Sankardeva enriched with wisdom, pedantry, farsightedness and sagacity, started the famous Neo-Vaishnavite movement with a view to removing all the socio-religious inequalities and bringing the millions and millions of masses under the one umbrella in the name and style of the Eka Sharana Dharma. He founded Namgharas in the villages and remotest areas where people belonging to different castes, communities, clans, races and tribes, came, assembled, prayed, discussed, broke all the socio-religious barriers and paved the way for structuring a social order in Assam. The Namgharas are still the museums of the national culture of the Assamese. The Bhakti-movement which began in the Southern India, flooded Assam and took a new shape in the lotus-hands of Sankardeva. Sankardeva spread this great movement nooks and corners of Assam with the help of his writings and performing dramas and bhaonas. He translated Sanskrit Shastras into Assamese and Brajabuli languages in order to penetrate the essence of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement into mind of the masses.

This Vaishnavite movement bound all the people of Assam irrespective of high and low, rich and poor, tribal and non-tribal, king and subject, Brahmin Shudra. It brought revolutionary changes in Assamese culture through the introduction of dhola, mridanga in the Kirtanas. The impact of this movement is immense in Assam. It united the people of Assam in spite of diversity of castes, communities, races, clans and tribes.