

Contribution Of Srimanta Sankardeva's Neo- Vaishnavism To The Indian Education System

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Abstract

In Indian history, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva occupies a very special place. He was one of the greatest saints of Mediaeval period in Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva had a crucial role in history of man kind. He is widely credited with building on past cultural relics and devising new forms of music(Borgeet), theatrical performance (Ankia Naat,Buaona),dance (Satriya) , literacy language (Brajawali). Besides,he has left an extensive literary oeuvre of trans- created scriptures (Bhagavat of Sankardeva) and different theological works. The Bhagavatic religious movement he started,Ekasarana Dharma which also called as Neo-Vaishnavite movement, influenced two of the mediaeval kingdoms - the Koch Kingdom and Ahom Kingdom and the assembly of devotees he initiated evolved over time into monastic centres called Sattras,which continue to be important social- religious institutions in Assam just as Guru Nanak,Ramananda,Kabir ,Basava and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu inspired it elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent. His influence spread even to some kingdoms as the Matak Kingdom founded by Bharat Singha and consolidated by Sarbananda Singha in the later 18th century endorsed his teachings.

Introduction:

His literary and artistic contributions are living traditions in Assam today. The religion he preached is practised by a large number of population and Sattras(Monasteries) that he and his followers established continue to flourish and sustain his legacy.

Sankardeva was born into the Shiromani (chief) Baro-Bhuyans family at Alipukhuri near Bordowa in Nagaon District of Assam. The family members, including his parents Kusumbar Bhuyan and Satyasandhya Devi, were Saktas. Sankardeva lost his father when he was about 7 years old ,and his mother died after the fifteenth day of his birth. As a result, he was fully left to the care of his grandmother Khersuti . Sankardeva began his schooling in Mahendra Kandali's tol at the age of twelve. He was a devoted pupil and from the very beginning,he made a brilliant impression on his teacher. Soon he wrote his first poem on Hari(God) with only the consonants and the first vowel as-

"Karatala kamala kamala dala nayana

Bhavadava dahana gahana vana sayana...."

Having seen this composition of Sankara,his teacher Mahendra Kandali was totally amazed and he could guess the future greatness of his young pupil Sankara. This poem is often cited as an example of the early flowering of his poetic genius. He practiced yoga with traditional learning . Sankara even surpassed a number of senior students in scholarship, which pleased his teacher so much, so that he made Sankara a 'pupil teacher'.

Sankardeva soon mastered the major scriptures and thereafter left the tol in his late teens(1466 A.D.) to attend his responsibilities as the Shiromani Bhuyan. Sankara tied the nuptial knot with Suryavati. A daughter, Manu or Haripriya was born to the couple after three or four years. In the course of a year after her birth, Suryavati died. The bereavement of his dearest wife seems to have distracted Sankara's mind from worldly affairs, and he decided to go on a pilgrimage.

Sankardeva's Philosophy of Life:

Sankardeva preached pure devotion to Lord Krishna consisting primarily in the singing (Kirtan) and listening to his deeds and activities. The people who practice his religion are referred to variously as Mahapurushia, Sarania n Sankari.

Srimanta Sankardeva started a system of initiation (Sarana) into his religion. He caused a huge social revolution by fighting against the varnashrama dharma prevailing in Assam at that time. He initiated people of all casts and religions including Muslims. After initiation, the devotee is expected to adhere to the religious tenets of Ekasana consisting in worship to one God, Krishna and offering devotion to him, forsaking completely all forms of Vedic rites. Do he himself married twice, had children and led the life of a householder, he is disciple Madhavdev did not. Some of his followers follow the celibate life (kevaliya bhakat) in the Vaishnavite monasteries- the Satras .

Sankardeva's language was lucid, his verses lilting, and he infused bhakti into everything he wrote. His magnum opus is his Kirtan-ghosa, a work so popular that even today it is found in many households in Assam. It contains narrative verses glorifying Krishna meant for community singing. It is a bhakti-kavya par excellence, written in a lively and simple language, has "stories and songs for amusement, it delights the young with its poetic beauty and elderly people find their religious instruction and wisdom."

Sankardeva's Philosophy is that of intrinsic equality in which the very doing of pure devotion is predicated on the existence of a transcendental society in which all members are essentially of one kind. His bhaktic philosophy envisages a kind of society which is modelled on Vaikuntha, the transcendental society, in which the governing ideal is one of equality. Bhakti was the chief ideal of Sankardeva's philosophy of life and to him God creates man to perform bhakti and it is only Bhakti which can save life in this creation. Apart from this, he was a psychologist too who could study and understand the minds of the mass people. Therefore he laid stress on the major four elements in teaching people the ways of Bhakti which were Sravana (listening),

Kirtana(chorus singing), Smarana(realising),and Archana(individual prayer).

Sankardeva's humanism has a universal appeal. Sankardeva taught as the value of generosity and selflessness by leading a simple and gratified life free from the intermittent pleasures of agony, jealousy and hostility. He showed the path of life that is different from material life, but at the same time, it is rooted in the reality. His views against bodily pleasures and sensual enthusiasm may open the eyes of our countrymen who are being submerged in the modern civilization of the west. He preached the value of non violence knowing well that non violence is not cowardice essence. The path he chose was filled with thorns, threats and hazards; he had to be a victim of defamation and slanders, as an accused to face the royal courts, lose his son-in-law and had to hide himself to save his own life for the sake of his own ideals. But he did not bow down his head before anyone in fear of losing his life. He revolted against the prevailing order of things silently and with abstinence. He was a revolutionary, but with modesty and empathy as his armour.

Mahapurush Sankardeva broke the barriers of seclusion that people living in the land of Assam through the spread of his Neo- Vaishnavism, though had to suffer a lot to uniting the masses of Assam; but contributed in the formation of a general Assamese society. He brought Assam closer to India by inculcating the idea of Indianness in the minds of the Assamese people. He frequently spoke of his pride of being an Indian; he wrote, Bharatvarsha(India) is a land desired even by the Gods and one can be born here on the strength of the devotion acquired through many rebirth.

Neo -Vaishnavism was not an indigenous ideology to Assam, Sankardeva took it from outside through Sanskrit sources but he cultivated it in a effective manner without philosophical jargons with a local tank and colour that the common people accepted this ideology very easily without thinking anything foreign about it.

In the juncture of the growing threats of dissipation in the present day Assam, Sankardeva's virtues on oneness, integrity , equality and unity is undoubtedly of immense value and should be a focal point in the intellectual context of today.

He propagated a philosophy though as a man of religion, was to a great extent- worldly, he was never ordinary to this society as well as in the world. As a highly social man, Sankardeva extremely aware about the conditions of the society and tried to relief his mates of the sufferings that society had imposed to them. With the concept of the Sattria institution, he tried to reduce the sufferings in practical way. He travelled almost every kingdom of knowledge, art , literature and humanities, which always prove that he is a man of truth. In today's age, when extreme forms of specialisation have made people into a machine, made him more a learned moron , we will not be able to enjoy the diversity of happiness that life offers unless we assimilate the idea of universal man propounded by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva.

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva's View On Education and Practices:

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva was an important personality in the records of Indian History . He was a religious mentor, spiritual leader, social reformer who had Sanskritised the poly- ethnic collage of north- east India assimilation them by merging them with the mainstream by the way of creating a harmonious socio-religious environment. He is the founder of Modern Assamese society. He made his evergreen impact on religion, culture, literature, spirituality and cultural life of the Assamese people.

Sankardeva envisioned an unbiased Society, where members from all sections life irrespective of caste, creed, tribe and community will be able to see together for the prayer of God and feed together. He advocated that there is no sense of caste difference in Bhakti. The Neo- Vaishnavite faith regarded that Bhakti is open to all people irrespective of caste, creed, and communities and it put challenge to the

age- old Brahminic religion.As as a non brahmanic endeavour, Vaishnavism prospered among the lower classes of people of the society at that time. Sankardeva made all to believe that everyone irrespective of their caste attaching the right to pray Hari (Vishnu).The Neo- Vaishnavite philosophy propagated by Sankardeva led to the upliftment of the Assamese society and trademark of this promoting movement in Assam acted as a catalytic agent in the evolution of two unique institutions, namely the Sattras Institution and the Namghara both of which worked as the medium for spreading the newly formed faith as well as to develop a closely associated bond in the diverse socio cultural life of the Assamese society.

Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva was the fountain head of the Bhakti movement in Assam and the explorer of Assamese art and culture, literature and language and also of education. He was a great genius, prophet, social reformer and educationist with extensive knowledge with a great personality.The Neo- Vaishnavite age of Assam was the period of renaissance of Assamese literature. Sankardeva composed a great numbers of Bargeet, dramas,versus and narratives where he explained and put forwarded the teachings of the faith he wanted to communicate. Alongwith the writings, and his nobel creations, he also organised unique institutions like Sattras and Namgharas to spread the message of his thoughts throughout the whole country. Until the time of Sankardeva, Sanskrit literature in tone, colour and form appeared to be the only in religious literature and therefore ,contained certain limitations.

Educational Strategy Of Sattras And Namgharas And Their Contribution To Modern Education System:

Sankardeva and his chief associates established Sattras as the main centres of Vaishnavite learning. The purpose and principles of all the Sattras were basically same with a certain modifications in their own ways. Vaishnavite religion has tremendous influence on the cultural, social and community life of the Assamese people which has many institutional aspects that are exercised even today. As the

institutions of education, the Sattras and Namgharas played a vital role when there was no public or private schooling system at the time of Sankardeva. Though all the Sattras are not uniform in size and influence, but they are contained same fundamental characteristics. They resemble in the Vaishnavite methods of teaching to a great extent. The 'Satriya' art and cultures spread out to the society through the Sattras. It has occupied an important place of honour in our present society also. These institutions contributed immensely to the spread of education of art and culture.

In Sanskrit, there are two independent meanings of Sattras—an almshouse and a sacrifice. But a Vaishnavite Sattrahad a special purpose and it was the central or head office of the vaishnavi movement. In its initial stage, it was only a religious setting and not a systematized and organised institution but in the later years, it becomes more systematized and more organised formal institution with particular rules and laws. Rules were strict and any offence against a disciple was not given pardon. Thus almost all the major aspects of modern educational institutions were also observed in the ancient Sattrainstitutions. Though religious teaching was the basic course of learning, but other aspects of life and living orders the members of the community were also given much stress. The Guru had to leave within the four walls of the sattracampus, the disciple had to work by themselves including cooking and washing for themselves. Other important teachings were included as training of some sorts of handicrafts during the interval between the prayer services and also some agricultural works within the campus as programs of manual learning and dignity of labour were a part of this education system.

Alongwith all these, the disciples were taught the art of manners and dealings from the very beginning. They had to learn the 'bhaktiya' behaviour to mean the behaviour of the bhaktas which were highly polite and polished. They never spoke in the first person, but always indirectly and politely in the passive form. They could not think that they had done anything by themselves, but everything was done by their grace of God. Rigid and effective discipline was

followed at all the times and nobody told any lie and the Guru had every right to punished the liar strictly.

The ancient sattras institutions were not lagging behind and not anyway inferior to our modern formal schools. Like today's educational institutions, co- curricular activities and course of study was a compulsory characteristic of teaching. Dancing and music were taught to the disciples and also dramatic performances of devotional plays was frequently organised on all important occasions. Boat race, the game of dhop, game of cowrie on the Bahag Bihu etc were also some group games held by the inmates of the Sattras.

The old sattras institutions were not only the centre of religious education but also sats kind of educational institutions through which moral, social and economical life of the Assamese people was controlled and guided. Art and literature were also given much importance in the itching process in the sattras. These great institutions created a sense of friendship, universal brotherhood, integrity among the Vaishnavas with the same Nam- kirtana, same God, same name, same prayer and same ideals and virtues. The Sattras made some special provisions for the tribal people of ancient Assam for bringing them forward into the fold of Vaishnavism. Thus the value of national integration was introduced in the Sattras.

Conclusion:

Through this study, a humble attempt has been made to discuss about the spiritual and value education preached by Srimanta Sankardeva through 'Eksarana Dharma'. This article also focused on how the Sattras and the Namgharas has contributed eminently in the assimilation and socialization process of the great Assamese culture and identity.

From the above discussion, it can be reflected the pivotal role of Sankardeva's 'Neo - Vaishnavism' and more specifically through the symbols of its institutionalised framework of Sattras and Namgharas have contributed

abundantly in the process of social evolution of the great Assamese culture and identity.

As a whole, we have earned the expertise of talking more and more, but executing less and less of what we talk about. It is the high time to join hands together and take the lead to reform this decaying society in the Sakara way. Let us all take the eternal message of Sankardeva by heart and endeavour our best to achieve his goal for a glorious 'Bharatvarsha' -

"Dhanya Dhanya kali-kaala

Dhanya nara- tanu bhala

Dhanya dhanya Bharat barisa"

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