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Socio-Cultural Dimension of Vaishnavism in the Pre Sankaradeva Assam Vis-À-Vis the Neo-Vaishnavism

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Abstract

Most of the historians and scholars discuss the Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam from various perspectives, but the antiquity of Vaishnavism in Pre-Sankaradeva Assam has left in the periphery though it has a historical background. Though the antiquity of Vaishnavism in Assam is not well known, but the worship of Vishnu was evidently prevalent in Pre-Sankaradeva Assam. Both archaeological and literary sources point to the conclusion that the worship of Vishnu and his incarnations was established in the land from early times before Sankaradeva preached the Neo-Vaishnavism.

However, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement preached by Sankaradeva in Assam brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life and a distinctly healthy harmony to social behaviour. By simplification of heterogeneous religious beliefs with the ideals of humanism and non-violence, the Neo-Vaishnavism called for injunction against animal killing and blood sacrifices.

The present study is expected to bring light the socio-cultural dimensions, changes and continuity of Vaishnavism in Pre-Sankaradeva Assam and in the period of Neo-Vaishnavism. The approach of the research is historical and analytical. Taking into account all the available sources, micro-study and inter-disciplinary method of study has done to make it more comprehensive.

Keywords: *Vaishnavism, Pre-Sankaradeva Assam, Neo-Vaishnavism, Socio-cultural dimension.*

Introduction:

“Vaishnavism appears to have been prevalent in Assam at a time when Surya worship and Brahmanical culture made considerable progress, and as the evidence shows, the worship of both Vishnu and his incarnations was prevalent in the land from early times.”¹ The antiquity of Vaishnavism in Assam is not known, but the worship of Vishnu was evidently prevalent in Pre-Sankaradeva Assam. Both archaeological and literary sources point to the conclusion that the worship of Vishnu and his incarnations was established in

the land from early times before Sankaradeva came into the scene. The *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* abound in indications of the prevalence of the Vaishnava faith in Pre-Sankaradeva Assam.

Vaishnavism is the cult of worshipping Vishnu as the supreme deity in any one of his several forms. “The origin of Vaishnavism in Assam, and the antiquity of the origin of Vishnu-Vasudeva-Krishna in India is disputed.”² Some ascribe the origin of Vishnu-Krishna to the Mediterranean-Dravidian element³ and even to the Stone Age⁴, while others point to their non-Brahmanic or non-Vedic origin.⁵ In any case, the worship of Vishnu is as old as the *Rig Veda*, where hymns are addressed to Vishnu in the *Rig Veda* itself and he is called one of the Adityas, and the Bhagavata doctrine was a development of the Sun-worship, common to both the Iranians and Indians.⁶ But Vishnu was only a minor god found mention in the *Rig Veda* and Vaishnavism as a faith is not found until the period of the *Mahabharata*.

In course of time, Vishnu came to be identical with Krishna-Vasudeva of the time of the Kuru-Pandavas as found mention in the *Mahabharata*. The name Vasudeva finds mention in later Vedic literature. The legends of Vishnu-Krishna are given in more details in the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata-Purana*, and the followers of this cult are called Bhagavatas. The earliest reference to the Bhagavatas is found in the *Brahma Sutras*, while the name Krishna is mentioned in the *Chandogya Upanisad*.⁷ Even Buddhist works like the *Avadanajataka* mention Nara-Narayana-Vishnu.⁸

Discussion:

It is almost impossible to trace the origin of Vaishnavism in Assam, but the association of Vishnu-Krishna with Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa (early Assam) is well-known. The kings of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa trace their lineage to Vishnu. According to the Naraka legend, as given in the *Kalika Purana* (chapter 38), it was Vishnu who was responsible for establishing Naraka as the monarch of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa. In the *Mahabharata*, Vishnu is called *Pragjyotisa-Jyestha*.⁹ Banabhatta in his *Harshacarita* describes Bhaskarvarman as a progeny of the Vaishnavas.¹⁰ Similarly, the Hayunthal Grant of Harjaravarman (v. 23) also traces the descent of Salastambha dynasty from Vishnu.¹¹ King Bhaskaravarman is said to have been created by Brahma (Nidhanpur grant, v.19). The popularity of the Vaishnava cult is shown by some of the names of the donees of the Nidhanpur grant e.g. Vishnughoshasvamin, Narayanasvamin, Vishnusvamin, Kesavasvamin, Janardanasvamin etc. Ratnapala is compared with Rama, Krishna, Purusottama and Janardana (Gauhati grant, vv. 2, 4, 5). The last of the copper plate grants of the period, we find that the Assam plates of Vallabhadeva (1185 AD) begin with a salutation to Lord Vasudeva.¹² “The mode of worship of Vasudeva-Krishna is according to a procedure prescribed in a set of texts known as *Pancaratra Samhitas*. The Pancaratra form of worship is marked by the predominance of the rituals common to the Tantric-Sakta cult besides *mantra* and *yantra*. It is observed that the *Pancaratra Samhitas* make the first emergence of Sakta principles in the Vaishnava

sect.”¹³ In the Pre-Sankaradeva Assam whatever trace of Vaishnavism we find, was presumably of the Pancaratra type.¹⁴

The socio-cultural history comprises all aspects of social, economic, educational, religious, artistic and other activities of human being. So as the socio-cultural dimension of the Pre-Vaishnavite Assam is the sum total of the crude and advanced elements associated with these aspects of human life. Pre-Sankaradeva Assam i.e. Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa proper was inhabited by Proto-Mongoloid, Proto-Australoid and Alpine people.¹⁵ Before the advent of Naraka, the great bulk of the population of early Assam was predominately Kiratas, or the Mongoloid people.¹⁶ Though it is difficult to determine when the Aryans and Aryanism made a foot-hold in Assam, the time of advent of Naraka is considered to be a tentative demarcating line for the penetration of Aryanism into this land.¹⁷ The *Kalika Purana* speaks of the earliest Aryan settlements that were made by Naraka in this land.¹⁸ However, it is presumed that “the Alpine people might have carried Aryan culture to this land prior to the advent of the Indo-Aryans. So, either the Alpines or the later Brahmanas who were brought and settled in Assam by Naraka, Bhagadatta and by the rulers who ruled from the 4th century A.D., had played a vital role in social change through ‘Sanskritisation’ among the local people.”¹⁹

References to the *varna*²⁰ scheme, understood as the fourfold traditional division of Hindu society, are remarkably present in the sources of Pre-Sankaradeva Assam. The earliest epigraphic reference to the brahmanas is found in the Nidhanpur grants of Bhaskaravarman.²¹ However, regarding the *varna* system, Nayanjot Lahiri opines that “In trying to understand Kamarupa society in this period, the *varna* ranking system seems too simplistic a model to use. Society, by the *varna* system of stratification, seemed to be divided for all practical purposes between the brahmins and non-brahmins.”²² The early Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa epigraphs and literary sources refer to *varna*, *varnasrama* and *aryadharmā*, but it was not used for all practical purposes in its original sense. However, while speaking of the *varna* scheme of the early Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa, mention of the two *varnas* i.e. the kshatriyas and the vaishyas are rarely mentioned in the sources. It was rather a theoretical statement referring to the brahmanas and men of other professions including the tribals all swelling the sudra community.²³ The idea of *varnasrama dharmā* similar to that which developed in the other parts of India, and advocated by Manu and others, was introduced and popularized by the brahmanas who were the recipients of the landed properties and other grants from the kings.²⁴ The kings were projected as the preserver of the *varnasrama dharmā* by the beneficiaries and facilitated the absorption of the local tribal cults and rituals within the Brahmanical religion.²⁵

The Vaishnavism in Pre-Sankaradeva Assam thus demonstrates this process of assimilation and absorption of the local tribal beliefs, rituals and customs within the greater Brahmanical tradition. The assimilation of the local tribes, their gods and goddesses with the incoming social and religious elements resulted in formation of a distinguished regional society characterized by Brahmanical and local flavour. “The accommodation of tribal gods and goddesses and ritual practices within the greater Brahmanical tradition accelerated the

process leading to creation of an integrated society...But the process affected the society in much limited way; and it failed to bring all the local ethnic groups within the peasant-cum-caste society.”²⁶ In the literary works of Pre-Sankaradeva Assam, mention is made of several professional and occupational groups which might have encompassed broadly within the theoretical *varna* scheme but it is supposed that they were not strictly involved in what was normally understood as the specific *varna* duties.²⁷ Such groups included scribes (*kayastha*), writers (*karanika*, *lekhayita*, *lekhaka*), engravers (*sasayita*, *sekyakara*, *taksakara*), artists (*silpi*), astrologers (*daivajnas*), soothsayers (*tarkkukas*), potters (*kumbhakara*, *hadi*), weavers (*tantranam*), etc.²⁸ On the other hand, some of the social groups were categorized as occupational based castes in course of time, i.e. Kaivartta community. Social groups that could not be incorporated in the *varna* system were mentioned by their names of the specific tribes, i.e. Avara (Abors), Daluha (Daflas), Vrihadrava (chief of the Rabhas), etc. also found mention.²⁹

The family system was based upon patriarchy, the father being the head of the family, possessing sole authority over his property. The life in general has been based upon the joint family system.³⁰ Evidence of the joint ownership of landed property is furnished by the Nidhanpur grant (vv. 25/26) by which land was given to several brothers jointly. The division of the joint property among brothers is also indicated.³¹ A good evidence of the joint family system is also found in the Parbatiya plates of Vanamaladeva (v. 27), under which the four brothers Curamani, Detobha, Garga and Sambhu lived together. The social structure of Pre-Sankaradeva Assam and its solidarity was based to a great extent on the institution of marriage, having social and religious sanction, is found mention in the literary works.³² Normally among the higher classes, the institution of marriage has been based on formal rites according to the *prajapatya* type.³³ However, we have no details of the marriage ceremonies of the ancient Assamese in general. The whole ceremony has a socio-religious sanction, and the sanctity attached to it perhaps made divorce impossibility.³⁴ Though details are lacking to arrive at a definite conclusion on the question of the social and cultural progress of the period, we have the evidences to believe that harmony among different groups was the key note of the system, and the non-Aryans and pre-Aryans in particular largely contributed to and influenced the level of Assamese social structure almost in all its aspects.

Assam in the medieval period witnessed a tremendous Neo-Vaishnavite revival in the 16th and 17th centuries of the Christian era. The movement was initiated by Sankaradeva, a man of versatile genius, in the last decade of the 15th century and gained strength and momentum in the succeeding two centuries. The ritualistic and priest-ridden complex religious rites of the Brahmanical religion were not considered suitable for the majority of the people who belonged to the non-Aryan aboriginal groups with little or no knowledge of Sanskrit language in which the Hindu rites were conducted. Sankaradeva, therefore, considered it desirable to evolve a religion which would not only be simpler in form but also easily practicable by all sections of people irrespective of their caste, social position and educational attainment. The monotheistic Bhakti cult with emphasis on *sravana*

(hearing or listening), *kirtana* (singing or reciting) and *samarana* (remembering) of the names of the adorable Lord was found suitable to satisfy the needs of the times. Sankaradeva, therefore, embarked on the arduous expeditions of reorienting the religious life of the people of Assam on the basis of monotheistic bhakti cult propounded in the *Bhagavata-Purana* and the *Gita*. They substituted the unintelligible Sanskrit versions of the religious scriptures by easily understandable Assamese versions of important religious works including the two great epics and some Vaishnavite Puranas.³⁵

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement preached by Sankaradeva in Assam brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life and a distinctly healthy harmony to social behaviour. It accelerated the pace of a renaissance of literature and fine arts like music, dance, painting, etc. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Assam was declared “The dignity of the individual endeavour of man as a distinct religious being and not as the thrall of theological despotism. The use of the local language in expositions of theology and philosophy was in itself a challenge to the erstwhile guardians of secret doctrines, who understood the significance of the challenge and protested very much. The new humanism eyed askance at the numerous blood sacrifices, including the immolation of man, and the nice sacerdotalism that was the order of the day in Hindu society. The use of Assamese, an Indo-Aryan tongue, which formed but an island in a Tibeto-Burman ocean, as the medium for the propagation of the Neo-Vaishnava faith led to its emergence as the language of all the people.”³⁶ The ancient Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa was thus undergoing a massive change, and it was having almost a regeneration, political and social, which timed well with the cultural resurgence initiated by the Neo-Vaishnavite movement preached by Sankaradeva; and the first possibilities of a unified and modern Assam was in evidence.

In the tribal social complex of the Pre-Sankaradeva Assam religious beliefs of Vaishnavism were predominantly governed by occult practices like *tantra*, *mantra*, *yantra*, magic, sorcery, belief in spirits and blood sacrifices etc. Speaking of this situation Moheswar Neog opines that “due to a confused admixture of different Hindu and Buddhist tantric cults a mysterious atmosphere was created in the country which came to be known to the outside world as a land of mysticism and sorcery”.³⁷ All the tribes including the ruling ones, such as the Ahoms, the Koches, the Kacharies, the Chutiyas, and the Hindu communities like the Bhuyans were patrons of tantric and rites and customs and accustomed to sacrifices.³⁸ It was in such a situation that the Neo-Vaishnavism by simplification of heterogeneous religious beliefs with the ideals of humanism and non-violence called for injunction against animal killing and blood sacrifices. Major attention in the Vaishnava ideals was confined to the liberation of the mass people consisting of peasants, slaves (bondage, self-sale or debt-slavery³⁹) and servants, women and the *Mlecchas* or *Kiratas* i.e. the tribes.⁴⁰ Attempts to gather people in congregational prayer, to encourage scientifically adopted cultivation, although not an affluent but to have a self-sufficient life, to teach them to bow down only to the supreme god usually in form of *guru*, to train in art and crafts, that all aimed at breaking down the old system of feudal relationship in the society.⁴¹

Congregational prayer equated people of various castes through an attempt to break down the class-caste formations.⁴²

Conclusion:

It is wrong to believe that the Neo-Vaishnavism that preached by Sankaradeva is a new outcome, but it is the fact that the basis of the Vaishnavism in Assam lies in Pre-Sankarite period with different ideologies and practices. It was the Vaishnavism and other Hindu religions of Pre-Sankaradeva era that through the gradual process of sanskritisation led to incorporation of most of the indigenous inhabitants to one roof and reinforced, and the Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam flourished as a well organised movement on the base that the early Vaishnavism created. The ritualistic and priest-ridden complex religious rites inspite of equality and fraternity, occult practices, and lack of organised manner were the fact that the Vaishnavism in Pre-Sankaradeva Assam could not exist for long, and the outcome of the Neo-Vaishnavism was an attack on the system which finally collapsed it.

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