**Emergence of Caste System in the state of Assam with special reference to Neo-Vaisnavite Movement by Srimanta Sankareva**

 **Dr. Sonali Chakraborty Kumbang**

 **Department of Education, Murkongselek College**

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| ***Abstract :Assam a multicultural polygot region.There were examples of cultural assimilation and syncretism instead of a great conflict among the ethnic communities in the state of Assam.The Bhakti movement and neo-vaishnavism has a great impact on the lives of the tribals of Assam. This study aims to focus on this aspect of complex population structure and the impact of the neo-vaisnavite movement that has given a new dimension to the tribals of the state of Assam. This study is mainly based on the gathered information, data compared with published and unpublished works verified by interview and queries on field work.*** ***Key words: polygot, neo-vaishnavism, assimilation***  |

**Introduction:**

 The present region of North East India was made after the British annexed Assam through the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 and by making several expeditions annexed the tribal dominated hill areas, and ruled till India got independence by forming districts and frontier tracts. Before the advent of the British during Ahom rule the hill areas were not the parts of the “Bor Axom” as depicted in Ahom chronicles. The hills people were having amicable relations with the Ahom Kingdom of plains. The Ahom kingdom was a semi feudal state and the then Assam was the land of Mongoloids and Kiratas. The Aryan religion and customs did not exist in Assam. The culture of Assam was the collection of small traditions of the tribal people who lived in Assam from time immemorial. Later on in different periods people migrated from other regions to this region more specially to the plains in search of better life chances and life styles. Regarding the emergence of caste system in earlier ‘Bor Axom’ presently the Assam plains Das(2019) viewed as under “*Caste system was not there in Assam where the population was either tribal or mostly of tribal origin, the only occupation was cultivation. Assam was the storehouse of the Mongoloid. Assam since 13th century till the take over by the Britishers in 1826 was ruled by the Ahoms a semi tribal group and they believed in social equality and could accommodate themselves to casteism. They introduced the “Paik” system(division of functions) and conferred status and privileges on the individuals on the basis of their allotted functions. The categorization of the functional grouping was the advent of the caste system in Assam.”* The power and wealth(prerequisites) associated with the category of the status group led to the unequal distribution of wealth amongst the various functional grouping and gave rise to the social stratification in which two distinct strata viz., the rich and the powerful and working class, the poor-came into existence and the poor remained ritually impure and this ritualized inequality is the base on which the caste system got scope to prosper.

 In this way caste system emerged in earlier Bor Axom during Ahom rule.

**Caste, Class and Mobility in the Traditional Society of Assam**

Caste system in the traditional society consisted of both castes and tribes, and social status of the latter groups were evaluated with the framework of the Hindu hierarchical system. In the hierarchical system Brahmins enjoyed social superiority, but they were liberal in their outlook regarding occupations, social laws and commensal relations with other castes. Kshatriyas and Vaisyas were absent in Assam. Among the Sudras, the Kayasthas and the Kalitas were regarded as higher castes. Most of the Vaisnava preceptors belonged to the Kayastha caste and they were vastly learned people. They had achieved a socio-religious status equivalent to that of the Brahmins. In medieval Assam, a number of ruling tribes were converted into castes for higher social status in the hierarchy. The Koches were given a caste status in the sixteenth century. They subsequently absorbed many local tribes who accepted their methods of sanskritization. The Ahoms- a Shan tribe, embraced Hinduism in the seventeenth century. The Kacharis were a Mongoloid tribe. The Rabhas, a Hinduized section of them, were ranked superior to the Kacharies. Miri, Mikir, and some other tribes also constituted an important section of the tribal social structure.

At the end of the fifteenth century, Sankardeva’s Vaisanavite movement (1449-1569) brought considerable changes in the social structure by intensifying social mobility and changes in the caste system. Sankardeva institutionalized Vaisanavism in the form of Satra(temple organization) and Namghar(temple). The spiritual bond and fellow-feelings fostered by these institutions considerably reduced caste rigidity. Sankardeva, a Sudra, was Kayastha by caste, he preached Vaisnava ideology during the first half of the sixteenth century. He become Gosain (religious preceptor) and succeeded in raising himself, his descendents and his Sudra followers to the status of highest spiritual and religious power equal to that of the Brahmins. The Ahom rulers gave equal respect and social status to the Sakta and Vaisanava Gosains belonging to Brahmin and Sudra castes, whose status was further strengthened by the political relations with the kings. Due to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement launched by the Saint Sri Sri Sankardeva different castes and tribes of Assam could become disciples of the same Satra which is the monastery of Neo- Vaishnavism. One could visit the Satras and pay homage to the same Satradhikar i.e. the Principal of Head of the Satra irrespective of caste. In Neo- Vaishnavism which was preached by Saint Sankardeva there is no need of any professional priest to perform rituals; whoever is good enough in chanting Namkirtana i.e., prayer song of God he would lead the congregational prayer, irrespective of castes. In Neo- Vaishnavism there is no deity or spirit worship. This is the religion which believes in only one God and none else and he is worshipped by reciting the nam kitans and there is no sacrifice in this religion.

**The Beginning of Neo- Vaishnavite Movement in Assam**

 Since the beginning of the 13th century, the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. Constant friction and conflict for supremacy amongst powers was the order of the day, which severely affected the political condition of the region. The political instability brought about a chaotic condition in the religious sphere also. Assam in the fifteenth century presented a motley picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The majority of the people belonged to non-Aryan tribes having distinct manners, customs and religious beliefs. Those who professed Hinduism loosely adhered to Vaishnavism or Saivism. At the other end of the religious spectrum were the bulk of the indigenous tribal population who followed their indigenous tribal faiths. Bringing all these diverse communities and warring factions under a systematized religious code and conduct of life and to provide the masses with a mode of worship, which would be simple and at the same time accessible to all was what constituted the pressing need of the time.

Against this backdrop, Srimanta Sankardeva appeared on the scene. A multi-faceted genius, Srimanta Sankardeva was at once a spiritual leader, a social reformer, a prolific writer and a master playwright and composer. He is credited with providing the bedrock of Assamese culture, and creating a religion that gave shape to a set of new values and social synthesis. The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam in the latter period of the 15th century ushered in an era of socio-cultural renaissance in Assam, humanist in content and popular in form, in literature as well as in the vocal and visual arts. Sankardeva being born in the low caste ‘*Kayastha*’ and working away from the centers of orthodox Brahmanism like Kashi was relatively bolder than his counterpart in other parts of the country. His main focus was to preach the ‘*Bhakti’* of Narayana and other things came as a complimentary. In his *‘Dasama’* Sankardeva said, “A Chandala who remembers God with heart and soul is superior to a Brahmin observing religious vow.” After Sankardeva the network of the ‘*Satras’* and *‘Namghar’* spread in the Brahmaputra valley. *‘Namghar’* is a place of Worship in village similar to ‘*Satra’* but on a smaller scale. The population belonging to different tribes and communities found a common place to come together and satisfy their spiritual thrust. Out of these gatherings the common identity as Vaishnavas began to develop religious practices are one of the important unifying factors. The attempts of Neo-Vaishnavism to bring the different tribes together is obvious from the sayings of **Madhavdeva,**

 “By uttering O Rama.

 One attains salvation including

 The Miris, the Ahoms and the Kacharis.”

The *‘Neo-Vaishnavism’* had also given freedom to the people from the tyranny of the Brahmin priest and complicated costly rituals and also from the heinous practices of the prevailing *‘Shakta’* cult. Sankardeva did have some disciples among the tribal and Muslim disciple as well. People from all castes and all walks of life were received by Srimanta Sankardeva as disciples and they could even act as teaches in his Vaishnava Order. The peripheral groups including the so- called untouchables and backward classes and tribes were taken into the new fraternity. People of the so-called untouchables or lower castes came to live in fellowship with those of the highest castes in Assamese villages and they could take part in all functions of the villages. Srimanta Sankardeva devised a tactic to dissuade these people from worship of lesser deities, where sacrifice of creatures was involved. He debarred his disciples from visiting the places where worship of any lesser deity took place. He taught the people practically how they should sacrifice the animal within them and not sacrifice any living being. So, the true meaning of Veda was preserved in the *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma,* not in the Shakti cult, where animal sacrifice is indispensable.

**Changing Scenario of the Caste System in Assam**

Change in the caste system gradually begun from the 16th Century when Neo- Vaishnavite movement begun headed by the Saint Shri Shri Sankardeva. This religion does not believe in caste distinction. It accepts and welcomes any person who embraces this Neo- Vaishnavism are treated as equals. Doors of Satras are open to all persons irrespective of castes who have embraced Neo-Vaishnavism. The introduction of Neo- Vaishnavism paved the way for closer interaction between castes and tribes. In Sankariya Vaishnavism no distinction is maintained between caste and tribe. Devotees of both the groups sit together and offer prayer in the same premise and take *Prasads.*

Changes have taken place in caste occupational. Except the Brahmins and Kayasthas, the other castes have accepted any occupation that is good for earning livelihood. Thus agriculture has become major occupation for all the castes of the state.

In reality the caste is taken into consideration for settlement of marriage and family rituals. In other social matters the caste as factor is gradually losing its ground. In fact in case of marriage also in greater Assamese society inter-caste marriage, is becoming a common phenomenon.

In the sphere of political participation specially in case of enjoying political power of the present political system of the state . It is no longer concentrated in the hands of the upper castes as it used to be a few decades ago. Now it is getting diffused among all castes and tribes of Assam. So, it is now observed that wind of changes are blowing in the sphere of caste system in Assam.

In the past decades the following major chances were noticed in Assamese society –

* **Trends for inter-caste marriage:** Purity of blood was one of the main aim of the caste system. As a result, inter-caste marriages were socially forbidden. Due to economic and social necessities, inter-caste marriages on western lines are being performed at increased frequency.
* **Challenge to orthodoxy:** Orthodox practices of the caste system such as child marriage, ban on widow re-marriage, ban on conversion, insensitiveness of superior class towards the low caste people are being challenged in the wake of Neo- Vaisnavite movement.
* **New food habits:** Due to frequent mixing of the people at meetings, conferences, seminars etc., food habits have changed. Moreover, people have adapted to new social norms such as eating at the same table, accepting food prepared by low caste people without any reservations.
* **Changes in occupation:** Occupational mobility has become the new feature. Leaving behind their traditional roles, Brahmins have become traders whereas Vaishyas have joined the teaching profession and so on.
* **Improvement in the position of lower caste:** Due to steps initiated by the government, position of lower castes have improved economically as well as socially.

**Conclusion:**

 In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva, in terms of its humanistic philosophy, art, literature, music and institutions stands at the very core of the Assamese cultural identity even as it contributes immensely to the process of socialization in Assam. Through the Vaishnavite movement the individuals of various castes, creed races and different social groups which lived in various circumstances, their religious beliefs, practices and execution were likewise become same and unique. Individuals were by degrees were changed over into one regular religious faith dependent on devotional principles. The *Satra* is viewed as the fundamental religious part of *Neo-Vaishnavism.* At the point, when the society or people in Assam was unrest, divided and group-ridden around then *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement spread the possibility of universal brotherhood.

 The socio- cultural situation in Assam and in India would have been worse than today without the efforts of the Bhakti saints of making religion relatively simple. The division and conflict that we see around us would have been probably sharper without them. By reducing the complications within the individuals and purifying the life of the individuals, Bhakti saints had tried to create harmonious individuals. And finally, we can say that, Sankardeva’s religion is most liberal, lenient, least difficult furthermore simplest way of attaining God and ready to keeping everything under control. In a word, we can term Sankardeva as an incredible social scholar, philosopher and thinker who achieve an equity of presence among all segments of individuals.

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