

# Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and New Social Structure of Assam

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## ABSTRACT:

Śaṅkaradeva was the propagator of the neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith of Assam which was a part of great Vaiṣṇava movement of India. Assam was fortunate to have a versatile personality like Śaṅkaradeva in the fifteenth century who was able to give a new social structure of Assam. Before the advent of Śaṅkaradeva the socio-political and religious conditions of Assam were very poor where religion had lost its' true meaning and significance. Through his *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma dharma*, the religion of self surrender to one, who is Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, Śaṅkaradeva was able to bring a remarkable changes in different fields of Assamese life and culture. By abolishing rites, rituals and crude religious practices, Śaṅkaradeva tried to give a simple form of religion with devotion as the cardinal feature to bring individual as well as social uplift. As a religious reformer, a humanist, a socio-cultural activist Śaṅkaradeva will remain as an indispensable part of Assamese life. In this paper, an attempt is made to show the prevailing social conditions of mediaeval Assam and Śaṅkaradeva's contributions in giving a new social platform to all sections of the society.

**Key words: Vaiṣṇavism, Śaṅkaradeva, Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement**

## Objectives of the study:

- To make a general account of Vaiṣṇavite movement of India.
  - To make a study of Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement of Assam.
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- To give an analysis of Śaṅkaradeva's Philosophy.
- To show the prevailing social conditions of Śaṅkaradeva's Assam.
- To establish Śaṅkaradeva as a religious reformer of Assam and a pragmatic philosopher.

### **Methodology: Analytical and Comparative study**

#### **Sources of the Study:**

Primary Sources - Some Original Works of Śaṅkaradeva

Secondary Sources-

- (i) *Charit-Puthi* (Compiled and Edited)
- (ii) Some Research Works done on the Bhakti Movement of India
- (iv) Relevant books on Vaiṣṇavite Movement and Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement of Assam
- (iv) Relevant Journals

#### **Introduction:**

The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement with devotion (*bhakti*) as its cardinal feature was started in India in the mediaeval period. But Vaiṣṇavism had existed before that and had been a living force in the Gupta period. The Gupta kings were all the champions of the religion of Vāsudeva. The germs of the Vaiṣṇavite cult may be traced back to the Vedic period. Vaiṣṇavism being a part of Hinduism worships Viṣṇu or one of his incarnations (usually Kṛṣṇa or Rāma) as the Supreme God. Intense faith in a personal God is the chief characteristic of Vaiṣṇavism which distinguishes itself with the Vedāntic thought that one God or Brahman is the substratum of everything. Viṣṇu, who is eternal Brahman of the Upaniṣads, according to Vaiṣṇava preachers, is originally a Vedic God.<sup>1</sup> In later times Viṣṇu is identified with Nārāyana, the Supreme. Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata* is also identified with Viṣṇu-Nārāyana. So, in Vaiṣṇava dharma, Viṣṇu is variously known as Kṛṣṇa, Nārāyana, Hari, Rāma etc.

Vaiṣṇavism got a new form at the later period when it was mostly associated with the concept of Bhakti or devotion to personal God. In the two great works *Mahābhārata* and *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is regarded as the son of Daivaki, who is nothing but Supreme God and represent Him as the founder of the religion surcharged with devotion which is called the Bhagavata, Satvata or Vaiṣṇava religion.

The seed of Vaiṣṇavism in South India was sown by the Ālvārs, who were the earliest Brahmin messengers to the South flourished between sixth to

ninth centuries. The collection of the hymns of these Ālvārs, consisting of four thousand verses, is called Nalayira-divya-prabandham and is placed side by side with the Veda.<sup>2</sup> Viṣṇu with all his avatāras, and particularly the Kṛṣṇa avatāra, was the object of their deep veneration. They used to adore idols of Viṣṇu of different forms, although the mode of worship was mainly confined to recitation of his names and contemplation of his forms. They gave emphasis on the emotional side of bhakti. Śhri-Vaiṣṇava Āchāryas came after the Ālvārs who united jñāna and karma with bhakti or devotion for realising God. Their object was to reconcile the Vedas, the Upaniṣads and the Gītā with the Tamil *Prabandham*.<sup>3</sup> Nāthmuni was the first āchārya. Yamunāchārya, the grandson of Nāthmuni, laid the foundation for all the doctrines that are now ascribed to Rāmānuja.<sup>4</sup>

There were four *sampradāyas* known as *Śhri*, *Brahma*, *Rudra* and *Sanakasampradāya* headed by Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha and Nimbārka respectively. Rāmānuja expounded the theory of Vishiṣṭādvaitavāda (Qualified Non-dualism) where Madhvāchārya expounded Dvaitavāda or (Unqualified Dualism). Āchārya Vallabha's theory is known as Shuddhādvaitavāda (Pure Non-dualism) and Āchārya Nimbārka expounded the theory known as Bheda-bhedavāda or Dvaitādvaitavāda (Dualistic Monism). All other current minor sects are said to have been included in these four *sampradāyas*. Rāmānuja tried to explain Vaiṣṇava philosophy from Vedāntic standpoint. In his *Vedānta-Saṅgraha*, an elaborate essay on the teachings of the principal Upaniṣads, he attacked the interpretation of Śaṅkarāchārya of the very famous passage of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, namely '*Tattvamasi*' or 'That thou art' and also Śaṅkarāchārya's doctrine of Māyā. According to Rāmānuja, Viṣṇu or Nārāyana alone and the only one who can be so named and so identified. Rāmānuja advocates a personal deity possessed of all attributes capable of giving liberation to devotees. Rāmānanda, who established a sect at Varanasi, brought the message of Bhakti to northern India. Gradually, through the dedicated works of Ruidās, Jayadeva, Kabir, Nānak, Mirābāi, Vallabhāchārya, Surdas, Tulsidās, Śaṅkaradeva, Chaitanya and other saints, this religious movement permeated the Indian society and a gradual shift occurred in Hinduism itself where from the domain of rituals, emphasis was getting directed towards "bhakti", i.e., towards establishing a personal God.

The official name of Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement is *Eka-śaraṇa-nāma-dharma* or *Mahāpuruṣia dharma*. Like other Vaiṣṇava cult both Śaṅkaradeva and Chaitanyadeva did not feel the need of *Vedānta Sūtra Vāśya* in propagating neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement. Śaṅkaradeva accepted *Bhāgavata-*

*purāna* and *Gītā* as the principal scriptures to construct his philosophy. Due to the emphasis on *Bhāgavata-Purāna* his religion is also called Bhāgavata dharma. After studying innumerable scriptures Śaṅkaradeva gave this monotheistic religion. It cannot be denied that Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy has similarity with the advaita vedanta of Śaṅkarācārya. But he maintained a gap with the Absolute monism of Śaṅkarācārya as well as Qualified monism of Rāmānuja. Alternately it can be said that he tried to combine both advaitavāda and bhaktivāda in order to make his religion more effective for the common people. By giving emphasis on *saguṇa sākara* worship of God Śaṅkaradeva tried to lift the illiterate people; to give them the way to *nirguṇa* Brahman. Mādhavadeva also described God as *nirguṇa*, devoid of adjuncts (*upādhirahita*) and of the nature of effulgence (*vyotirūpa*) but recommended Kṛṣṇa for devotion.

Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavite faith relies on monotheism i.e., devotion to a single, supreme God, Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. It gives emphasis on self-surrender to the supreme God Sri Kṛṣṇa who is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world. Restrictions are shown in worshipping minor gods and goddesses on the ground that they are nothing but the partial manifestations of supreme God Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. In his famous book '*Kirtana-Ghoṣā*' Śaṅkaradeva describes the twofold aspects of God and there he says that as indeterminate God is not comprehensible, devotees including the gods (*devas*) worship and adore His beatific form as Nārāyaṇa.<sup>5</sup>

*Bhakti* (devotion) plays an important role in Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy. He believes that bhakti has tremendous force in bringing a close relation between God and devotee. In various works of the sect e. g., the *Bhakti-ratnāvali*, the *Bhakti-ratnākara*, the *Bhakti-pradīpa*, the *Nāma-Ghoṣā*, the *Bhakti-viveka*, the *Saraṇa-sambhita* etc. the different aspects of *Bhakti* have been dealt with.<sup>6</sup> 'Absolute self surrender to the Lord' and 'a Feeling of ecstatic joy in serving Him' are the two characteristics of bhakti. Though Śaṅkaradeva says about nine modes of bhakti yet *śravaṇa* and *kīrtana* are popularly recognised as the best. In his *Kirtana-Ghoṣā* he narrates how Ajāmila, a sinful brahman, went to the abode of Viṣṇu when at his death-bed he remembered his son Nārāyaṇa. Lakshminath Bezbaruwa in his book 'The Religion of Love and Devotion' writes: "The eka saraṇa of the *Gītā* superimposed upon the idealism dāsya-bhakti with sat-sanga or companionship with bhaktas of the Srimadbhāgavata and the Hanumāntikāṣṭha, i.e., the unwavering and firm devotion and allegiance to one and the only one God as of Hanumān to Rāmchandra, is the main plank of Śaṅkara's creed."<sup>7</sup>

### Origin of the Problem:

The neo-Vaisnavite movement of Śaṅkaradeva and the uplift of the society are the two sides of the same coin. So, in order to discuss the new social structure of Assam it is necessary to give an account of prevailing socio-political and religious situation of mediaeval Assam. There is no doubt that Śaṅkaradeva's advent as a religious reformer was a need of that time. The aim of this article is to show the adverse scenario of Sankaradeva's religious movement and his dedication to bring new life and culture to the Assamese society.

### Discussion and Result:

Before Śaṅkaradeva's arrival, Assam showed a picture of diverse shades and grades of culture. The majority of the people belonged to non-Aryan tribes and they had distinct manners, customs and religious beliefs. The political condition was unstable due to the conflicts for supremacy of power amongst different group of Hinduism. Different sects like *Śaivism*, *Śaktism* or *Tāntric Vaiṣṇavism* were the dominating religious forces of ancient Kamrupa. The *Kālīka-purāṇa* and *Yogini-tantra* have mentioned several places sacred to God Śiva and there still exist many Śaiva temples in Darrang and Kamrup districts, some of which have been in existence at least since the time of the composition of the *Kālīka-purāṇa*. Śiva appears in the *Yogini-tantra*, as in the earlier *Kālīka-purāṇa*, oftener as a *Bhairava* than as a normal deity; and he could therefore, be adored with extreme left-handed (*vāmācāra*) practices.<sup>8</sup> J.P.Rajkhowa writes that at the Śiva temples 'Nat' or dancers were picked up to offer their dances for propitiation of Śiva and in reality these girls were subjected to the sexual exploitation by the powerful masters of the temples.<sup>9</sup> The non-Aryan tribes like Kacharies also practised a form of primitive Śaivism by sacrificing buffaloes, he-goats, pigeons, ducks, cocks, rice and liquor. Bāthau-brāi, the god of Bodo-Kacharis, can be equated to Śiva of the Hindu. Śaṅkaradeva's father Kusumbara, who had no issue till an advanced age, is said to have worshipped Śiva for a son.<sup>10</sup>

Śaktism was also a dominating force up to the advent of neo-Vaisnavism. It was mentioned in the *Kālīka-purāṇa* and *Yogini-tantra* that Śakti in her different forms was worshipped in different temples. But the centre of Śaktism had been the shrines dedicated to Kāmākhya situated in Guwahai. Another temple namely Jayantesvari of Jayantiāpura located in Jayantia hills was there, where human sacrifices also performed along with animal sacrifices. Besides Kāmākhya, Śakti in her different forms like Ugratara, Mangalcandi, Siddheswari, Bhairavi, Cāmunda, Burhi Gosāni, Dirgheswari etc were worshipped in different places. All these facts showed the dominance of Śakti worship at the time of

Śaṅkaradeva. Both the chief scriptures of Assam Śaktism, the *Kālikā-purāna* and the *Yogini-tantra*, belong to the 'left-hand' school of Śaktism, and enjoin blood sacrifices and various esoteric rites.<sup>11</sup> B. Kakati in his book "Mother Goddess Kamakhya" writes: "The land was infested with itinerant teachers of the Vāmācāra Tāntric schools with their insistence on the philosophy of sex and palate. Among religious rites, the most spectacular were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums, cymbals, night-vigils, virgin worship and the lewd dances of temple women."<sup>12</sup> Even the great Śaṅkarāchārya had to go back defeated because Śaktism was too deeply rooted in ancient Kāmrupa.<sup>13</sup>

Tāntric Vaiṣṇavism was also prevalent before Śaṅkaradeva in some places like Haygriva- Mādhava of Hajo, where the system of worship and the various mantras are in practice as given in the *Brahma Purāna*. Dr M. Neog gives an account as given in the *Yogini tantra* about the origin of the stone image of Haygriva Mādhava of Hajo, in the light of the story of the wooden icons of Kṛṣṇa, Balabhadra and Subhadrā of the great Jagannātha temple at Puri. The other form of tāntrism was Buddhist form of Tāntrism that was prevalent at the time of Śaṅkaradeva. Dr M. Neog had described about the encounter of Śaṅkaradeva with some Buddhist magicians (*baudhamatiya tatakiya*). He explained that Vajrayana Buddhism admitted the five M's (makaras) as indispensable for the votary and held that the seeker of salvation should enjoy Prajnaparamitā or perfect truth that resides in every woman.<sup>14</sup> They claimed themselves as devotees of twelve gurus (*bāra-guru*) and in practice made no discrimination as regards caste, creed and sex rules in their conducts of life. These Hindu and Buddhist form of Tāntrism with various forms of ceremonials were popular at the time of Śaṅkaradeva and Bhakti had no special place as a form of religion. As a result, religion had lost its' true significance and was used as a means of exploitation by a section of people. So, Śaṅkaradeva played an important role in bringing unity among the masses. His appearance can be treated as a Copernican Revolution. It was possible through emotionalized religious teachings and performing arts which cumulatively worked on people. Unlike other great mediaeval saints Śaṅkaradeva was not interested in professing a school of thought. Rather he can be recognized as a social and religious reformer. Man was the centre of his movement and religion was the means to achieve the development of the human being.

The social condition of the mediaeval Assam was also very poor. The lower sections of the society were dominated by the higher classes. The

Brāhmanical priests gave more emphasis on Vedic rites and rituals. They were very much concerned with their social supremacy they occupied in the society and tried to keep it up by dominating the weaker sections. Religion became the monopoly of the privileged few. Caste and class distinction were most dominating factors in religious matters. As a religious reformer, Śaṅkaradeva's prime aim was to abolish these distinctions among masses. This problem was so deep in different parts of India that some of the mediaeval Vaiṣṇavite saints like Kabir, Nanak and Dadu made an open challenge to caste system. But there is no evidence to show that Śaṅkaradeva and his followers tried to do away or interfere with caste regulation.<sup>15</sup> Nanak believed that caste is nonsense and those who love God, love everybody. Śaṅkaradeva also had faith on the spirit of "love". Śaṅkaradeva not only tried to give equal value to all human beings but also all the creatures of the world. As a strict monotheist, he believed in one God and jiva and jagata as His creations. In *Kīrtana Ghoṣā* he writes:

*tumi paramātmā jagatara iśa eka  
eko vastu nābhike tomāta vyatireka  
tumi posu paksi surāsura taru tṛna  
ajñānata mudhajane dekhe bhinna bhinna<sup>16</sup>*

(Thou art the Supreme self, the only Lord of the Universe. There is nothing real except Thee. Thou art all beasts, birds, gods and demons, trees and herbs. People, because of their ignorance, look at these in a sense of difference.)

But he was not trying to bring this radical change by challenging the prevailing religious and social codes and conduct of his time. In keeping his mind the chaotic socio-political and religious condition he had to move carefully in propagating his religion. He was deeply concerned with the prevailing social evils that were current in the name of religion and tried to wipe off them. Śaṅkaradeva, therefore, tried to give a religion which can uplift an individual and able to bring mutual understanding among different groups of people. He kept no place for Vedic rituals like homes, yajñas and animal sacrifices that were common in śākta form of Hinduism. The economically backward classes and socially downtrodden became the victims of such ghostly practices. In Śaṅkaradeva's opinion there is no need of Vedic rites and rituals. He writes:

*Tapa japa sannyāsa parama mahādane  
Napāwe sāṅkhyā yoga tattvajñāne<sup>17</sup>*

"My friend, I am beyond the reach of meditation, japa, renunciation, great charity, yoga and profound knowledge."

Mādhavadeva in his *Nāmghoṣā* says: "The indwelling Hari moves far away from him who places faith in rituals. But one who makes it religion to hear and recite Hari's name attains Kṛṣṇa even if he is not freed from the ego." Although Śaṅkaradeva does not encourage karma or the Vedic rites, provision has been left for karma mainly for citta-suddhi, in the early stages of a devotee. But in the higher stage, a true devotee realises this as meaningless and looks upon all the creatures of the universe as manifestations of God and gives them equal value.

Śaṅkaradeva's religion can be treated as a challenge to Brāhmanical Hinduism. Vivekānanda had all praise of Hinduism; but he was also very critical of the dogmas and alubius role of priests. Will Durant has rightly said, "Christ had brought the kingdom of God nearer to earth; but he has been misunderstood, and in place of God's kingdom, the kingdom of priest has been established among us."<sup>18</sup> All the Vaiṣṇava reformers gave emphasis on the fact that everyone has the equal right of worship. Śaṅkaradeva also spoke about the equality of all at the spiritual level. Spiritual realization, for him, should not be the monopoly of a socially privileged few. He gave the equal status of a Brāhmin and a Candāla at the spiritual domain. He is of the opinion that a candāla with devotion to Viṣṇu Kṛṣṇa is superior to a Brāhmin without devotion. The simplicity of his religion and disinterestedness to the caste system were the two main points which attracted the common people to participate his religion.

As a part of social upliftment, Śaṅkaradeva was also able to bring a change in the field of education. The monarch of Kāmarupa, encouraged education by introducing 'tol' or chatra-sali, the residential school, where Brahmin scholars coming from different parts were get admitted and learned Sanskrit grammar, the epics, the purāṇas and the other religious books. The Kāyasthas, had ofcourse training in their vocation under an expert professional. By establishing the *Satra* institution Śaṅkaradeva took the responsibility of enlightening the people through their *ṭols*. All the important satras used to maintain and are still maintaining regular band of scholars whose duty was to impart education, especially in respect of ancient lores and scriptures. Moreover, this type of education included physical, mental, moral and spiritual knowledge. "The various Satriā-dances like *Sūtradhārī*, *Cāli*, *Ojāpali*, *Naṭuā*, *Rāsanṛtya*, *Kṛṣṇa-nāch* and others are the special contributions of *Satra* Institution."<sup>19</sup> Mādhavadeva himself took initiative for enlightening their disciples. According to Dr S. N. Sarma, like the Christian monastery of the mediaeval times a *Satra* was a religious centre, a school and library.<sup>20</sup>



*Nām-gbar*, a mini form of *Satra* institution, also played a most important role in bringing unity among various sections of people. It became an indispensable part of assamese life at the time of Śaṅkaradeva and even today it keeps its own respectable position. It is at once a village prayer hall, village court and village theatre. It is also a platform for Pañchāyat Rāj which Śaṅkaradeva was able to introduce in the fifteenth century. In a sense, *Satra* and *Nām-gbar* are the symbol of love and bond of unity. Bhāratavarsa was glorified as a holy place and the atmosphere of this land was praised as comfortable for spiritual upliftment.<sup>21</sup>

Śaṅkaradeva was a humanist and a true believer of ethical virtues. Like Gandhiji he deeply believed that social welfare is possible only through the mental and ethical development of the individual. In the thought system of Sankaradeva, the human person is understood as a complex structure who is to be studied from different perspectives.<sup>22</sup> Śaṅkaradeva thought that every person is gifted by ethical virtues like love, kindness etc. and he should cultivate them. For him, a true religious person is pure in heart and a morally good person who can overcome his narrow selfish desire. Śaṅkaradeva, therefore, gave emphasis on *jīvan-mukti* or liberation at one's own lifetime which is possible through devotion and cultivation of the ethical virtues. He writes:

*Viṣṇumoi dekhe yito samaste jagata  
Jīvante mukuta bowai achira kālata*<sup>23</sup>

“He who sees Viṣṇu everywhere in the universe attains release even  
when alive”

“The service of humanity is the service of God” has been the motto of Vaiṣṇava reformers. Śaṅkaradeva advised his disciples not to hate anybody. As Śaṅkaradeva strictly prohibited the worship of other gods and goddesses, it may be a point of objection that he was against other sects who were not members of Vaiṣṇavite cult. But though the followers of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism were against some religious behaviours, but in actual life they were totally tolerable to the other sects. Śaṅkaradeva believes that all creatures are coming from the same source and they should be respected on their own right. He, therefore, writes:

*Kukkura srigāla garddarvaru ātmarāma  
Jānia sabāko pori koriā pranāma*<sup>24</sup>

“Even the souls of dogs, foxes and asses are verily God and with this in mind,  
they should be respected (saluted)”

Śaṅkaradeva makes use of language, literature, art and culture in propagating his religious faith. The Bargeet, Bhāonā and Ankia-bhāonā are great cultural contributions from Śaṅkaradeva which indirectly helped in educating the illiterate masses. The mediaeval saints and social reformers used the regional languages with a view to bring their messages.

### Conclusion:

Finally, it can be said that not a single aspect of assamese life left behind which was not influenced by Śaṅkaradeva's pragmatic thought. Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement is not only a religious faith but also a way of life. Mahatma Gandhi also has observed: "You cannot divide social, political and purely religious work into watertight components. It (religion) provides a moral basis to all other activities, which they would otherwise lack, reducing life to a thing of sound and fury signifying nothing."<sup>25</sup> Śaṅkaradeva tried his level best to bring harmony among different groups of people by abolishing superstitions, magical practices and selfishness of then assamese society through his *eka śaraṇa nāma dharma*. It is due to his unchallenged versatility, Assam is still remaining as the land of Śaṅkaradeva. We can conclude with the remarkable words of Dr. B. Kakati: "Śaṅkaradeva had given Assam a new life, letters and a state. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdom perished in the dust, but Śaṅkaradeva's state endures and broad in the general heart of men his power survived."<sup>26</sup>

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