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Socio-economic Background of Bhakti Movement in Assam: A Historical Study

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Abstract: The origin of Bhakti movement in Assam under Sankardev marks an important development in the socio-cultural milieu of Assam. The spread of Bhakti i.e. devotion or the concept of 'total surrender' to God has its root in south which later percolated towards north keeping the prime ideas intact. However, the idea of Bhakti, wherever it entered, adjusted itself to the local socio-cultural environment with great impact upon its people. Importing the basic tenets of Bhakti, already popularized in other parts of the country, and mixing it beautifully with the socio-cultural ethos of the land of Assam and its people Sankardev's experimentation bore fruitful results. As founder and leading member of this movement in Assam, understanding his time becomes a topic of great importance. Under the historical lens Sankardev and his time needs to be focused. We have to identify the urgency of the medieval Assamese society and economy which subsequently shaped this great man and his idea of syncretism. The society during 16th century Assam was mostly a stratified one which had its legacy going back to the rulers of ancient Assam who were more or less inclined towards Hinduism which strictly followed the notion of maintaining hierarchical structure of society according to the *jati*. Written and archaeological evidences dating to pre-Ahom era give the picture of changing Assamese society gradually from tribal to Brahmanical Hindu. This was possible largely because of the easy assimilating zeal of this version of Hinduism which incorporates the local culture and religion into its greater fold. People of Kshatriya and Brahmana identity worked as agents of this campaign. In this respect, the character of Sankardeva turns out to be exceptional of the time. Although belonging to a Kayastha Hindu, a part of the greater Hinduism, Sankardev turned his attention towards giving the religion a new direction to be acceptable for all irrespective of caste barriers. Sankardev even made the religion easy and digestible for all who were long denied of entering this faith due to this caste restriction. The existing social structure Assam did have impact on the economy. Agriculture was the occupation of majority of people. The economic activities of the people were by and large directed and controlled by the upper class, in order to maintain the social status. Kings and his officers did have significant say on the people engaged in various occupations. This was kind of 'streamlining the administration' project of the Hindu kings guided by the Brahmins. Under this socio-economic background we need to trace this Bhakti movement. The existing pre-Sankardeva society and economy of Assam gave the impetus in raising the Bhakti ideology and re-shaping the Assamese society with some new and progressive thoughts.

Keywords: Bhakti, Sankardeva, Hinduism, Society, Economy, Brahmanas

1. Introduction: Assam is a peripheral state of India. It is evidently the meeting place of diverse ethnic strains which contributed to the evolution and development of different racial groups and culture of north-eastern India. The migration of people in various waves penetrating into the land with their own set of culture contributed in making what the present state of Assam is. Human migration always brings new cultural ethos thereby exert lots of influence upon the existing socio-economic structure. The western part of Assam i.e. *Pragyotisha-Kamarupa* was the first to encounter this large scale human migration and got affected from the Aryanism via *Varnasrama* Dharma. Before this interference, the land was mostly under the primitive mode, so as to say tribalism which emphasized on animism. The people of the land were segmented into various tribes. Sources are there to suggest tribal affinities of its people which gradually intermingled with the coming new waves of religion. This process of interaction and intermingle with the native tribal society, culture and religion definitely took a considerable time, and interestingly the process is still in continuation. This assimilating campaign in Assam did introduce some notable changes. During this transition from tribal to state society under the Hindu notion kingship, a little bit of adjustment and tension bound to be there. The penetrating Hinduism under the patronage of kings, supported by the Brahmins who were further donated lands to settle and reorganize society as per the Hindu norms, created a condition of utter confusion among the natives. The Brahmins gave the sense of legitimacy to the rulers instead. The social stratification and caste based strictness attached to the incoming religious belief and the consequent impact on the economy of the land had tremendous impression upon the social life of the people. The birth of Sankardev and his notion of neo-Vaishnavism, a form of Bhakti movement in Assam need to be viewed and understood in this context.

2. Statement of the Problem: Bhakti movement in Assam is considered to be a path breaking development. Sankardev and his disciples led the movement and popularized among the natives. The impact of the movement is far reaching and still felt in the present.

A considerable amount of works have been done focusing on the Bhakti movement of Assam and its impact but the socio-economic background which created the basis has been dealt in very limited number. To fill the gap, this work is mainly about.

3. Objectives of the Study: The present study is analytical in nature and the main objectives of the study are as follows-

- (a) To study the social conditions prevailing in Assam before the Bhakti movement in Assam.
- (b) To study the economic conditions prevailing in Assam before the Bhakti movement in Assam.
- (c) To study the various socio-economic challenges of the 15th century Assamese society.

4. Research Questions:

- (a) Is there any social conditions prevailing in Assam before Sankardev?
- (b) Is there any economic conditions prevailing in Assam before Sankardev?
- (c) Do the contemporary conditions have any impact on the people of Assam in general and on Sankardev in particular?

5. Research Methodology:

To study these three major objectives, an analytical method has been used. The data have been collected from the primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources were in the form of different books written by different scholars, articles published in different journals, internet, website etc. All of the data or sources have been critically analyzed.

6. Discussions:

6.1. The Social Backdrop of the Bhakti Movement of Assam:

The history of Assam has passed several stages of development to shape the present social structure. Epigraphical and literary sources talk, though indirectly, about the social stratification introduced by and large due to the appearance of Brahmins on the Brahmaputra valley whose date of advent cannot be ascribed properly due to lack of sufficient evidence. Their zeal to aryanize the people of Assam is well attributable in the aspects like social life, custom, marriages etc. It is interesting to note here that before this proselytizing zeal of the Brahmins actually got directed towards this land, the people of this land followed non-Aryan social system which was said to be egalitarian in nature and less stratified than the Aryan one. The tribal state system, as it is termed by various scholars, was followed by various small local-level chiefs who were mostly of Mongoloid stocks, referred to as *kirata*, *danavas*, *asuras*, *mlechchas* etc. The picture of the social structure of pre-Ahom Assam was that of a mixture of colors. The cultural exchange that took place among the Mongoloid, Dravidian and Aryanised people shaped the then society. The Aryanised culture was somewhat more systematized and appealing for the others which helped in the creation of composite pre-Ahom Assamese culture. These Indo-Aryans entered the valley, among many things, with Sanskrit language. It was the duty of the rulers to uphold the 'new social structure' as enunciated by the Brahmins. Prof. S.L. Baruah comments, "The society in *Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa* rested largely but loosely on the *Varnasrama dharma*, which was steadily gaining ground under the auspices of the reigning kings whose duty it was to uphold that order."¹

Some works make interesting references to the gifts made to the gifts made to the Brahmanas by kings of Kamarupa. King Bhaskarvarman gave presents to Brahmanas through affection, even when he was a boy as mentioned in a Sanskrit text called *Kadambari* of 7th century CE composed by Banabhatta. It can be assumed from this

¹ Baruah, L.S. (1985), *A Comprehensive History Of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, p. 152

example that the ancient rulers of Kamarupa did play important role in popularizing this faith in Assam. The Nidhanpur plates clearly indicate that the kings adopted a systematic policy of settling the Brahmanas in the kingdom by gifts of land in the type of Agrahara to expedite their religious as well as literary pursuits.

The Aryan culture, in order to expand its influence, accommodated a variety of non-Aryan elements. The Mongoloid tribes were incorporated to the Hindu fold as *Sudra* class. Broadly, the ancient Assamese society was divided into the Brahmanas and the *Sudras*. Though detailed information about this Non-Brahmana class is very scant but the inscriptions mention about Kayasthas, Karanas, Lekhakas, Daivajnas, Kaivartas, Kumbhakaras, Tantuvayas, Naukis and Dandis. Most of them were professional classes rather than castes.

Hinduism has had evolved multiple times. The ostentatious arrangements of Hinduism created tensions among the newly converted natives. The discriminatory mindset and power relation actually broadened the social gap. Sankardev and his ancestors, who belonged to the Hindu fold (his ancestors were the *Baro Bhuyans*) had said to have brought with them a reformed religious mindset and maintained a balanced relation with the people who arrived the valley earlier.

6.2. The Economic Backdrop of the Bhakti Movement of Assam:

Information regarding the material condition of Assam is very scant due to overemphasize on the political-administrative history. The economic historians that are why have to do a great deal of handwork in dealing with the sources. Here I am not going to elaborate my point on the general discussion about the economy; I would rather be dealing with the probable cause of tension brought forth due to the new economic arrangement.

The economy was mainly agricultural and cultivation of paddy was the main job. The process of gradual change from jhumming method of cultivation to that of ploughing was very slow and many tribes still follow the jhumming method. Various land grants and the account of Assam by Yuan Chwang testify this transition. The king's one of the prime duties was to make the fallow lands cultivated through different methods.

The land grants of Assam show that broadly lands were given individually and forests, ferries and mines etc. belonged to the state. The Barabil grant, Subhankarapataka grant, Tezpur grant of Vanamala and Nidhanpur grant record the grant of lands to a number of Brahmanas. Bhakara's renewal of land granted by Bhutivarman indicates that these lands were in the hands of the donees for generations. The temples were also assigned lang grants. A special kind of tenure was *Brahmadeya*, by which lands were granted to Brahmanas and such grants were made in the form of small plots, or groups of villages, called *Agraharas*.

In Assam there is no direct evidence of grants made to officers for their military and administrative services. But indirect references of Brahmanas as administrative officers

and their holding high military positions can not be ignored. The grant of Dharmapala states that the Brahmana *Himanga* was expert in the discharge of military duties. Hence it may be said that some military officers were Brahmanas and they were remunerated in land revenues. Thus Brahmanas as land owning class were emerging as an intermediary class between king and temporary peasants who cultivated the lands of the priests. Similarly, there was tendency of the temples developing into a sort of semi-independent areas enjoying immunities on religious grounds. In this way this process of granting land to the beneficiaries who enjoyed several economic rights ultimately loosened the economic ties between the central authority and the donated areas. The beneficiaries had to depend more on the local tillers, artisans than on the central officials which made them grew stronger politically and economically. This power relation indicates to the presence of sub-ifeudation in Assam. The ultimate result was the decentralization in administration on account of grants of revenues to Brahmanas and other officials, common post-Gupta phenomena engulfing the northern Indian politics.

7. **Conclusion:** From the above discussion, a picture can be drawn about the socio-economic condition of the pre and early Bhakti movement in Assam. The society was divided on the basis of caste and some degree of power imbalance did exist among these people. The social relation was even based upon power which comes from the respective professional and social duties. These hierarchies played significant role in widening the gap between the ruler and the ruled; the social gap, however, was not that much wide when the tribal system was on the operation. Similarly, the social distinctions had tremendous impact on the economy. On the basis of the question of the owner of the land and ultimate power, the economic duties were parceled into different professional castes. Slowly but steadily tensions started to generate among them in terms; the internal strife plunged into abject bitterness which led to socio-economic instability. In this situation, person like Sankardev introduced the idea of Bhakti in a more subtle and easy way to bridge the gap.

Word Meaning:

Bhakti	: Devotion ; the cult of devotion
Jati	: In Hindu society, a jati is a kind of caste, or social group
Kayastha	: A high class Hindu caste
Varnasrama	: A Vedic social system which organizes society into four stages of life
Kirata in mountains	: A generic term in Sanskrit literature for the people who used to live
Mlechcha	: A term applied by the Aryans to the non-Aryans
Karanas	: A community of scribes
Daivajnas	: Ganakas; a Hindu astrologer

Kaivartas	: Fishermen
Lekhakas	: Writers
Kumbhakararas	: Potters
Tantuvayyas	: Weavers
Naukis	: Boatmen
Dandis	: Rowers of boat
Jhumming	: Slash and burn cultivation
Baro-Bhuyans	: Baro means twelve and Bhuyan means landlords; twelve landlords
Agrahara	: Royal donation of land or village to Brahmanas
Brahmadeya	: Revenue free land grants to the Brahmanas

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