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Neo Vaishnavism and Assamese Literature

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Introduction: Assam was Pragjyotishpur. Ramayana and Mahabharata mention it. East astrology means "east diamond." Kamarupa was its Middle Ages name. Kamarupa occurs in Samudra Gupta's fourth-century Allahabad Pillar inscription.

Ancient migrants and natives practised Shaivism. Harsacharita of Banabhatta describes seventh-century Shiva devotee Bhaskarvarman. The Yoga Tantra includes several Shiva sanctuaries. Shiva was tribal and regal. Shiva temples feature Bhairava-shaped Shakti temples. These temples revered Bhogi and Yoni Shiva. Tantric and Puranic rites honour them, respectively.

Hsien Tsang visited India with Kamarupa's seventh-century emperor Bhaskarvarman. Kamolup'o, 9th-century Assam or Kamarup wrote Kalika Purana. The Kalika Purana states Shiva guarded Kamakhya till Naraka introduced Devi Worship.

The Mahabharata's Narakasur ruled here. He captured Swargaloka (Heaven), the King, and sixteen thousand ladies. Krishna slew Narakasur and married sixteen thousand Dwarka women. In the Mahabharata, Arjun killed Pragjyotishpur monarch Bhagdutt. Narakasur erected Neelachal Hills Kamakhya Devi temple.

Bhagwata Purana discusses the site (sacred book of Hindus, dedicated to Lord Vishnu).

Shiva carried Sati's corpse in rage and grief. Lord Vishnu used his Sudarshan Chakra (a celestial discus) to shred Sati's body and scatter it to calm Shiva and save the cosmos. Kamakhya became a sanctuary for her genitals (Yoni).

Mahabharata. Hidimba marries Bhima. Their son Ghatotkach becomes a powerful fighter for the Pandavas in Kurukshetra.

Tantric cults have Vishnu temple ruins. Assam shakti cult thrived. Witchcraft and Tantra characterised it. Assam's Black Magic capital is Mayong. Ain-e-Akbari and Fathiya-i-Ibriyah explore mediaeval Assam magic. Mirza Muhammad Qazim's Alamgir-namah indicates that visitors to Kamarupa lost their way and couldn't return. Shaktism became popular because it was gender- and caste-free. Tantric rituals included madira (wine), mangsa (meat), matsya (fish), mudra (parched grain), and maithuna (milk) (sexual union) Assam's history began with the Kamarupa Kingdom's fourth-century PushyaVarman dynasty. Assam royals practised Shaivism and Shaktism. Assam may have had Hinduism and tribalism.

Srimanta Sankardeva led the Vaishnavism through community mobilisation: Srimanta Sankardeva's sect includes three pillars. Satsanga, holy

Bhakti congregation; Nama, reading Bhagawata Purana and Bhagawat Geeta, and Eksarana, total dedication to one's faith (Vishnu). Sankaradeva began Naam Gharas Nama kirtana devotional discourses. Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism — Eksarana Nam dharma — follows Vishnu as Rama, Krishna, and Narasingha. Assamese Vaishnavas worship Krishna, Vishnu's 8th incarnation. Neo Vaishnavism prioritised devotion above salvation and rejected idolatry. Monotheist.

Assam's Sankardev Vaishnavism worships Krishna alone. Radha-Krishna rules Manipur Vaishnavism. Sankaradeva promoted marriage. Homeowner. Bhaona dances encourage marriage.

Hindus, indigenous, and Muslims followed Sankardev. Chanted Vaishnavism. Majuli, Barpeta, Nagaon are Assam's Vaishnavism centres. Madhavadeva, his closest disciple and spiritual successor, was at Majuli. Poet, playwright, poet, and musician Madhavadeva spread Naam dharma in Assam. Historians claim Srimanta Sankaradeva and his Bhakti movement promoted spiritual equality and human dignity regardless of birth or social background. It taught brotherhood and rejected Tantric practises like animal and human sacrifice and priest appeasement.

Neo Vaishnavism still dominates Assam's progressive, pleasant, and inclusive society. Sankaradeva and Neo-Vaishnavism—Sankaradeva was born in the mid-15th century to Kayastha landowner Bhuyas.

Sankaradeva was gifted from infancy. His wife's death made him reflective and more religious. Ironically, a man comes to God when he suffers personally. When God chooses someone to bless, he may take away their material possessions. Tukaram, the 17th century Maharashtrian saint says,

'Bail meli mukt zali/deve maya sodvili' (Marathi)
{God freed me from "Maya" (illusion) when my wife died. Author-translated)

When earthly possessions and worldly people are gone, we turn to God. After his first wife died, Sankaradeva travelled extensively. Katha Guru Carita says he visited national pilgrimage places. The countrywide "Bhakti" movement hampered his vacation. He taught Vishnu devotion and established "Satras" after returning (prayer sites). Madhavadeva spread Viashnavism in Assam.

Viashnavism dominated mediaeval "Bhakti". Sankaradeva's Viashnavism upended Assam's social, cultural, and political life. There was Vishnu worship previously. Neo-Viashnavism.

Practices of Neo-Viashnavism

The "Satra," or temple of worship, is central to Neo-Viashnavism. The Sanskrit word sattra refers to an extended ritual sacrifice that might last anywhere from a few days to an entire year.

The "Satra" complex is the nerve centre of neo-religious Viashnavism. Prayer books are available in the main prayer room. Temple of Worship (Kirtan Ghar). There is no central deity in Kirtan Ghar. Only religious works, such as

ratnavali.

At some "Satras," the "Kirtan Ghar" is separated from the main temple space by an altar with statues. This "Kirtan Ghar" has rooms for "Satra" followers all around it. There are no married Kavalis.

During the day, the "Satra" only lets in female customers. No way are they monks.

Sankardeva spread his message of Dasya-Bhakti across Assam. The relationship between the devotee and God in "Dasya-Bhakti" is one of master and servant.

Neo-Vishnavism and Caste System: The caste system is very discriminatory and has wreaked havoc on Indian culture. Sankardeva selected several non-Brahmins as head of some of the "Satras," yet he apparently faced no backlash for this radical move.

Because of its location on the Aryavarta's periphery, Assam has a less stringent caste structure than its neighbouring states. While Sankardeva shown remarkable bravery, other "Bhakti" saints throughout the nation did not. Many of them, even those who were not Brahmins, praised the Brahmins excessively. Tulsidas, whose 'Ramchritmanasa' had a deep impact on the North India, argues that the Bhakti saints in general had a very high regard of the Brahmins.

*"Pujiya Bipra Shil Guna Hina,
Shudra na Guna Gyan Pravin" (Hindi)*
(Ramcharitmanas, Aryankand)

(It's OK to revere a characterless Brahmin, but not a knowledgeable Shudra.)
(Translation by author).

But as Madhabdeva points out, the Bhakti saints didn't accept caste-based discrimination when it came to religion.

*"The impurest of all castes attains salvation,
With but the utterance of lord Rama's name."*⁵

That's quite close to what Ramananda taught in Northern India., "Jat Pat na Puche Koi

Hari Ko Bhaje so Hari Ka Hoi" (Hindi)

(Anyone who worships Hari, regardless of caste, will be welcomed by Hari.)
(Translation by author)

When it came to fighting prejudice, Bhakti saints didn't bother. The logical mind finds Bhakti's practise of caste equality unsettling and tends to see those of the lower caste as socially inferior. Many members of India's subjugated lower castes abandoned Hinduism for Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity during the course of Indian history.

There were a lot of gifted but wavering reformers among the Bhakti saints.

The discrimination caused them harm, yet they could do nothing to stop it. Large-scale shifts that might weaken the status of the rich are difficult for them to achieve. As children of Brahmins, Bhakti leaders like Gyneshwara and Tulsidasa could not fathom a society without caste distinctions (known as "Chaturvarna"). They presumably didn't want to give up their advantages since they were Brahmins. A staunch opponent of the caste system, Buddha spoke out forcefully against it. Kabir is a really brave person. Kabir, like the Buddha, was not a member of the Brahmin caste.

Sankardeva, born in the low caste "Kayastha" and operating away from conventional Brahmanism like Kashi, was braver than his counterparts in other regions of the nation. However, unlike Tulsidasa, he nominated non-Brahmins as Satra heads. He also didn't change Assam's Hindu society's social customs. Not his main goal. He preached Narayana Bhakti. Other things complimented. Brahmins maintained their birth-based dominance. In "Satras," upper and lower castes mixed, but outside, they lived the same manner. The "Bhakti" movement's dichotomy of equality during prayer and discrimination thereafter is a major flaw. The Bhakti movement in Assam and others is like this. It was more obvious elsewhere.

For centuries, Hindus had been trapped in the caste system, and no reformer, from Buddha to B.R. Ambedkar, was able to break the cycle. Things wasn't uncommon for Bhakti saints to leave it alone either. Still, they helped lessen discrimination towards those of lesser social status. Tulsidasa, like Gyaneshwara, held the Brahmins in extremely high regard.

'Bhakti ga ath sare, Jati aprman' —(Marathi) (*Gyneshwari Ch.IX*)

(Devotion is everything and castes are irreverent) (Translation by author.)

Sankardeva is even bolder to say in his '*Dasama*'

"A Chandala who remembers God with heart and soul is superior to a Brahmin observing religious vow"

The Bhakti saints may have been hesitant to disturb the powerful Brahmin lobby, despite their stated goal of ending birth-based prejudice. Brahmins took advantage of their position of trust with the king and queen to turn the aristocracy against Sankardeva and his disciples. He ran away from Ahom and ended up in Koc. Madhabdeva's son-in-law was executed, and he was thrown in prison along with his wife. It is hard to estimate how big of an influence the Brahmins may have had in the northeastern Indian state of Assam since it is one of the only regions in the country where Brahminism is still a young religion and is surrounded by non-Aryan, non-Brahminical tribes. Sant Eknatha of Maharashtra wrote a Marathi commentary on the Bahgavata's eleventh chapter during the Hindu Renaissance. Because of this restriction, he had to provide an explanation in Kashi. The son of a Sanskrit Pundit rebelled as well. It is important to keep past events in context with the present.

Satras and Namghars scattered over the Brahmaputra valley. Namghar, a rural temple like Satra, but smaller. Tribes and communities established a place to

worship together. These meetings fostered Vaishnava identity. Religion unites. According to Madhavdeva, neo-Vaishnavism seeks to unite tribes.

"By uttering O Rama,

One attains salvation including

The Miris, the Ahoms and the Kacharis."

'Shakta' was the prevailing religion, and it was horrible and terrible, but the 'Neo-Vaishnavism' movement freed the people from the Brahmin priest and his costly, time-consuming rituals. The people of Assam created new rituals based on worshipping at a "Satra" or "Namghar" and singing songs of praise to Narayana. These practises were more accessible to the general population and less costly than the complex ceremonies of the 'Shakta' and orthodox Brahmins.

Neo-Vaishnavism and Women: Discrimination against half the population prevents social peace. In male-dominated culture, women constantly suffered. Men considered women a distraction from spirituality. Blaming others is usually simple. Scapegoats are usually weak protesters. Sankardeva and other Bhakti saints discriminated against women. Women are barred from the "Kirtan Ghar" in Neo-Vaishnavism. They cannot become 'Kavaliya' i.e., monk. Sankardeva says,

"The dire illusions created by women-the most hideous of all illusions"

Bhakti Movement and Hinduism discriminate against women. They may have overemphasised women's sexuality to distract males and deepen ties to this realm. Religion tends to isolate us.

Buddha was more feminist than Bhakti saints. He originally hesitated, but subsequently welcomed women as Buddhist "Bhikuni" (women monks) in the Buddhist "Sangha". This backfired. Young unmarried boys and girls living together in the "Sangha" (monastery) degraded morality and weakened Buddhism. Humanistically, excluding half the people for the other half is wrong. But Buddha's experiment and "Shakta" tantric rituals involving women may have shaped Bhakti saints' views on women. They felt males should stay away from women.

However, creating a separate residence for women monks or permitting them to access the "Kirtan Ghar" during a certain time was not considered.

Daytime ladies visited the "Satras." Women becoming monks is also risky. Traveling monks feared women's violence. Nearly 500 years ago, life was dangerous. Satra rites must attract few ladies.

Kanaklata, Sankardeva's grand-daughter-in-law, managed the "Satras" against prejudice. The "Bhakti Movement" helped women in various sections of the nation express their creativity and spirituality. I haven't found any Assam women Bhakti poetess in my reading. Neo-Vaishnavism opposed celibacy. Shankardeva married twice. His student Madhavadeva, who promoted Neo-Vaishnavism, was celibate. He also didn't promote singlehood.

Limitations of Neo-Vaishnavism: Hinduism follows no one text or set of beliefs. Variations abound. Assimilation is ongoing. It has pros and cons. This absorption and churning preserves the finest as society advances. It also satisfies

varied inclinations. How can one worldview satisfy everyone when we are so different? Degeneration occurs when multiple bad habits are adopted. Hinduism's past is a major mystery since it evolved over millennia. It accepts varied and opposing perspectives. Our thinkers went through this process of looking back and thinking about themselves and came to the conclusion that,

"Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti"

(Truth i.e. God is only one but the learned call it by the different names)

But Neo-Vaishnavism did not spread these principles, which might have brought together the many schools of thought and practises. As Sankaradeva seems to be opposed to the worship of all deities but Narayana, his stance comes off as being unyielding. Following Sankaradeva's death, Madhavadeva took control of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. In his devotional poetry collection, 'Nama Ghosha,' Madhavadeva wrote:

"Those vile and foolish person who try
To compare Thee, Krsna
The crowned head of all Gods, with other Gods,
Suffer in hell"

It's possible that when Sankaradeva initially brought his new religion to Assam, he took considerable pains to stop the spread of "Tantrism" and "Shakta" so that Viashnavism wouldn't take hold. He had just one deity in mind, and that was Narayana. Madhavadeva excommunicated a Kali devotee.

This conservatism stopped Neo-Viashnavism from expanding to North East India's mountains. Geographical, ethnic, and socio-cultural obstacles prevented integration.

Sankaradeva taught Muslims and tribals. These situations support nation-building. Neo-Vaishnavism has failed to change North East Hill culture and religion. It remained in Brahmaputra valley lowlands. Tantrik superstition accompanied animism. Plains tribalism persisted. Even the common people worship the Shakta goddess "Kamkhya" and many other Gods in Assam.

British movement limitations in the North East of India widened the hill-plain divide. They wanted hill people untouched by anti-British independence. Christianizing tribes expanded the hill-plain divide.

Political and economic considerations shaped post-Independence society. North-East Indian tribes are emphasising their identity. They reject Hinduism despite its effect. They either embrace western manners and costumes or revert to pre-Neo-Viashnavism, pre-Hinduism habits to express their uniqueness.

Over this split, Assam's Bodos, Dimasas, Karbis, and others fight non-tribals and each other. Religion divides India yet does not generate violence.

Bhakti literature embraces fatalism and escapism. God governs everything and human effort is worthless. They're good and bad. It reduces monotony. Meekness also affects productivity. Neo-Vaishnavism streamlined and less violently practised superstitious ceremonies, unlike the Bhakti movement.

Neo-Vaishnavism preached unwavering faith in Narayana, which may not appeal to modern logic. Saints overemphasised Bhakti. The Bhagavata describes Brahmin Ajamil. Madhabdeva's "Bhakti Ratnavali" recounted (Ch. 5). Brahmin Ajamil allegedly committed every sin. As he died, he called Narayana. Narayana ran him free. Does just reciting God's name out loud satisfy God? While such passages in Bhakti literature might provide temporary solace to an offender, they can also foster the belief that one can do anything, good or terrible, in the name of God. If this theory gains traction, it might lead individuals to act hypocritically, as the old adage says in Hindi.

"Muh me Ram, Bagal me Churi"

(Name of the Rama on the lips, but dagger hidden in the armpit)

The idea also does not stand the scrutiny of rationality.

Conclusion: Assam's Bhakti movement fought religious discrimination against lower classes. Prejudice and unfairness continue. Superstitions and degeneration remain despite their efforts. Should we say they failed?

It may be difficult to answer this. Philosophy, culture, and civilization develop slowly. Mindsets evolve throughout time. Seneca, a 1st-century Roman philosopher, said, "Knowledge must be disclosed over long continuous periods." Our descendants will be amazed that we didn't know apparent stuff. 9

Like the speeches of Shankaradeva, Gyneshwara, Kabir, Vivekananda, and Mahatma Gandhi, this one will go a long way toward advancing the progress of civilisation. This is a baby step as society evolves from the physical to the mental to the philosophical to the spiritual.

Assam and India's socio-cultural standing improved due to Bhakti saints' religious simplification. They prevent conflict and divisiveness.

By simplifying and purifying their lives, Bhakti saints sought to generate tranquility. Peaceful societies come from harmonious individuals. Purifying our inner anguish will eliminate our outside disturbance.

Religion in school and college curricula is tough in pluralistic India. We're raising spiritually underdeveloped generations. Corruption and values crises may arise. Bhakti saints' worshipper aims are shown in the Bhagavata's "Uddhava Gita."

From Chapter II of the Uddhava Gita: "Like water, the sage cleanses everything by being seen, touched, and loved by them; it is pure; it is appealing by nature; it is pleasant; and it is a source of giving holiness to others." Bhakti Saints placed a higher value on morality than on political change.

In a pluralist civilization with expanding globalisation, one religion may not satisfy humanity's spiritual requirements. That will fail and raise controversy. However, interfaith dialogue should reach the Dalai Lama's "core"—love and compassion.

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