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**SRIMANTA SANKARADEVA—A UNIQUE PERSONALITY OF NEO-  
VAISHNAVITE MOVEMENT**

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**Abstract:**

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement that evolved in medieval India was a movement of religious upheaval and social reform . Almost all over India the Vaishnava saints adopted the Neo Vaishnavite or Bhakti movement. These saints from different parts of India mostly extracted their doctrinal tenets from Bhagavata Purana and Gita. All the saints more or less paved their views in monotheism and established Bhakti as the supreme path of devotion and salvation . Sankardev , the Vaishnava saint , born in Assam in 1449 AD , had so many distinguished characters in comparison to that of other saints of contemporary period. He was considered as an unique figure in all the aspects- his religious motto, essence of spiritual cultivation, cultural and literary achievements, social leadership, economic revolution, scientific observation and rational projection of ideas.

Sankardev's religio- cultural movement was a scientifically programmed and rationally designed speculative system of harbouring pure humanity. In this paper a vivid discussion has been done to find out the distinguished features of Sankardev's religious and cultural contributions and achievements to stand him as a unique personality of Neo- Vaishnavite movement.

The Neo- Vaishnavite renaissance that evolved in medieval India was a movement of religio-cultural upliftment as well as social reforms. A galaxy of Vaishnava saints in different parts of India contemporarily adopted this Neo-Vaishnavite or Bhakti movement. In Southern India Ramanujacharya , Ballavacharya, Nimbarka, Madhavacharya etc initiated the Bhakti movement. In Northern India it was headed by Ramananda, Kabir, Surdasa and Tulsidasa. The other important Vaishnava saints were Namadeva and Tukarama in Maharashtra, Nanaka in Punjab and Chaitanya in Odisha and Bengal. The Vaishnava saints opposed the orthodox rituals of Brahmanism and introduced Bhakti as the supreme way of salvation and devotion. They especially appreciated the hearty adoration of Lord Krishna based on the doctrinal principles of Bhagavat Purana and Gita. Nine varieties of Bhakti have been elaborated in the school of Bhakti concept- sravana, kirtana, archana, bandan, smarana, dashya, sakhitva, padasevana , and atmanivedana. Bhakti is the purest love and devotion to God.

In the North-East region of India Srimanta Sankaradeva pioneered the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. He was born in 1449 AD, during the Ahom reign in Nagaon district. He was born in a rich and prestigious Bhuyan family who was blessed with Royal privileges. Sankaradeva was a versatile genius. He was simultaneously a saint, a religious preacher, a poet of high order, a scholar, a dramatist, an actor, a linguist, an artist, a musician, an instrumentalist, a social leader and reformer, an economist and an idealist of scientific consciousness. Biographies say Sankaradeva became an orphan in infancy and was grown up by His grandmother. MHe spent childhood by loitering and enjoyed an untidy, wildish life. His grandmother Khersuti brought him to the 'TOLA'(Centre for education) of esteemed Sanskrit scholar Mahendra Kandali at the age of twelve year. Sankaradeva studied all branches of Sanskrit lore and grammar and got mastered in all the branches of learning in a few years. After finishing his education Sankaradeva returned to his home and got tied with the bond of marriage. Though he was nominated as Bhuyan chief by the elder ones of the family, he gave up the prestigious post very soon. He was bereaved by the early demise of his wife for which he seemed to be indulged in spiritual exercises and poetic proclivity. Sankaradeva as stated by majority of his biographers had rooted the seed of Bhakti cult before he left for first pilgrimage at the age of thirty two years exemplified by his work 'Harischandra Upakshyan' and performance of 'Chinha Yatra Bhaona'(Art drama). Sankaradeva visited almost all holy places harbouring Vedic tenets in his first pilgrimage. After twelve years of travelling he returned home carrying a basket of religious and cultural knowledge. He established 'Namghara' in his place of birth, Bardowa and measurably started cultivation and propagation of Neo-Vaishnavite thoughts and Krishna culture. Sankaradeva extended this in a vast domain of Assam, Kamrupa and Cooch- Behar, three ancient kingdoms of that time. During his hundred year long creative and functional life Sankaradeva wrote numbers of books and verses, composed songs of high devotional consciousness, and created six numbers of dramas by which he made a very strong basement of Assamese literature. Sankaradeva left for heavenly abode in 1568 AD at Madhupur of Cooch-Bihar.

Amongst the pioneer saints to steer the Neo-Vaishnavite movement Srimanta Sankaradeva was a unique figure in all aspects. His religious motto, essence of spiritual cultivation, cultural and literary achievements, social leadership and elimination of untouchability and caste distinctions. No other religious personality in the contemporary Bhakti movements could reflect their totality to stabilize, reform and progress the society like Srimanta Sankaradeva. Sankaradeva was a versatile genius. He was simultaneously a saint, a religious preacher, a poet of high order, a scholar, a dramatist, an actor, a linguist, an artist, a musician, an instrumentalist, a social leader

and reformer, an economist and an idealist of scientific consciousness. The official name of Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism is Eka Sarana Hari Nama Dharma. Sankaradeva took Eka Sarana from Gita, Sat Sanga from Bhagavat Purana and Nama from Padma Purana. He proclaimed Sravana and Kirtana as the supreme form of Bhakti, that is hearing and reciting the name and glory of Lord Krishna.

### **Jadyapi bhakati nava bidha madhavara**

#### **Shravana kirtana tate ati shresthatara (Bhagabat)**

Although all the Vaishnava saints propagated Bhakti cult, Sankaradeva was a unique spiritual leader to adopt Eka Sarana strictly prohibiting the worship of other gods and goddesses except Lord Krishna- the creator, preserver and destroyer of the endless universes. In the religious principle of Sankaradeva it is mandatory to give up worship of other gods and goddesses, taking offerings(Prasada), meant for them and also entering their holy premises.(1) Sankaradeva also strictly denounced idolarity in which subject the contemporary saints seemed to be a bit malleable. These two mottos of Sankaradeva established his doctrine of monotheism in its purest form and expressed His unique denomination of Bhakti cults. This is why today also Sankaradeva's school of vaishnavism remains unchanged, unmixed and peaceful. Most of the Vaishnava saints except Sankaradeva and Chaitanyadeva wrote commentaries on vedantic philosophy to establish their own concept on Brahma Sutra. Sankaradeva conceptually attempted to lay down philosophical principles nowhere in his writings. According to him the Bhagavata Purana is the essence of all vedantas. So no separate commentary is essential to adopt Bhakti consciousness among the common people. Sankaradeva also did not write anything about ritualistic display for devotional offerings and happenings which seems to express the generosity and virtuousness of his spiritual thoughts and teachings.

Srimanta Sankaradeva not only nullified caste distinctions but also showed in his practice and behavior. Every Soul(Atma) is a minute particulation of the Great Soul( Paramatma).

#### **'Jiva anshe prabeshila tumi gawe gawe(Kirtan)'**

So earthly identification in the form of race, caste, sub-caste, tribe, sub-tribe etc. are irrational, impractical and ill valued in its divine sense. Because of this unconditional proclamation of Sankaradeva regarding caste distinction and untouchability people in Assam enjoy a life of social harmony, peace and religio-cultural tolerance. As evidenced by biographies Sankaradeva could attract the tribal people to the path of bhakti and many of them became his disciple of high honour(ATOI) e.g. Gobinda from Garo tribe, Narottam from Naga tribe, Ramai from Kachari tribe. Sankaradeva also took a soberly tolerant view towards the customs of the tribal people. In Kitran he writes...

#### **Kukura khay hena mlesa gane**

#### **Siyo sudha howe hari kirtane (Pasanda mardan--117)**

Sankaradeva's religion was very simple in comparison to other Vaishnava saints, free from all ritualistic complexities, rigorous customary practices and banal formalities for which people from various castes and tribes came forward to become his devotees.

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement of medieval India deserves a special dimension incorporating ‘SANGEET’ (combination of dance, song and musical instruments) to the system of religious adoration. Sankaradeva extended his mastership in this field ornamenting his spiritual practices as well as giving the traditional Assamese system of Sangeet a special dimension to be weighted as part of Indian Classical music. The creation of ‘ANKIYA NAAT’ was an epoch creating phenomenon of Srimanta Sankaradeva. This innovative creation not only valued him as a unique genius, but established Him as the pioneer literary and cultural figure to begin open drama amongst the masses. Sankaradeva wrote six number of dramas (Ankiya Nat). He was a director, an actor, a musician in all plays. He also made many musical instruments by modifying the local traditional instruments.

The foundation of Assamese literature built by Sankardev is so well established that many research works have been done upon the literary erudition and contribution by many scholars of Assam as well as out of the state. Nothing is there to add in this domain of Sankaradeva except to highlight that no such contemporary spiritual leader is found to keep standing the same level of his cumulative scholarly glittered literary works.

Sankaradeva discouraged the killing of birds and animals for food and religious occasions. To overcome the criticism of developing food habits of nutritional deficiency, Sankaradeva started the tradition of offering peas, pulses and fruits in religious occasions which is not seen in any part of India. Peas and pulses supplement required protein, deficiency of which make a man structurally and skeletally weak. Fruits have abundant antioxidants, vitamins and trace elements. So a vegetarian Bhakta has little chance to suffer from nutritional deficiency and health problems from this scientifically prevailed food habit.

Although Sankaradeva is recognized as a spiritual GURU, some masterly activities achieved under His leadership focused Him as a great social leader. Construction of ‘TEMBUWANI’ dam, performance of ‘CHINHA YATRA’ art drama and weaving of colorful ‘BRINDAWANI BASRA’ are some examples of social leadership. The Tembuwani was a ravine causing damage to the paddy field of the farmers in Bradowa . Sankaradeva well understood the sorrows of the farmers and he came forward to construct a dam in the ravine together with the farmers in the contrary of arranging some religious formalities which practices are seen in this modern scientific age also. To be mentioned again that the Bhuyans could get escaped many a time from the cruel oppression of neighboring tribal kings because of Sankaradeva’s leader worthy timely initiatives. The ‘NAMAGHARA’, a village institution of spiritual, cultural and intellectual cultivation, established by Sankaradeva also reflects His dignity of social leadership. The NAMAGHARA in other sense can be considered as a village community centre where common people used to assemble to discuss social problems. This can also be considered equal to the modern Panchayat system.

If we deeply study the work culture of Sankaradeva , we see a scientific approach from the beginning. After thorough study and intuitive adventure upon all branches of Hindu religion Sankaradeva understood that only the monotheistic Krishna Bhakti could be the simplest and purest way of devotion for the common people. But it was not possible to carry this message in society only by speech or poetic recitation. With the divinely bestowed intellectual capacity and innovative thought Sankaradeva purposefully selected the audio-visual system of folklore to express his spiritual and cultural acceptance amongst the common people. So he first performed the ‘Chinha-Yatra Bhaona’, a script less mimik dramatic representation of painting. Sankaradeva

managed all the requirements alone for the occasion. The 'Chihna Yatra Bhaona, was the milestone of Sankaradeva's Bhakti movement for the reasons-

1. People tasted a new style of cultural performance.
2. People irrespective of caste and tribe assembled in a circle of spiritual environment. Here the sense of high and low social status was abolished to some extent.
3. People got submerged in Krishna consciousness without their own knowledge.
4. People discovered the righteous greatness of Sankaradeva.
5. People from low socio-economic status got social recognition being entangled with the innovative adventure of Sankaradeva.
6. Sankaradeva was proclaimed as the spiritual and cultural leader by the dignitaries . Even his guru(teacher) Mahendra Kandali made an open declaration about Sankaradeva as the only spiritual leader for all.
7. Sankaradeva could successfully lay the foundation of Neo-Vaishnavite movement by this performance.

Sankaradeva left for pilgrimage not only for a holy visit, rather he travelled for a comparative study of his doctrinal acceptance with that of the other saints in India. Sankaradevsa also acquired surplus knowledge of vast Indian spiritual and cultural heritage through this travel. So he creditably could make a strong and everlasting bondage of Indian spiritual and cultural heritage with that of Assamese ones. Assam was not a part of political and geographical India till the beginning of British rule. But it had spiritual and cultural linkage with India(Bharatavarsha) from a very ancient time which was magnified by Sankaradeva to an extent Assam becoming an inseparable part of spiritual and cultural India. In this sense Sankaradeva was the single religious and cultural leader of mediaeval India to propagate Bhakti movement in a vast region of non political India.

Among the pluralities of Sankaradeva's individual endeavour development of the village economy is quite noteworthy. He encouraged people to grow crops and vegetables. He brought forward the village craftsmen giving a social recognition to their handicraft items for which these socially and economically backward groups could outweigh their dignity of labor. This type of activity extends His intellectual capacity beyond religious objectives enlightening His sense of pure humanity.

Sankaradeva's religio-cultural movement was a scientifically programmed and rationally designed speculative system of harbouring pure humanity. This is because the Assamese has got a nationwide recognition of its tolerability, hospitality, social harmony and ever friendly behavior.

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