



SANKARDEVA AND INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM

Dr. Surjya Chutia

Principal, Tinsukia College Tinsukia, Assam-786125

Dr. Hemalakshi Gogoi

Assistant Professor, Doomdooma College Doomdooma, Assam

ABSTRACT

One of the most legendary, colorful and versatile personalities of all times – Srimanta Sankardeva (1449 – 1568 A.D.) thrived in the socio-religious history of eastern Bharatavarsa in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Srimanta Sankardeva was the founder of Vaishnavism in Assam. The new Vaishnavism movement of Assam was initiated by Sankardeva in the 15th century. The new Vaishnavism is concerned with the faith in devotional worship of Vishnu. Vaishnavism has an all-comprehensive aspect it represents a synthetic culture that includes what may be variously called Bhakti Cult, Ek Saran Dharma. Sankardeva's Vaishnavism went against the spirit of traditional Brahmanical faith which is based on the notion of caste, worship through various manifestations of Devi. During Sankardeva time, it was a very much caste – ridden society ruled by precepts sanctioned by the Brahmin priests. The Sudra and other low caste people were treated as subordinate and they had to bow before the priestly class. This article is an attempt to explore the Sankardeva Philosophy eradication of casteism and teaching of equality and fraternity.

KEYWORDS : Caste system, Equality, Humanism, Vaishnavism etc.

INTRODUCTION:

Srimanta Sankardeva (1449 – 1568 A.D.) was the founder of Vaishnavism in Assam. The new Vaishnavism is concerned with the faith in devotional worship of Vishnu. The conception of divinity culminates in his concept of Vishnu, is as much as Vishnu represents in the highest degree, all that is majestic, sublime and blissful. The root word 'Vishnu' is 'Vis' it means to pervading i.e. Vishnu is the all-pervading One. Vaishnavism has an all-comprehensive aspect it represents a synthetic culture that includes what may be variously called Bhakti Cult, Ek Saran Dharma. Sankardeva's Vaishnavism went against the spirit of traditional Brahmanical faith which is based on the notion of caste, worship through various manifestations of Devi. The socio-ritualism order dominated by Brahmins was completely overthrown, yet the Brahmins lost much of the spiritual authority which eventually passed on to the author of the Vaishnava Bhakti Cult i.e. the saints and Gurus whose songs and biographies become scriptures for their followers. Idol-worship is discarded while prayer services are held in the Namgharas where the object of Venerations is the Guru-Asana where the holy text books are kept. Sankardeva holds that it is only Bhakti which can bring moksha or liberation.

Objectives:

The main objective of this paper is to make a reflection on the thoughts of Sankardeva in eradication of Indian casteism and teaching of social equality, healthy culture and humanism.

Sankardeva And Indian Caste System:

One of the most legendary, colorful and versatile personalities of all times – Srimanta Sankardeva thrived in the socio-religious history of eastern Bharatavarsa in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Dr. Chatterji eulogies him as the greatest builder of Assam, who brought in purer spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India as a religious leader, he is unquestionably one of the greatest has produced and he deserved to be mentioned with Sankaracharya, Ramanada, Kabir, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Tulsidas. In time of Sankardeva, the society was full of superstitions. Most of the people were the blind supporters of Shaktism, Tantricism and practised all sorts of evil deeds. Sankardeva realized the causes of degradation of the society and he tried heart and soul to reform it.

Caste system is one of the most discriminatory practices and had done a lot of harm to the Indian society. One bold act that

Sankardeva had initiated was that he appointed some non-Brahmins also head of some of the Satra and he did not seem to have encountered opposition to this. Assam being on the border of Aryavarta, the influence of rigidity of the caste system is relatively on the lesser side. Bhakti saint in many other parts of the country had not shown similar courage like Sankardeva. Even, many of them showed unique praise on the Brahmins, almost bordering on the servility. Bhakti saint in general had a very high opinion of social justice. He was against the discrimination practiced in the society in the name of caste. This unique importance given to the person born as Brahmin discrimination against the lower caste is one of the important causes of the lower castes walking away from the fold of Hinduism and embracing Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. The caste system had taken such a hold of Hindu psyche for centuries together that the attempts of reformers starting from Buddha to B.R. Ambedkar had made a little dent in it. Sankardeva in general had also refrained from any attempt of demolishing it. Yet they must be given credit that they contributed towards reducing the intensity of discrimination towards lower castes. 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"

It was Indian and undoubtedly in north eastern part, Sankardeva was a person to bring the Kings and Beggars, the Brahmins and the out caste, wise and ignorant into one platform sitting together, thinking together, aspiring together and praying together. He believed no caste and cast barrier in the process of worshipping God and accordingly he chose his disciples from different castes and also from religions irrespective of the then existing sever sense of untouchability and inequality. Therefore, Sankardeva's disciples were from different caste and tribes, Gobinda Giri, A Garo, Jayhari, a Bhutia, Chandsai, a member of the Muslim community, Ananta Kandali (Brahmin), Madhavdeva (Kayastha), Narahari (Ahom), Paramananda (Mishing), Jayram (Bhutia) etc. His ultimate aim was to form unique nation on the basis of universal brotherhood.

Recognition Of Sankardeva:

In Sankardeva philosophy, there is no communalism, religious fundamentalism and social narrowness. Because of his Borgeets, Ankia Boanans, Kritanghosa and his artistic culture, he was a really the commentator of Universal brotherhood. His philosophy has a great importance to

establish world peace, healthy culture and humanism. We can say Sankardeva's "Eka Deva Eka Seva, Eka Bine Nai Keba" agrees with universal brotherhood.

But, Sankardeva is still ignored in national perspectives, he is not given due recognition which is the great lost to the humanity, I therefore put few suggestions here in the matter-

- Govt. of Indian should announce International Srimanta Sankardeva Award for human integrity
- Govt. should introduce Srimanta Sankardeva Chair in all major universities of the country.
- Construct Srimanta Sankardeva Bhavan in metropolitan cities of India
- Scholars should try to establish Sankardeva's philosophy in direction and in right place.
- Building a positive image of Sankardeva in world perspective and reorganization his contribution in social, economic and political spheres
- Hundreds of Assamese settled across the globe have duty to spread Sankardeva ideology.

CONCLUSION:

The attitude of unison was the back-bone of the Neo-Vaisnavite movement of Sankardeva which he innovated for the common people of the then medieval society of Assam. Sankardeva innovated his newly devised socio-cultural-religious system with a view to re-establishing the decayed love and piety along with humanistic zeal. The democratization of social system was the prime objective of Sankardeva's Krishna culture. Such pronouncements of Krishna culture tend to address two fundamental needs of the society: first the establishment of democracy and second, eradication of social impediments like untouchability. He wanted to establish a philosophy of humanism throughout his deeds. He had dreamt an advance and harmonious Assamese society of peaceful co-existence. He felt man needs the feeling of unity and feeling of humanism in order to safeguard the society and to get rid of all man-made disasters. For this, he showed the path of Krishna culture where the truth of life can be seen through the unison of mind and heart of every living being. Sankardeva's Vaishnavite philosophy teaches people not only to worship God, but also to purify themselves for their common welfare by uplifting the people to the civilized stage. Sankardeva's Vaishnavism i.e. One God belief is indeed an important step in middle age. In fact, Sankardeva wanted to maintain the brotherhood among the people through his religious Vaishnavism.

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