

## THE DARŚANA OF THE TWO SAINTS OF ASSAM, ŚANKARDEVA AND ĀJĀN PĪR : A COMPARATIVE STUDY



### Philosophy

KEYWORDS : Śankaradeva, Ājān Pīr, Vaisnavism, Islamism.

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### ABSTRACT

*The two saints of Assam, Śankaradeva and Ājān Pīr, though preached two different religions namely the Vaisnavism and the Islamism respectively, contributed the simplification of rituals and the use of vernacular for translating their respective religious directives, played a great role to enter in to the heart of the people of Assam of their times and now. Śankaradeva composed a numbers of Nm, Kirtana containing the religious ideologies of the Mahapurusiā vaisnavism. Ājān Pīr was not an Assamese by birth like Śankaradeva, he came to Assam from Bagdad, Iraq and acquired mastery in the indigenous Assamese language and composed a number of religious songs (zikir and zāri) in Assamese language that simplified the learning of Islamic preachings. The present study is a comparative analytical study to enquire their contribution in propagating their religious idea and tolerance.*

### Introduction:

Vaisnavism is one of the oldest, living religions of India. It is certain that the sources of *vaisnavism* may be traced back to the *vedas* and *upanisadas*. The word *vaisnava* in the sense of a sect of religion is not to be found either in the *vedic* literature or in the principal *upanisadas*. But it has got some relation with the *Rig vedic Visnu*, which is the solar deity, the all pervading God and the God who occupies the highest heaven. *Vaisnava* thus comes to mean the servant or follower of *Visnu*.<sup>1</sup> The word *vaisnava* in the sense of a sect of religion is found only in the latest part of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>2</sup>

Assam *vaisnavism* was styled by its greatest exponent Śankaradeva, the “*eka - śarana - nām - dharma*” the religion of supreme devotional surrender to one.<sup>3</sup> This discussion would remain incomplete if we do not discuss the view of Śankaradeva and Ājān Pīr.

The two saints of Assam, Śankaradeva and Ājān Pīr, though preached two different Religions: former the *vaisnavism* and latter the *Sufism* of Islam, contributed simplification of rituals. They played a great role in popularising and gaining acceptance of *bhakti* among the Assamese people. Both of them were successful in entering in to the heart of the people of Assam, showed them the right path of achieving truth.

### Materials and method:

The method of the study is based on the comparative analysis of the data and information to be collected from books, journals, periodicals etc.

### Results and discussion:

ankaradeva showed the people a new way to divinity through *nāma* (prayer) and *kirtana* (chanting). According to Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezborua, the *vaisnava* school did not try to start a new philosophy, but based its teachings on ‘*Nāradya pancaratna*’ and the ‘*bhāgavad*’ and laid stress on a life of purity, high morality, worship and devotion to only one God who is above all-the creator, preserver and destroyer.

In Śankaradeva’s philosophy *māyāvada* seems to continue with unspent vigour. In his religion God as *Nārāyana - Visnu - Kṛṣṇa - Rāma* represents as eternal *Brahman* and demands the worship and devotion of man. The *jīva* is different from God only in as far as it is the creation of God, is in the fetters of *māyā*, and, therefore has the need of worshipping God with the love of his heart. Absorption in *Brahman* comes as a natural consequence of release from the bondage of *māyā* and cycle of rebirth, his motto is not to achieve *Mokṣa*. But the devotee may well look forward to place in the celestial Abode of God, that is *vaikuntha*, fellowship there with God. This is because in *vaikuntha* the life of devotion may continue for ever. As a matter of fact, the devotee would not

grudge life in the body of any animal or in any sphere, provided he is allowed the privilege of servitude to the Lord.”<sup>4</sup> Śankaradeva was absolutely monotheistic and his doctrine is known as ‘*eka śarana hari nāma dharma*’ i.e. the religion of unflinching devotion and absolute surrender to one God. According to Śankaradeva, external rituals are not necessary for the attainment of the grace of God. Only through the pure and immaculate path of *bhakti* i.e. the self less and undeviating devotion and prayer to Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, the Supreme God, one can realise Him and attain *mokṣa* or liberation. This is the cardinal principle of the doctrine preached by the renowned saint Śankaradeva.

The *Neo-vaisnavism* flourished under the guide-ship of Śankaradeva who was also a sage of hindu-muslim symbolical amity and harmony in Assam. He was respected by both the hindus and the muslims alike. *Chand Khan* or *Chandsai* was a dedicated muslim disciple of Śankaradeva, who established the foundation post of *nāmghara* with Arabic verse - “*Lā-ilāhā illāllāhu.....*”; and from this, the use of the word ‘*lāi khutā*’ of ‘*nāmghara*’ started in Assamese society. Both Hindus and Muslims respect him with the name ‘*Kabir Gossāin*’<sup>5</sup>. It is said that *Chānd Khān* composed a number of religious songs 8 which are equally sung by Hindus and the Muslim and helped to grow the Hindu Muslim synthesis in Assam.

It is significant that the *bhāgavad*, the main source of inspiration for the mediaeval *bhakta* saints, opened up new creative interpretations. Both these diverse religious traditions gave special emphasis on bringing the lower strata, the *sudra* (the most innumerable component of India) and *stri* (women), into the forefront of religio-cultural practice through mass community participation.

“Although Assam came into contact with muslims as early as 1203, the systematic propagation of Islam as an organised religion started only in the early part of the 17th century by a wandering muslim mystic *Shah Miran* - or as he was popularly known, ‘*Ājān Pīr*’- who came to Assam in about 1630 A.D. *Shah Miran* and his brother *Shāh Nabī* found that the muslims of Assam did not follow any aspect of traditional Islam and had assimilated into the medieval Assamese society and gained acceptance as one of its inseparable components.

According to a legend, *Hazrat Shāh Mirān* received the name *Ājān Fakir* or *Ājān Pīr* (Saint) because he was the one who taught the Assamese muslim to recite ‘*ājān*’ as a part of Muslim ritual. He introduced the Muslims of Assam to the ‘*nāmāz*’ (the practice of offering prayer to almighty *Allāh*), the contents of ‘*qurān*’ (the revelation of *Allāh*), the ‘*hādīths*’ (the sayings and practices of prophet *Muhammad*) and other Islamic literature with which they were barely acquainted, through a regime of folk songs, instrumental

music and dances.”<sup>6</sup>

The muslim society of Assam during those days was influenced by immoral and irreligious practices. Superstitions ruled the root and the Assamese muslims appeared to be moving away from the Islamic philosophy of truthfulness. They were muslim in name only and discarded the age-old practices of performing the ‘*nāmāz*’ and observing ‘*rojā*’ (fasting).

Sir Edward Gait in his “History of Assam” echoed similar thoughts. He had written that the contemporary Assamese muslim society was muslim in name only. Against this backdrop *Hazarat Mirān Shāh* popularly known as *Ājān Pīr* tried to infuse the spiritual and moral practices in the Assamese Muslim Community by introducing the practice of ‘*nāmāz*’ at Sunpura, Assam through invocation of ‘*Ājān*’.

*Ājān Pīr* also initiated the practice of cultivating mystical and spiritual philosophy of Sufism through the medium of songs in Assamese known as ‘*zikirs*’ and ‘*zāris*’. The Sufi philosophy is the most simplified and broad based principles of Islam which discards all the orthodoxies of religion. This broad based philosophy has been embraced by the sufi saints like *Ājān Pīr* who cultivated the ideology of Sufism and preached that all human beings are creature of one God and are equal irrespective of their religions. Despite numerous cultural variety and religious beliefs, the only guiding principle believed and preached by *Ājān Pīr* in Assam was to spread the Islamic principle of human brotherhood and unity in the diverse society of Assam.<sup>7</sup> The Sufi saint, *Ājān Pīr* attracted those muslims who have been distracted from the true spirit of Islam towards ‘*kalimā*’, ‘*nāmāz*’ etc. through his preaching and at the same time taught them about the brotherhood and unity among all the human beings irrespective of their casts, creeds, religions etc. In this connection, a part of his *zikir* as given below is noteworthy, “*mor manat āān, bhāb nāi o Allā, mor manat nai āān bhāb, hindu ki musalmān eke Allār farmān, ākherat eke Allār nāām*” - that means, there is no difference in the mind of *Ājān Pīr* towards hindus and muslims. Both are guided by the same directives of Allāh (God) and at the end of both, there is the name of same Allāh (God).<sup>8</sup>

#### Conclusion:

*Śankardeva* and *Ājān Pīr* have proved themselves to be two religious reformers who will be remembered in the region

and worldwide for their contributions in restructuring the religious beliefs, the fabrication of social harmony among the people of their times. Both these religious reformers constructed a new kind of meaning as the horizon of the text or the tradition, which they sought to creatively re-interpret giving new literary canons and poetics where the sufi *vaisnavite* philosophy confluenced with an identical concept of *bhakti*. The seeds of fraternity scattered by *Śankardeva* was successfully nourished and fruited in Assam with the earnest endeavour of *Ājān Pīr*. On the other hand, the very bond of hindu-muslim unity patronised by *ekśaraniā dharma* or *Mahapurusiā vaisnavism* of *Śankardeva* was further consolidated with the cultural synthesis of *Ājān Pīr*. It is significant that *Ājān Pīr* drew inspirations from the liberal spirit of Sufism that enabled him to give centrality to the human and the loving face of *Allāh*. *Ājān Pīr* and his early disciples contributed significantly to educating the majority of local muslims in the spirit and significance of Islam through un-orthodox methods, including those considered ‘un-Islamic’ by scriptural standards.

## REFERENCE

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