



Sankardeva's Influence In The Songs Of Bhupen Hazarika

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Abstract:

Sankardeva (1449-1569), the great spiritual fore-runner of Neo-Vaishnavite movement of medieval Assam made his all pervasive and pervading influence in every sphere of Assamese society. He is considered as the father of Assamese nation. His great contribution made in the field of religion, language, literature, art, play, music, architecture etc. makes the very foundation of today's Assamese culture and society. Most of his successors till our days are indebted to him. The stalwart like Laksminath Bezbaruah, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Bishnuprasad Rabha etc. belongs to modern age, were vehemently influenced by his principle of inclusiveness, adopted by this great vaishnavite saint who made this nation called Assamese. Bharat Ratna Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011), being born in a family background where deep influence of Sankardeva prevailed, became inquisitive to know about activities and ideologies of this great personality since his childhood. Subsequently, when he emerged as a lyricist cum singer, influences of ideologies of this great saint got its reflection in his lyrics. This paper aims at finding out how Bhupen Hazarika treated Sankardeva and his ideology in his lyrics.

Keywords: Sankardeva, Bhupen Hazarika, neo-vaishnavite movement, medieval Assam, lyrics, song etc.

Introduction:

Sankardeva, heralded a renaissance and reorientation to the attitude to the life of the people of Assam. He did it through a cultural and spiritual movement in 15th century called, the neo-vaishnavite movement. With a "democratic philosophy of life"¹ when he revolutionized the Assamese society spreading spiritual doctrines through his Vaishnavite literature it helped in ushering an awareness of national consciousness to the Assamese people lacking so far an organizational leading.

¹. Hiren Gohain, *Asamiya Jatiya Jibanat Mahapurusiya Parampara*, p.12 (trans)

It is stated that Sankardeva's "mission was to reawaken spiritual consciousness in men, to teach dharma as the term connotes, to recover social justice and equality and to liberate humanity here and hereafter from ignorance and suffering"² He emerged as the preceptor of culture to wage a crusade against *duṣkṛti* i.e. anarchy, for rehabilitation of *saṅskṛti* i.e. culture. Art became the strongest tool for him to transform the society. For it, he spread his doctrines through his poetry, drama, art etc. for achievement of his cherished goal. Moreover, his establishment of *nāmghar*, a community prayer hall and *satra*, a socio-religious institution, played a pivotal role to attract people of different communities under the universal canopy of Vaishnavism. Since then, *nāmghar* and *satra* have been playing an important role to enliven the cohesiveness in the social life of Assamese people. Kesabananda Goswami, a prominent scholar on Sankardeva, estimates a *satra* as thus in the following words:

But it was more than a mere religious monastery. For, it soon became the centre of art and culture. In order to preach his neo- Vaishnavism through all possible machineries, Shri Sankardeva turned to art, music, drama and literature which directly appealed to the mass-mind and made his new idea of Vaishnavism most popular.³

On the otherhand, Bhupen Hazarika's great variety of artistic craftsmanship has got their reflections through his writings of various essays, lyrics, film-scripts, editorials for magazine, rhymes for children, direction of films, autobiography and painting of pictures as well. But, his extra-ordinary talent as a lyricist cum singer surpassed all other those mentioned above.

Extending a period starting from 1937 with his first lyric *kusumbar putra śri śaṅkar guruwe* to his last one i.e. *ākāś sāvaṭi nāmilo sāgarat/ bukuṭ kaḍhiyālo āgneyagiri* (embracing the sky I come down to the sea and carry the volcano in my bosom) composed on 11th March in 2007⁴, Bhupen Hazarika contributed a great bulk of lyrics for enrichment of the treasure of Assamese lyrical poetry. The people of Assam recognize them as *Bhupendra saṅgīt* i.e. the songs of Bhupen Hazarika.

². Kali Charan Das, *Some Aspects of Assam Vaishnavism of Sankardeva*, Mahapurush Sankardev, Bhabaprasad Chaliha (ed.) p.10

³. Bisnu Ram Medhi, *Srimanta Sankardeva: The Vaishnava Saint of Assam*, Mahapurush Sankardeva, Bhabaprasad Chaliha (ed.), p.7

⁴. Gautam Sarma, *Bhupen Hazarika-Pej Wan Baks*, Mrityunjoyee Duronta Tarun Bhupen Hazarika, Anubhab Parasar & Samiran Goswami (ed.), p.287.

A genuine inquisitiveness to know about Assam and Assamese way of life made Bhupen Hazarika retrospective to overview the Neo-Vaishnavite Movement, launched long before five hundred years by Sankardeva in medieval Assam. Its socio-cultural perspectives provoked Bhupen Hazarika to act for promotion of Sankardeva's ideologies during his life time. His song Kusumbar putra śrī śaṅkar guruwe, is a panegyric to Sankardeva which was his first lyrics composed in 1937 during his adolescence period. The song glorifies Vaishnavite Age and the unparalleled contribution of Sankardeva in making Assamese, a nation. Sankardeva initiated nāmghar, bhāonā (a form of drama) and bargīt (noble songs) to consolidate the Assamese society out of its segregated existence. Moreover, expression made in the context of the song, by Bhupen Hazarika i.e. asamar ākāśat dukhar rol uthiche āji śrīśaṅkar nāi --- implies that Sankardeva's absence to direct the Assamese in their right course of the national life, has deeply been felt by every Assamese. During his whole career as a lyricist cum singer Bhupen Hazarika refers Sankardeva, directly or indirectly in about twenty numbers of his songs. His admiration and fascination for Sankardeva's stickiness to his great ideologies of unity, equality and fraternity is echoed in these songs. Thus, being influenced by Sankardeva, in our age, Bhupen Hazarika too absorbed in spreading out messages of peace, unity and equality in a set of his songs with an objective to bind the people of Assam as a nation. Similarly his agnijugar phiriṅnati mai composed in 1939 (I am a spark of a fiery era) also propagate Sankardeva's inclusive principle to consolidate the people of Assam in unity.

Sankardeva's monotheism in Bhupen Hazarika's songs.

An engulfing social stratification and prevalence of a sense of intolerance among the people, prior to the spread of Sankardeva's (1449-1569) Vaishnavite ideologies, vitiated the process of integration in Assam. It was he who gave the people of Assam a common platform to be united by love instead of hatred. His doctrine that jata dekhā carācar harimay nirantar i.e. God is omnipresent, inspired him to integrate myriad people of Assam under his spiritual canopy. For it he expounded as follows-

Kirāta kachārī khāci gāro miri
 Javana kaṅka gowāl
 Āsama maluka dhoba je turuka
 Kumār mleccha cāṅḍāl.
 Āno pāpī nara kṛṣṇa sēwakara
 Saṅgata pavitra hay

BḌikunṭha sukhe calay. (Śrimadbāhgavat, p.33)

The foregoing and many other poetic expressions of Sankardeva on account of dissemination of his monotheism acted as an incentive promoted a sense of integration among the people of Assam who remained segregated in their respective peripheries of class, caste and creed so long. His preaching of high philosophy that the soul resides within a dog, an outcaste, an ass etc.⁵ crushed the prejudices and vanity of the caste-mongers of the society. It gave dignity to all and eradicated all sorts of discriminations and sense of intolerance that was deeply rooted in the society. Besides, his unsealing of knowledge to make it attainable by all along with his preaching of Eka-śaraṇ-Harinām-Dharma, mainly in North-Eastern part of India, realized its people that God is the Supreme-soul of the souls. Such was the sustaining contribution of “the master builder of the Assamese society”⁶ Sankaradeva, who through his doctrines of neo-Vaishnavism inspired people to germinate a feeling of oneness among them for future blooming of Assamese nationalism in its subsequent period.

Bhupen Hazarika’s advocacy for unity, equality and fraternity

Following the path of Sankardeva Bhupen Hazarika too upheld noble ideologies of unity, equality and fraternity. In his agnijugar phiriṅati mai (I am a spark of a fiery era) such messages of Sankardeva have been carried out beautifully. His expression like Harijan pahari hindu muslimar /-Boro konch chutia kachari ahomar/antar vedi mou buwam/ vedavdar pracir vangī appropriately propagate Sankardeva’s doctrine of monotheism. Similarly, his pāṛ bhāni dile śrīmanta śaṅkare bahe brahmāṅdak bhedi/trṣṇātur mānave phuriche bicāri

⁵ *Kukura cāṅḍāl garḍḍbharo ātmārām*
Jāniyā savāko pari karibā praṅām.
Samasta bhūtat biṣnu-buddhi nohe jāwe
Kāya-bākya-mane abhyāsibā ehibhāve.
Biṣnumay dekhe jiṭo samasta jagata
Jīvante mukut howe acir kālat
Sakalo prāṅḱ dekhibāhā ātmasama
Upāy madhyat iṭo āti mukhyatam. (Kirtan Ghosa , p-443)

⁶ Dayananda Pathak (ed.), *Bhakti Movement and Shrimanta Shankaradeva*, preface.

śānti- amṛtar nadī (A song imitating Madhavadeva at the outset implies that Sankaradeva spread messages of peace in human society) also appreciates Sankaradeva's core principle of 'discourse of inclusion' by which he intended to bind people of different communities of the North-East region with feeling of oneness. In it, Bhupen Hazarika eulogized Sankaradeva's spiritualism that acted for liberal nationalism to crush the repellent factors which stood in the form of untouchability and caste and class discrimination in Assam. The poet-singer sang that Sankaradeva integrated the Gāro, Nagā, Javan, Kōivarta (the schedule tribes), Muchalmān, Micing, Āhom, Bhot, Baniyā, Kachārī etc. with an ekatār jari i.e. a thread of unity.⁷

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that prior to Bhupen Hazarika, his predecessors, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Bishnuprasad Rabha also imagined of a greater Assamese community being influenced by Sankaradeva's ideology. The very thesis of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's 'asamīyā ḍekār ukṭi'⁸ i.e. the statement of an Assamese youth and Bishnuprasad Rabha's metaphorical expression comparing all the myriad races of Assam to the rivulets and tributaries of it, that merge in the mighty Brahmaputra⁹, is an echo of Sankaradeva's doctrines of solidarity. Such a notion was indeed necessary in a region where people of different origins coming through a long history had to evolve a 'principle of co-existence' to live together in Assam. Bhupen Hazarika too followed the same path of his predecessors in the hope of "cultural self-determination"¹⁰

7. *"Spṛśya-asṛśyar bhedābhed nemāni*

Sundar senānī gaḍhi

Duskṛti nāśile śrīmanta śānkare

Bāndhi loi ekatār jarī

Gāror govinda nagār narottam

Javanar jayhari

Kōivarttar rādhikā micingar paramā

Āhomar narahari . (Dr.Bhupen Hazarika Git Samagra,2015,p-308-309)

8. *Jyotiprasad Rachanavali*,p.657

9. Bishnuprasad *Rava Rachana Sambhar* vol-II , p.1094-1095 (passim)

10. *International Encyclopaedia of Social Science*, Vol.11-12, p.65

of the people of this region through a series of lyrics, believing it to be the pre-requisite of Assamese nationhood.