

# **MAHAPURUSH SANKARADEVA AND THE BHAKTI RENAISSANCE IN ASSAM IN LIGHT OF THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

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## **Abstract**

The article considers the medieval Bhakta Saint of Assam, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva in the context of a phenomenological understanding of what it means to undergo a religious experience, and how it transforms not only the life of the saint but the thinking of an entire tradition.

## **A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE LIVED DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

In order to understand the prophetic vision of Medieval Bhakta saint of Assam, Mahapurush Sankaradeva, and his mission to restore his people's lost sense of belonging to a religious tradition, we need to understand the context of the religious dimension of life and a phenomenology of religious experience in general.

If religion can be defined as an integral to what is experienced as a total Being, then some formal features that are common to all such experience can be characterized. Religious experience is the most intense and practical experience of its kind that compels man to act in a particular way (services, cults, worship, offerings, festivities), to think in a distinctive manner (Theology, Cosmology, Soteriology, Ecshatology), or to form an intimate community (Brotherhood, Church or sect). A phenomenological exploration of religious phenomena includes not only religious experience directly but many other essential dimensions of the overall experienced dimension of religion. The sub sects within sects like the

Catholic –Protestant, Shia-Sunni, Hinayana-Mahayana etc. are historical divisions of religion and are also part of religious phenomena that fall under religious experience in a broad sense. Looking for a distinctively religious dimension that adds religiosity to all such experiences, phenomenologists remain attentive to the patterns of disclosure of the lived dimension of religious experience.

In their attempt at phenomenological exploration of the lived dimension of what it is to be religious, religious phenomenologists like Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade and G. van der Leeuw have touched upon this *sui generis* dimension of religious experience as: "...something 'primitive and primary' which cannot be derived from something else and cannot be reduced to any other foundation".<sup>1</sup> Usually, the essential nature of religion is interpreted as experience of the Holy or the Sacred, experienced as an encounter with a numinous and a wholly other reality that is beyond the grasp of logical and conceptual scheme. This is a realm of experience that is sacred and undefinable. While for some phenomenologists like Rudolf Otto, the experience of the "Holy" and the encounter with it is something recurrent in all religions, independent of the geographical differences and historical distances separating one culture from another, some others like Schleiermacher, Mircea Eliade and others concentrate more on religious feeling and so on. However, they all agree that all such experiences are characterized by an opening toward the transcendent.

## **WHEN LIFE BECOMES AN OFFERING TO GOD: INTRODUCING MAHAPURUSH SANKARADEVA, THE BHAKTA SAINT OF MEDIEVAL ASSAM**

Sankaradeva (1449-1568), was born in the Āhin (September-October) month in 1371 Sakābda (1449 AD) at *Ali Pukhuri* near Bordowa, the present-day Nagaon district of Assam. This Saint (who would one day bar idolatry from his religion), had himself grown up in a Tantric Shakta environment that demanded the offering of blood to the Devi (Goddess). Since his early childhood Sankaradeva had undergone deep religious experiences. He demonstrated his genius since childhood when he

composed a highly philosophical exquisite devotional poem made up of simple consonantal wordings without the addition of any vowel sounds except the first vowel 'a'. It was a soulful prayer and an offering to his lifelong companion and guide, his beloved Lord Krishna, the most complete incarnation of the human and the loving God Vishnu.

## **THE ORIGINAL SPARK AND THE DECISIVE MOMENT: THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE AND BEYOND**

The Saint lost both his father Kusumvara Bhuyan and his mother Satyasandhya Devi at a very tender age and was raised by his grandmother Khersuti. He married his first wife Suryavati when he was in his early 20s. Soon after his daughter was born his wife died and this was his first encounter with the tragic sense of life. Sankaradeva's biographers pen down these shattering experiences of his personal life in a touching manner as follows:

“The year was 1472 A.D., a young woman in a forlorn cottage in the remote state of Assam was agonizingly ill. Frail, weak and with high fever, she drew her last bit of energy, took her month old baby and placed it on her husband's feet. Then tying her own hair around his feet, she said, ‘I have found you as my husband after many good deeds through several births .It is my only prayer that I find you as my husband every time I am reborn. This little child is part of your life. Please take care of her, raise her with love and please find a suitable match for her in time’. As her husband gently lifted her up and placed her on the bed ,the woman breathed her last. Her young husband, then hardly 23 years old, was deeply moved by his wife's devotion, faith in her life and love for her child. Life, love, devotion and all the mysteries that human existence could bring mystified him all at once. Few years later, after finding a suitable match for his daughter, as requested by his dear departed wife, he set out like Bud-

dha to find out the answer. For twelve long years he roamed around India, meeting scholars, holy people, musicians and the like trying to find how the wise and the creative people find meaning in life and try to link with God.

The young man's name was Sankaradeva. In those twelve years of sojourn, Sankaradeva mastered the best traditions of Indian music, art, dance and drama. With those creative art forms, he completely submerged himself in the great Vaisnava movement of the time. He became transformed to a devotee of Krishna and found a way to cross the ever mysterious ocean of life (*Bhaba Sagara*) through cultural, spiritual and literary activities. So transformed, he returned to Assam and took upon himself the task of bringing enlightenment to the World. What he did in his long life is now history and is still the backbone of the people of Assam and her culture. Though Sankaradeva is a household name in Assam, the genius of this great man (Mahapurush) is hardly known in the English speaking world".<sup>2</sup>

However, the same decisive moment may be interpreted differently from different perspectives. Since no philosophy can replace the original experience of the religious founders, the first hand experience of the believer, no logical structure can replace that initial decisive moment of deeper existential crisis that appears religiously significant. It is this hermeneutic understanding in St Paul that the self's reawakening in the *kairological* time, is more a situatedness of the moment than just a content of belief. In the language of Kierkegaard it is the fullness of the moment that gives birth, when time itself is pregnant with new and creative dimensions, those are the moments when time touches or intersects both time and infinity. It was also the influence of 'Thus Spake Zarathustra', and of nihilism, when death and nothingness become revelatory of a tragic sense, the double meaning of the event and its mystery, the presence - absence, revealed-disclosed, all together instantaneously for "one who listens so that one can speak, that one believes so that one can know (St Augustine)".<sup>3</sup>

The difficult event in life of a saint or of a religious visionary may be interpreted as tragedy only from our ordinary perspectives. These events may also be seen to have a deeper meaning and can be interpreted sym-

bolically. It may be that when God selects someone to shower his bounty, he himself snatches away those things from his devotees which are likely to create attachments with the material world. Tukaram, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra saint says: ‘*Bail meli mukt zali/deve maya sodvili*’ (*Marathi*)<sup>4</sup> {My wife had died and got liberation and God had made me also free from ‘*Maya*’ (illusion).} So when material possession and the people who create bound with the world had gone we feel increasingly drawn towards God”.<sup>5</sup>

Sankaradeva made himself completely subservient to the divine will and now, accepting life as a gift, he set out on a long pilgrimage visiting important sites spread across the country, searching for a meaningful purpose in life. During his long sojourn at various places of his motherland, he encountered many places, both sacred and profane, and met with a variety of people. He became concerned with both the lowly and the high. He re-discovered the *Bharatvarsha* of his quest and sang her glory and the glory of his present age. Although his age – the Iron Age – was considered the most corrupt, he believed it had a saving grace of its own. In this age, in this holy land, anyone who sings the glory of God, is liberated if one has a mind steadfast in God, and sees God in all! What else can one aspire to? Why would one want to be a Brahmin? So he sang the glory of his wonderful motherland, the land of *Bharatas*, the holy land of the ‘*bhaktas*’:

“Dhanya dhanya kalikaal      Dhanya naratanu bhala  
Dhanya dhanya Bharatavarishe”

Glory to be born as man in Bharatvarsha in the Kali age.

Sankaradeva now returned home with all his doubts cleared. He now has to tell his lost countrymen that ‘devotion to God was not a business transaction, where one invested pragmatically with many gods to harvest rich dividends in return. Instead, true devotion was total submission to the Supreme God with deep and absorbing love’.<sup>6</sup> A true devotee is one who takes utmost refuge at God’s feet, *kaya-bakya-mane*, and leads a dutiful life with a sense of complete dedication to the Lord.

## **EK SARANA NAAM DHARMA: THE RELIGION OF UNVITIATED DEVOTION TO THE ONE**

Srimanta Sankaradeva considered the *sravana* and *kirtana* modes of *bhakti* or devotion, the chanting of the Divine Name and listening to it, as prescribed by the Bhāgavata-Purāna, to be sufficient. These being easily accessible to the highest and lowest, the literate and the illiterate, men and women alike, irrespective of birth, caste or status and no rigid theocratic laws are to be followed by the votary. Bhakti is not blind intensity of feeling or an ecstasy divorced from knowledge and duties of practical life, it is dasya, loyal and dutiful at the same time.

The word *ek-sarana* literally means ‘taking complete shelter or refuge in the One’, Deva, in association with fellow devotees, the *bhakats*, as guided by a Guru, and thereby taking refuge in the Divine-Name because name is inseparable from the bearer of the name. Sankaradeva’s religion has many institutional aspects, and these exercise even today a tremendous influence on the cultural, social and community-life of the Assamese people. As an institution, it may be considered mainly in two major aspects: the *Sattras* and *Nāmghars* and these bear distinctive local and regional identities of their own. The *Nāmghar* became a center for overall development of the community and combined sacred and profane space. All in the performance of the Divine Name, which is devotion actualized, the above mentioned four parts of devotion are held to be present. The Bhakti path is thus associated with a modification of the concept of God to make Him accessible to the devotee, but also ‘with a reinterpretation of the final goal’, Bhakti, being substituted for *mukti*.

## **SANKARADEVA AND HIS ASSAM: RE-VITALISING THE TRADITION**

### **A multi-faceted genius**

A multi-faceted genius, Srimanta Sankaradeva is credited with contributing to the bedrock of Assamese culture, and creating a religion that gave shape to a set of new values and social synthesis. Sankaradeva

found it safe to relate Assam with the *Bhakti*-centric medieval India that is liberal in outlook with its emphasis on tolerance. Assamese culture and Assamese language is in itself a miniature of that miniature *Bhāratvarsha* that could accommodate all in a harmonious fold. Sankaradeva remains the true representative of this basic Assamese spirit.

### **Vernacular Medium and Democratization of Bhakti**

Both Mahapurush Sankaradeva and his ardent follower Mahapurush Madhavdeva, who guided the movement in the early phase, were not only scholars but also poets. Sankaradeva understood the psychological need of his people. He gave to the masses a spiritual nourishment, and did so in the Assamese vernacular. The holy books in Sanskrit could be now easily accessible to the Sudras and women, and came to them in the medium of their own vernacular language that could safeguard the distinctive ethos of this composite society. Even though Assamese has its roots in Sanskrit and Pali, it is greatly influenced by the local dialects. Various tribal dialects and languages of the state such as Bodo, Kārbi, Dimāsā, Tiwā, Tāi, Mising, Rābhā, etc. have enriched it. Sankaradeva rendered the original Bhagavata, which was written in Sanskrit, into Assamese words and idioms of the time, but it was not a *verbatim* translation. He intentionally left out some sections and summarized or elaborated others, to fit the situation in Assam. He replaced the name of the tribes and flowers by those found in Assam, for instance, to specifically target the local populace. More significantly, whereas the original looked down upon the *shudra* and *kaivarta* castes (Bhagavata 12/3/25), Sankaradeva extolled them, envisaging a radically different social order not based on the traditional *varna* system. Some of the more abstruse philosophical parts were summarized and rendered so that the common people in Assam could understand them (Barman 1999, p.121).

Hiren Gohain observes, “Like Wycliffe and Luther the medieval saints also cultivated the language of the people” and “the parallels are too striking to be thought accidental”.<sup>7</sup>

## REACHING OUT FOR OTHERS: SHARING COMMON CONCERNS & INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

*Tolerance, inter-cultural dialogue and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where peoples are becoming more and more closely interconnected.*

*—Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations*

The Sufi religion of the heart could pave the way for Ajan Fakir (born as Shah Miran in Baghdad 1605-1690) to choose the local vernacular and folk tradition as a medium for instruction. The Assamese *Zikirs* along with Sankaradeva's *Nam-kirttan* and *Bargits*, created a class of Muslim devotees who shared cross-cultural commonalities with their Hindu counterparts. Simplification of rituals and use of the vernacular for translating the religious texts have played a role in popularizing Bhakti. Both these religious reformers constructed new kind of meaning as the horizon of the text or the tradition, which they sought to creatively re-interpret *Zikirs*, such as the following, continue to be sung at social gatherings in Assam also helped fostering the spirit of religious tolerance touching upon the phenomenological dimension of lived religiosity.

*'O Allah, I have no feeling of difference,  
I have no feeling of disunity or hate,  
Whether Hindu or Muslim, all come from the same Allah,  
Only, Hindus will be placed in the pyre,  
Muslims will rest in the grave,  
Under the same earth'.<sup>8</sup>*

While Bhakti-centric Sufism and Vaishnavism could come closer because of shared commonalities in terms of vernacular Assamese as the common medium for both traditions, Sankaradeva's Vaishnavite followers could look forward to sharing interreligious dialogue with other forms of non-idolatrous and monotheistic religions including reformist form of Brahma religion as advocated by Rammohan Rai, and with Christianity as well.

Christianity being the religion of the book, the early missionaries in Assam translated the word of God (the *New Testament* more so than the *Old Testament*) for the use of the common people. While some American Baptist missionaries accomplished the task of compiling the first Assamese dictionary in 1867, and brought out the first Assamese newspaper named '*Orunodai*' in 1845, Missionaries like Nathan Brown, Oliver Cutter and Miles Bronson, came to Assam and in 1836 they opened educational institutions in Sadya. Gradually education was extended to such places as Nogaon, Sibsagar, Guwahati, and Golagaht. The printing press was set up in Sibsagar as *Orunodai*, the first Assamese journal published by the Mission in 1846, made its stamp creating a landmark in the history of Assamese literature.

Interestingly, the Christian voice in early Assam could remain above communal interests to be representative of the liberal and modern trends of the entire Assamese community in the true sense of the term as it could give much impetus to the Assamese Renaissance centering round a handful of Assamese educated youths with wide exposure to the humanistic spirit of the time. Interestingly enough, *Arunodai*, a journal supposed to be a mouthpiece of Christian Missionaries, came to be admired across all sections of the society for its secular spirit and its true zeal to spread the benefit of science, education and modernism, to one and all. A scholar observes: "It is evident therefore that the Missionaries were reluctant to identify the journal as a mere mouthpiece of the Christian Mission for religious propaganda. In keeping with the general spirit of the 18th century Enlightenment the Sibsagar Missionaries emphasized the secular aims of the journal to popularize liberal thought in this remote region. In an editorial retrospect the editor of *Oronodai* wrote in 1862: "The editor feels confident none will doubt that the *Orunodai* has been useful for the natives of the scheduled province in the diffusion of general information and more general ideas."<sup>9</sup>

The activities of early Christian Missionaries in Assam helped in strengthening democratic ideals and they drew the attention of the educated Assamese to issues like widow re-marriage, education for women, evils of child labor, care for orphans etc. The American Baptist Missionaries in Assam thus remained representatives of the modern and liberal trends of the entire Assamese Community. This also provided impetus for

a particular section of the Sankaradeva's movement, Srimanta Sankar Sangha, to focus more on social reform along with Gandhian and also Christian counterparts.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS: VISION FOR THE FUTURE

While religious conflict in our country is more of colonial origin, one can say it is politicization of religion which is the real problem and not religion *per se*. With his basic motto of: "never be intolerant of other's Faith, be kind and compassionate to all beings" (*Parar dharmaka nihimsibā kadācit, karibā bhutaka dayā xakaruna cit*—*Sri Sri Sankaradeva*), Sankaradeva taught us that living together as brothers and sisters is easy, if and only if we learn how to become religious in the true sense of the term that paves way for meaningful interreligious and inter personal dialogue. It is, rather, in reference to the individuality of each of us living in this world where it is necessary to understand one another as members of an inter-personal community in which each person undertakes within himself or herself to participate and to attain for ourselves all that we are lacking in order to be able to lead an existence based on concord and an active and living comprehension of a goodness that acts to unify all intelligent personal wills.

Since no form of life is complete in itself and as the Buddha so wisely proclaimed: 'all life is inter dependent', we can remain fellow travelers with common objectives in mind. Matthew Muttumana puts it: "According to Fr Kuriokose, we can draw inspiration from the works of *Sankaradeva*, appreciate his philosophy of life and look at certain specific methodology he employed to reawaken the morbid and dormant religious fervor of the people of his time".<sup>10</sup>

But is there any need for such creative and meaningful interaction with the 'other'? Is there any scope for creative dialogue at interpersonal and interreligious level? To quote FRANCO BOSIO: "We must do so, but only because, and in so far as, we truly wish to understand our duty and our active undertaking to achieve reciprocal understanding and ethical love for our neighbor. The perfect achievement of the ethical life is the living intuition of the divine, both as value and as personality"<sup>11</sup>.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Franco Bosio, “The Phenomenology of Religion” In Anna-Tymieniecka (Ed). *Phenomenology World-Wide* (Kluwer Academic Publications, 2002. PP.615-616.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Dilip Kumar Datta, “PREFACE” to the Prasad Rajkhowa, Sankaradeva: His life Preachings & Practices, Guwahati, B.S. Publications, Guwahati, 2003.

<sup>3</sup>St. Augustine, *Conf.* 1, 1, 1:PL 32, 659-661.

<sup>4</sup>Vinoba Bhave ‘*Tukaramchi Bajane*’ (Marathi), (‘Devotional songs of Tukaram’)

<sup>5</sup>Dr. Ravi Khangai, “Neo-Viashnavism and Social harmony in Assam”, <http://ravikhangai.blogspot.in/2012/07/neo-viashnavism-and-social-harmony-in.html>.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>H.Gohain, “The Labyrinth of Bhakti: On Some Questions of Medieval Indian History” In *Economic and Political weely*, Nov 1967”.

<sup>8</sup>Saied Abdul Malik, *Asamiya Zikir Aru Jari*, 1958, Guwahati

<sup>9</sup>The Orunodai, July-1861, cited in. Birinchi Kumar Barua, “Keikhanman purni asamiya sapa puthi” In *Assam Sahitya Sabha Patrika*, New Services, No 2-3, 1952, pp.75-85.

<sup>10</sup>Matthew Muttumana, *Christianity in Assam and inter-faith dialogue*, [http://openlibrary.org/works/OL5248192W/Christianity\\_in\\_Assam\\_and\\_inter-faith\\_dialogue](http://openlibrary.org/works/OL5248192W/Christianity_in_Assam_and_inter-faith_dialogue)

<sup>11</sup>FRANCO BOSIO, “THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION” In In Anna-Tymieniecka (Ed). *Phenomenology World-Wide*(Kluwer Academic Publications, 2002. PP.617.