

Srimanta Sankaradeva and the tribes of North East India from Admin's blog

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The North East India was known for different ethnic conflicts when Srimanta Sankaradeva was born here in the fifteenth century. Those ethnic groups were Karbi, Ahom, Kachari, Chutiya, Naga, Manipuri Meitei, Koch, Mising, Jaintia, Tipra, Khasi, Barahi, Moran, Matak, Deuri, Rabha, Tiwa, Kalita, Kayastha, Bodo, Hajang, Garo, Dimasa, Brahmin, Kaivarta, Daivajnya, Kumar, Bonia, Adi, Khamti, Luchai, Kuki, Dafala, Serdukpen, Mech, Misimi, Monpa etc. Among these tribes and castes, Bodo, Koch, Mech, Garo, Rabha, Tiwa, Dimasa, Tipra and Kachari have anthropological and linguistic similarities. So these nine Tibeto-Mongolean tribes are called the Bodo group.¹

Among the above ethnic groups, Daivajnya, Kumar, Bonia, Kalita, Kayastha, Brahmin, and Kaivarta are called castes. All other social groups in the above list are called tribes. So we can surmise that generally the Tibeto-Mongolean groups are called tribes. But this general definition of tribe is not correct. In our view, the ethnic groups which live in pristine conditions and which maintain a similar production condition should be called tribe.²

The tribal people, who were recognized as backward even by definition, were considered as people of lower class in the medieval society.³ Some castes like Kaivarta were also included in that category. The Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma, preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva had immense compassion for all these people. The saint advised his disciples to consider all creatures as manifestations of God.

Samasta bhutate Vishnubuddhi nohe yâve

Kâyabâkyamane abhyâsibâ ehibhâve

(Kîrtana-ghoshâ/1824)

The devotee should consider him/herself as the lowest of the low in the path of devotion. One cannot exercise devotion unless one develops that attitude. One has to make oneself humble if one is to get rid of this world.⁴ Only that person is redeemed who has developed dâsya (servility) attitude. So the path of devotion was easy for the tribal people, who were already counted as the lowest class in the society. Srimanta Sankaradeva wrote,

Kirâta Kachâri

Khâsi Gâro Miri

Yavana

Kanka

Gowâla

Asama Muluka

Dhobâ je Turuka

Kubâcha Mlechcha Chandâla

(Bhâgavata/2/53)

Thus Srimanta Sankaradeva declared that the path of devotion was a good way of life for the low class people like Bodo, Kachari, Khasi, Garo, Mising, Muslims, Gowal, Dhoba, Koch, Mech etc. Madhavadeva also echoed that feeling when he said,

Harinâme nâhike niyama adhikâry

Râma buli tare Miri Asama Kachâri

(Nâmghoshâ/510)

The acceptance of the tribal people in the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma, was not a strategic manouvre by Srimanta Sankaradeva, but a sincere act from his heart. He loved these people from his heart. So he kept only a tribal person with him as personal attendant. This man, who stayed with him like a shadow was Paramananda. He belonged to the Mising tribe and his previously known as was Pangkong. He hailed from Ratanpur village in Majuli and he stayed with the saint from his early age. He accompanied the saint in both pilgrimages as well as during the trial in king Naranarayana's court. No other disciple had this rare privilege.⁵

Another tribal devotee who was showered with love by Srimanta Sankaradeva was Govinda. Narayanadas Thakur brought him near Srimanta Sankaradeva when the latter was staying at Patbausi. Govinda was a Garo farmer and he had benefitted by uttering the name of lord Rama at the advice of Narayanadas Thakur. So he accepted the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma. He had a different name before his conversion to the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma. That earlier name was however obliterated and the new name 'Govinda' given by Srimanta Sankaradeva became popular.⁶

Srimanta Sankaradeva loved Madhai, the Jaintia devotee more than his own son. Srimanta Sankaradeva was not affected by the death of his second son, Kamal lochan. But he broke down when Madhai died a few days later. Madhai was a very high category of devotee. He considered Srimanta Sankaradeva as God. Barabahi, the other half of Narayanadas Thakur was so impressed by Madhai's devotion and wisdom that she arranged regular food materials to be sent to him. Madhai composed verses too from time to time, though he could not do so well like Madhavadeva. Madhai was earlier a tax collector. Then he released his bonded labourer, whom he handed over that office. But as a result, his own income source was stopped. The two wives of Madhai also were very devoted persons. Srimanta Sankaradeva accepted them as his disciples and allowed them to stay in the Patbausi Than.⁷

Nowadays Bhutan is counted as outside the North East India. But Bhutan was included among this region in the medieval period. The people of Bhutan maintained close cultural relationship with the people of the North East. A Bhutiya person, named Jayananda took the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma.⁸ He was a Mahout of elephant.⁹ No other name of Bhutiya devotees is available. But it is well known that both Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva accepted many Bhutiya people in the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma fold.¹⁰

Many Kachari people took the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma in the life time of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Many people of the Heramdoi, a small Kachari kingdom near Palasbari in Kamrup district took the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma. After that, their king himself wanted to become a disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva. He sent a messenger to Srimanta Sankaradeva, who was then staying at Patbausi in 1542 AD. Srimanta Sankaradeva did not go to Heramdoi himself and instead sent Narayanadas Thakur and Madhavadeva there. Both Narayanadas Thakur and Madhavadeva accepted the hospitality of the Kachari king and initiated him in the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma. The devoted king

acquitted nine persons charged of treason. Narayanadas Thakur and Madhavadeva stayed in Heramdoi for a fortnight.¹¹

The Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma became popular among the Koch people also. The most illustrated Koch devotee was the Koch prince and general, Chilarai. He accepted Srimanta Sankaradeva as Guru in the early part of 1548 AD. He was the acting king of the Koch kingdom at that time, since his elder brother, king Naranarayana had left for secret living for two and a half years towards the end of 1547 AD on the advice of the astrologers. Chilarai was also a son-in-law of Srimanta Sankaradeva since he had married Kamalpriya, a niece of the saint. Kamalpriya's father Ramrai had not initially accepted Chilarai as son-in-law because he belonged to a different ethnic group, but later gave his consent to the marriage at the advice of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Chilarai helped indirectly in the propagation of the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma among the Koch people, since he was an influential person in the Koch society.¹² Most of the scholars in the Koch royal court accepted Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma from Srimanta Sankaradeva.

The Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma preached by Srimanta Sankaradeva became popular among the Ahom people also. A section of ill-motivated priests lodged false allegations against the saint near the Ahom king Chuhungmung in 1536 AD. But all those allegations were proved to be unfounded, whereupon the king threw the priests out and showed honour to Srimanta Sankaradeva. When the successor king, Chuklenmung kept Madhavadeva under house arrest for six months, an Ahom official Handique Bora helped Madhavadeva immensely. Handique Bora engaged Madhavadeva in recitation of scriptures and supplied him provisions.¹³ So the image of Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva among the Ahom people was very good. The Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma spread a lot in the Ahom kingdom during the life time of Srimanta Sankaradeva himself, during the reigns of king Chukhampha and king Pratap Singha. Chukhampha did not persecute the subjects who had newly converted to the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma. However Pratap Singha harassed the followers of Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma a little in the beginning at the incitement of some people, but later the situation improved. Another king Jayadhvaja Singha accepted the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma after the demise of Srimanta Sankaradeva. That was why he was called Saraniya raja or initiated king.¹⁴ He was so devoted to Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma and its preachers that he consulted them in the royal matters also. He even bequeathed the throne to Banamalideva of the Dakhinpat Satra before his death.¹⁵

Madhavadeva became the head of the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma order after the demise of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Gopal Ata of Bhavanipur, an ardent disciple of Madhavadeva developed a new sub-cult known as Kâl-sanghati. This sub-cult gave emphasis on proselytizing work among the tribal people. However the principles of the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma had to be diluted for that purpose. Even the animism of the tribal societies found its way into the Kâl-sanghati. The socio-cultural customs of the tribes were incorporated in the Kal-sanghati. For instance the Mising people who were converted to the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma continued with the practice of drinking the home-made wine Apang, eating pork and chicken, living in houses built on platform, burying the dead by putting the body inside Rungkung, eating a dish Nâmsing made of dry fish etc.¹⁶ The Ahom devotees of the Kâl-sanghati also drink their home-made wine Sâj. It may be mentioned that Gopal Ata set up about twenty Sattra in his life-time itself.¹⁷ However the residential institution of religious preaching came to be known as Sattra after the demise of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Earlier these were known as Thân. Srimanta Sankaradeva himself used the term Devagriha.¹⁸

Many Naga people also were initiated in the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma at the initiative of the activists of Kâl-sanghati. Jagat Mahanta, the Satrâdhikâr of Chaliha Bareghar Satra initiated as many as fifty thousand Naga people in the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma in the twentieth century. There is a Naga village near Moiramara Satra. The Naga-gaon in the Hahchara mouza of Sivasagar district has about five hundred population. Many ancient Naga customs like burying the dead, celebrating the Naga festivals Ailing and Auniye, wearing loin cloth, playing on the instrument Tungkhung etc are still in vogue among these people.¹⁹

The incorporation of tribal elements in the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma is a note-worthy aspect

of this order. The most important element among these is the Kirtanghar or Nâmghar. The concept of this most important multi-dimensional institution of the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma was taken by Srimanta Sankaradeva from the tribal institution, Murang-ghar or Dekâ-châng. The Naga people also has this institution. In our view, Srimanta Sankaradeva remembered the Mising institution, Murang-ghar when designing the Kirtanghar. The length and breadth of Murang-ghar are 40-45 feet and 20 feet respectively, which are approximately the dimensions of Kirtanghar too.²⁰

The practice of calling the main pillar of the Kirtanghar as Lâi-khutâ came from the Ahom tradition. The word Lâi is of Ahom origin. It means 'the main' in the Tai. Not only that, even many tunes used in the Prasanga came from the Ahom tradition. The practice of uttering Jai (glory) at the end of Nâm-Prasanga or Bhâgavata reading also came from the Ahom tradition. The concept of the flying lion carved on the altar Guru âsana is of Mongoleen origin. We can guess an Ahom influence here too.²¹

The tribal cultures of North East India enriched the Sankari culture and it is evident in many aspects of it. One such component is the instrument Bhor-tal, which is indispensable in the Nâm-Prasanga or Kirtana etc. This Bhor-tâl came from Bhutan, because of which it was earlier called Bhot-tâl.²² Another popular in the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma, the Nâgârâ is the contribution of the Tiwa tribe of Assam. There is closely similar to Ludâng-khrâm with the instrument Khol devised by Srimanta Sankaradeva. The saint had innovated the Khol, which he got made by a Kachari artisan from the Kapili valley. The Khol was first made in 1468 AD just before the first play of Srimanta Sankaradeva, Chihna Yâtrâ was enacted.²³

The Sarengdâr, another instrument used during the days of Srimanta Sankaradeva was a contribution of the Bodo tribe. The Daba, the most important instrument kept in the Kirtanghar came from the tribal tradition. So the entire Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma reverberates with innumerable tribal heritages. Some of these ingredients came into Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma only after the passing away of Srimanta Sankaradeva. Such incorporation became possible only because Srimanta Sankaradeva had made the Sankari culture a meeting place of all the castes, tribes, and sub-castes of North East India. Moreover that contributed in the creation of one common Assamese culture.²⁴

The contribution of the tribes of Assam is undisputed in case of Sankari dances too. The postures of hand and feet movements of Bodo, Karbi, Mising, Jaintia etc tribes are found in Sankari dances. One of the most important component of it, the Gâyan-Bâyan came from the Sonowal Kachari tribe. There is a 3,000 year long tradition of classical dances among the tribes of North East India. It was initiated by Usha, the princess of Sonitpur. That tradition has enriched the Sankari dance.²⁵ An example of tribal posture in this dance is the Hai re hand posture. This hand posture came from the Mising culture. It may be noted that the Sankari hand postures Mujurâ, Sashak, and Hâi re are not found in other classical dances of India.²⁶ Another notable fact is that the word Hasta instead of Mudrâ is used in the Sankari dance to signify hand posture.

There is tribal ingredient in Bargeet, yet another important resource of the Sankari culture. The Bargeet "Rama meri hridaya pankaje baise" was the first Bargeet composed by Srimanta Sankaradeva. It was composed by him in 1481 AD. Total one hundred and ninety one Bargeet are available between Srimanta Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. Both the Mahâpurushas created own Râgas for these Bargeets. These Râgas are different from other Indian classical Ragas. Some of the tunes of Bargeet resemble with that of the Lâi hilâi songs of the Tiwa tribe. The Tiwa tribe always maintained a cordial relationship with the followers of Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma. The Tiwa kings gave a regular grant to the Bordowa Than.²⁷ So the Tiwa tribe must have had an intimate relationship with the followers of Eka Sarana Nâma Dharma since the days of Srimanta Sankaradeva.

Srimanta Sankaradeva, the first playwright in all modern Indian languages used tribal ingredients in his Ankiya plays too. He put many such traits together in the compere of his plays, the Sutradhâr. The headgear worn by the Sutradhâr came from the Jaintia tribe. The Ghuri worn by him on the lower part of the body came from the Rabha tribe. The jacket worn by him on the upper part of the body came from the Khangâliphagâ of the Tiwa tribe.²⁸ The interesting character of Sutradhâr had its genesis in the

indigenous Ojâ-pâli, Putalâ-nâch etc. The presentation by the Sutradhâr of the Ankiyâ plays resemble the presentation by the Sutradhâr of the Mâregân, a type of Ojâ-pâli prevalent among the Rabha tribe, to a great extent. However the Sutradhâr is more akin to the Ojâ of the Naganyâ Ojâ-pâli of Nagaon area. But the very existence of the Mâregân indicates some relationship of the Ankiyâ plays with the Rabha tribe.

There is tribal influence in the masks worn by some characters of the Ankiyâ plays. Many tribes like Khamti, Bhutiya, and others have been using masks since long ago. There is use of masks in the South East Asian countries since ancient times. So the mask might have entered the Sankari culture, thanks to some tribes migrating from that direction. The mask must have entered the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma from some tribes living in the Eastern part of Assam rather than from the Bhutiya people. The mask became so popular that it became a practice at one point of time to use masks for all characters in some Ankiyâ plays. Such enactment of Ankiyâ play is called Mukhâ bhaonâ. However masks are used only for the demons and the lesser creatures in the Ankiyâ plays authored by Srimanta Sankaradeva. These masks have made the Sankari culture very colourful.

The tribal society of Assam is ever widening. Many others have entered this region in later period. Some examples are Aitoniya, Khamyang, Singphow, Turung, Phake etc. Most of them entered this region only in the eighteenth century. Only the Turung tribe came in the nineteenth century.²⁹ Therefore many new ingredients must have entered the Eka Sharana Nâma Dharma too. But these have not yet become prominent. The liberal sub-cult, Kâl-sanghati has a greater scope for such incorporation.

The culture created by Srimanta Sankaradeva helped to a great extent in removing the ethnic conflicts we had mentioned at the outset. All the tribes in this region accepted the Sankari culture as their own, since this culture incorporated cultural ingredients from all the tribes. The Sankari culture thus became the first ever common culture in Assam. It helped in mitigating the inter-state conflicts too. Actually the creation of this common culture created the Assamese race itself. When there was no idea of self-determination in the medieval period, the Eka Sarana Nâma Dharma acted as a bonding agent for nation building.³⁰

It is proved from an intensive analysis of the life and works of Srimanta Sankaradeva that his sympathy for the tribal people and the downtrodden people of the society was not confined to his literary works only. He practised those ideas in real life also. He extended immense love and compassion for such people throughout his eventful life. That was his ideology too. There has not been a greater friend for the tribes of Assam and for that matter the North East India than Srimanta Sankaradeva till today.