

Two Major Themes in Socio-Religious Reform Movements in North-Eastern India

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The north-east India is the home of a number of hill tribes, plain tribes and non-tribal people. In this essay the focus will be on the growth and role of social and religious reform movements in the entire North-East India from the time of Lord Sankardev (1449-1568) and the neo-Vaishnavism founded by him, to the advent of the American Baptist Mission. The social and religious movements in North-Eastern India, as elsewhere in India, came into being in response to the pressing need of the time. In this region, however, religious reform preceded social reform.

The geographical situation of undivided Assam as a frontier state of India has given to the province its special position and importance. "Certain Tibeto-Burman and other Sino-Tibetan-speaking tribes (Mongoloids) have formed parts of the settled population of Assam since time immemorial, and they have come within the orbit of Indian civilization at a fairly early age; and now they form part of the Indian body politic."¹ The Nagas belong to India as much as the Bengalis, Manipuris, Mishmis, the Miris, the Daflas, the Akas, the Abors, the Khasis, the Jaintias, the Garos, the Tripuris – people who had relations with the ruling houses of the Brahmaputra valley and with no other advanced states by virtue of their geographical situation. Assam has thus to meet all the tribal movements from the East, involving the advent into India of Tibeto-Chinese speaking Mongoloids, and it was in Assam primarily that the great synthesis in the formation of the Indian people became largely strong – particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. "The great neo-vaishnava movement of Assam of the sixteenth century brought about a new and comprehensive outlook on life, a distinctly healthy tone to social behaviour with an all pervasive organisational set-up, and accelerate the pace of literature and the fine arts like music and painting."² Namghar, the esteemed institution of Bardowa (Nowgong) became the nucleus of the Vaishnava organisation, which later spread throughout the neighbouring States of Assam, Kamrupa and Koch-Bihar in the forms of regional establishments called 'Sattra' and numerous village temples, known as 'Namghar'. The Sattras played a great role in the social life of the people, and as a social force this institution was greatly strengthened by the acceptance of the Vaishnava faith by the Ahom

Kings and nobles. Sankardeva and others of his school interpreted the '*Bhagabata Purana*' in the Assamese language, and let it out as the secret of the 'Vedanta'. Several early schools of Vaishnavism had prepared each a commentary on the '*Brahma-sutras*'. Sankardeva of Assam and Sri Chaitanya Mohaprabhu of Bengal did not, however, deem it necessary to follow the example of these sects. In Assam too '*Neo-Vaishnavism*' brought in its train a wide culture of music. The Vaishnava music of Assam is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety. The Vaishnava Renaissance thus reached out to all fields of culture and developed life in Assam, enriched it and brought about altogether a unifying and glorifying vitality to this part of the great and immortal India.³

As S. K. Chatterjee suggested the Bodo and the Ahoms may be compared to the Anglo-saxons and Normans in England only both were overshadowed in the cultural sphere by the Assamese Aryan speech, which ultimately caused the disappearance of one and almost complete elimination of the other.⁴ In fact, the Ahoms unified Assam. Mohapurush Sankardeva founded the Sattrra or Monastery at Patboushi near Barpeta to be the centre of his missionary work and a more important centre for the faith was set up at Barpeta by his disciple Madhavadeva. Amidst darkness and gloom, Sankardeva's message shone like the brilliance of a mid-day sun and till now there is light which has passed through the corridor of five centuries and still gives hope and inspiration to the common man in Assam.

Likewise, the ancient Kingdom of Manipur reached the climax of her glory in the 18th century. However, in the beginning of the 19th century, Manipur had already passed her heydays and same is the case in respect of Bengal. The worship of Vishnu was started in the 15th century. But the kings of Manipur were not converted to Hinduism till 1709 in fact, during the 19th century Vaishnavism made further progress during the reign of Gambhir Singh (1825-1835). The process of Sanskritization of Manipur which is sometimes called by some scholars as Aryanisation continues up to the middle of the 20th century. The first Muslim settlement in Manipur recorded in the chronicle was in the year 1606. Coming of Christianity in Manipur is a very significant feature of British Rule in Manipur as well as in Assam. For example, the foundation of the Baptist missionary movement was laid when in 1907 Church of Ukhrul was established with seven members. If Hinduism had revolutionised the life of the Meiteis of the Imphal valley, Christianity had brought tremendous change in the life of the tribal people.

Above all, Christianity has brought about a great social and religious change in the hills of North Eastern India. In India as a whole, many waves of Christian missionaries came from the early eighteenth century and preached the gospel of Christ to the Indians. Even in North Eastern India, the Welsh Mission established their centre at Cherrapunji of modern Meghalaya state in 1840. The American Baptist Mission started their work centering upper Assam and Naga Hills. "The present mass awakening of the tribal people in North-Eastern India and their rapid metamorphosis from primitive ways of life to modern, progressive and enlightened social, political and cultural values are the major result of the work and activities of the American Baptist Mission over the last 150 years."⁵

It is interesting to note here that the impact of the above socio-religious Movements is visible only in the periphery of the society. This will be evident by the Study of Bihu Songs of Assam which own their origin evidently to the feudal society, when people lived community lives in the small tribal group. With a twentieth century outlook of Urban culture, it is indeed difficult to make a correct estimate of the life and society as revealed in the folk-lore which depicts the wishes and aspirations of the people of the by-gone days. The Bihu songs of Assam as a type of folk-poetry, as in the folk-poetry of other people has a "social content" and "economic aim". These songs, and the dances and rituals associated with them had been playing a lively role on the life and experience of an agricultural community. The Bihu festival of songs and dance has, to a great extent, begun to confess candidly about all modern day festival of the urban population, divorced from the original spirit and faith. With the gradual decay of the agricultural society the solidarity and integrity of the village society have to a considerable degree waned. The fundamental basis of the Bihu is materialistic in spirit and action. Perhaps the most lyrical type of Assamese folksongs is the Bihu-Nam associated with the Bohag Bihu or spring festival. "Thus the seed time in Assam is commemorated with the Bohag Bihu which ushers in the New year."⁶ The middle of April ushers in the Indian New Year and this period coincides with the Bihu festival of the Assamese. Some of the customs observed at the Bihu are common to both the plains Assamese and tribals. They seem to have their parallels in Chinese Society. The Bihu-Nam or Bihu songs are anti-phonal and constitute a language of love. The collective emotion of the people finds expression in songs and dance ; and the magical practices and ritual

enactments are projected in all seriousness with a view to drawing the forces of Nature on their behalf. This is how the folk-religion and folk-poetry grow out of a basic materialistic out-look of the people. The incorporation of and blending of the human qualities with the characteristics of the Nature gods of the sky and the earth is indeed a very interesting development of human thought. This cult though very ancient and prevalent world-wide finds a very suggestive lyrical expression in the Bihu songs of Assam. So the the Assamese Bihu songs have become a rich wealth of symbolical poetry. Further the Bihu songs of Assam enable the researchers to know the people, both plains and tribals as well as their societies as a whole. To quote P. Goswami, "The Bihu dance and the Bihu songs are not occasional extravagances, as considered by the educated section. They have a ceremonial character, though losing their functions in a changing economy and changing mental climate." In present-day India, the seven sisters of North East India have come to their own as important units within the union of India, and sons and daughters of this region are now taking their due share in carrying on the affairs of India.

References

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3. S. N. Sarma, *The Sattra Institution of Assam*, p. 55
4. S. K. Chatterji, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
5. T. Luikham, *A Short History of the Manipur Baptist Jubilee*, 1981, p. 20.
6. P. Goswami, *Bihu songs of Assam*, p. 1.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.