

Book Review-1

Dr. Girish Baruah, *The Vedanta and Srimanta Sankaradeva*, Mohan Chandra Mahanta Samaj Vigyan Adhyayan Gobesana Kendra, Cinnamara College, Jorhat, 2023, p. 268, Rs. 500

Dr. Girish Baruah's research on Assam's renowned medieval saint, Srimanta Sankaradeva, provides fresh insights into the study of Bhaktivada and the role of religious ideologies in Indian social life. The book is actually a compilation of articles published in different journals, arranged thematically under two separate sections. The first section focuses on various interpretations of the Vedantic philosophy and the second one deals with Sankaradeva's understanding of it. At one level, the book appears to offer a comprehensive overview of Sankaradeva's philosophical injunctions. A more nuanced understanding of it, however, would reveal its relevance in contemporary times. The historiographical significance of the book also cannot be denied as it illustrates the heterogeneity within the Bhakti Movement in the subcontinent.

'Bhakti' as a socio-religious concept signifies an emotive state of mind that refers to attachment or devotional surrender to a personally conceived supreme God for attaining salvation. The origin of this doctrine can be traced to both the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions of Ancient India and various scriptures such as the *Bhagavata Gita* and *Bhagavata Purana*. As the fundamental element of spiritual salvation, 'Bhakti', rose in opposition to 'Advaita' Vedanta philosophy of Sankaracharya. The Saiva Nayanar saints and Vaishnava Alvar saints of South India spread the concept among different sections of the society irrespective of caste and sex during the period between the 7th and the 10th centuries. Some Vaishnava scholars like Ramanuja, Nimbarka, Madhava, Ramananda and Vallabhalaid down the philosophical foundation for later Bhaktivadas. The Islamic invasions, growth of artisanal production and subsequent socio-cultural changes led to the development of nirguna and saguna bhakti strands. Vaishnavism spread to the eastern side, particularly under Chaitanya in Bengal and Sankaradeva in Assam.

The book has demonstrated how Sankaradeva's philosophy appropriated the Vedantic postulations and combined them with Bhaktivada to suit the needs of the time and place. Sankaradeva challenged the implicit bias in Vedantic doctrine towards a special class in society but kept it in tandem with its core philosophy. Bhaktivada offered him the avenue to engraft the egalitarian spirit into the Vedantic rituals. Prof. Baruah has elaborated on this 'aesthetic syncretism' in Sankaradeva's philosophy.

The book also provides a philosophical grounding for historical changes in Assam in the 15th century. By propounding a monotheistic religion, Sankaradeva provided an overarching ideology for the 'feudalisation of tribal society' (p. 134). Intermittent allusions to Western philosophical thought and its juxtaposition with Indian knowledge systems reveal the richness of the latter (p. 40).

The historical narratives portray the Bhakti Movement as a distinct socio-religious phenomenon that primarily serves as an antidote to the rigidly hierarchical Brahminical social system. The Movement was widespread not just because of its geographic expansion, but also because of its general appeal. Naturally, its character, composition and ideological footings varied, rendering it practically impossible to come up with any pan-Indian definition of it. The Indologists of the 19th century like George A. Grierson and the historians like R.C. Majumdar, Tarachand, Yusuf Hussain and Munshi Ram Sharma failed to take into account the heterogeneity of the bhakti movement. Recent scholars like Krishna Sharma have pointed out how different economic, political and socio-cultural contexts have shaped the peculiar characteristics of the Bhakti movement in different parts of the subcontinent. Dr Girish Baruah's book has provided a case study of the Bhakti movement in Assam under Srimanta Sankaradeva, thus highlighting its peculiarities and uniqueness in the northeastern region. Regional variations in the movement form new areas of interest for scholars. However, in order to present a nuanced understanding of these differences, comparative studies are necessary. A few chapters in this book have tried to address the issue from this angle. Prof. Baruah has provided comparative analyses of Sankaradeva's postulations with those of Sankaracharya, Guru Nanak and Chaitanya. These chapters deal with the philosophical divergences, with occasional references to the socio-economic contexts that had shaped them. Studies on spatial variations are substantiated with comparisons across the time periods. Sankaradeva and his legacy have been traced in the thoughts of neo-Vedantists like Raja Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda and Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan. The book, therefore, in a lucid style, has put forward a comprehensive overview of Sankaradeva's bhaktivada.

Legends, myths, gods and religions appeared for the first time with the Cognitive Revolution. Yuval Noah Harari has explained that the potential of Humankind to weave myths collectively has enabled them to cooperate flexibly in large numbers, leading to their considerable advantage over other species. The moot point in his argument is that the formulation of myths (or religion, in the sense of a more formal, widespread doctrine) should aim at facilitating better cooperation among individuals or societies, not instigating conflicts or being a weapon for legitimising oppressive social systems. The myths, therefore, need to make space for dynamism and be adaptive to the needs of the time to serve the purpose of ensuring social cohesion. The Brahminical social structure in India, based upon numerous legends/assumptions, failed to remain flexible and became rigid and exclusionist in

due course of time. The Bhakti movement gave a blow to this dogmatic structure and the saints sought to rearrange, recreate and reorder the myths to form more flexible and somewhat liberal structures. Girish Baruah's work provides a detailed analysis of Sankaradeva's doctrine and elucidates that he sought to use the unique power of Sapiens' cognitive capacity to form an inclusive, well-coordinated and harmonious Assamese society.

So far, the significance of the book in intellectual circles has been discussed. It would be an intriguing read for the general audience, offering glimpses into the development of a new social structure based on Bhaktivadain Assam in the 15th century. The vision of Sankaradeva is relevant still today - he strived for the elimination of dogmatic practices and urged people to be tolerant and open to new ideas and challenges (p. 261). He sought to make Vaishnavism a cohesive force against the evil practices of exploitation, casteism, cruelty, etc. Such a doctrine needs to be reiterated time and again and has to be disseminated among the general public to prevent the rise of any form of dogmatism.

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