



Research Paper

Egalitarian views in Vaishnavism of Sankardeva and Buddhism

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Abstract:

Egalitarianism is a very old concept-it is a political as well as a social philosophy. We can see egalitarianism in some way or other in Christianity and Islam which are comparatively new religions. Hinduism in its conglomeration of diverse faiths under one umbrella gave spaces for egalitarian views. However, due to political aggrandizement time to time sectarian views and religious bigotry asserted its prominent existence. About 600 years before the birth of Christ religious reformer Gautam Buddha and Mahavira propounded two new religions where egalitarian views asserted their existence.

Vaishnavism of Mahapurusha Sankardeva also embraced egalitarian views very liberally. During his time a liberal Vaishnava movement was going on all over India. This pan Indian movement made an impact on Sankardeva in his Bharat tour on foot. So egalitarianism and liberalism became the hall mark of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism. This resulted in a tolerant and liberal Assamese society where there is no space for religious bigotry and communal intolerance.

Keywords: *Egalitarianism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Gautam Buddha, Sankardeva, Vaishnavism.*

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One of the most important faiths of Hinduism in Assam is Vasihnavism propounded by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankareva. He was born in a Kayastha family in Nagaon district of Assam. His Vaishnavism is called Neo-Vaishnavite religion or Mahapurushiya Dharma. Sankardeva who was one of the pioneers of Bhakti Movement of medieval India was a religious reformer during the rule of the Ahoms in Assam. He was the social reformer and he gave the foundation of present Assamese society. Everybody got an equal status in his religion. But the Ahom royalty was followers of Shakta cult and was not tolerant towards this religion. Due to religious persecution of the then Ahom kings he had to take shelter in the court of the Koch King Naranarayan.

Liberalism and egalitarianism were the need of the time. People also wanted change in the society. They wanted respite from religious persecution. People used to follow animistic tribal religion and the royal family on the other hand followed newly imported Shakta cult from Bengal. So people were forced to follow the royal faith. No egalitarianism was allowed by the royalty. In this context for liberal faith Bhakti movement of Hinduism automatically found favours among the common people. This movement was an all India phenomenon. Chaitanyadev, Guru Nanak, Kabir, led Bhakti movements in other parts of India. Mahapurush Srimanta Shankardeva roamed for about 20 years all over India and got enlightened. He began his religious work in Assam and his work was crucial leading to all round change in the society. Now his religion has become the guiding light to the Assamese people irrespective of caste, creed, and communities. So the Assamese society is liberal to a great extent due to the impact of egalitarian views in the religion of Sankardeva. In the name of religion no persecution is seen. Women are respected in the society. They have equal position in the society, though the society is patriarchal. That is why we do not see any communal clash in the history of Assam.

.One great religion of the world is Buddhism where liberalism is one prime force. The Buddha(or the Enlightened One) was born in a Kshatriya royal family of Kapilabastu, at the foothills of Nepal to liberate the downtrodden, marginalized section in the Hindu sectarian and class dominated society. This age was a transition

period in the history of India. State formation process was going on at that time. Second urbanization was also going on then. So in this socio-political and economic condition Buddhism and Jainism were born in India. These two faiths were opposed to many Brahmanical theories and practices, and orthodoxy. The egalitarian religion Buddhism got popularity among the common people of the country. Because of the measures adopted by Emperor Ahoka Mauraya the great and Kanishka the religion of Shakyamuni became a world religion. People of the Asian continent embraced this religion two millennia years ago or in the early centuries of the Christian era. So, this religion has transformed the lives of millions of people around the world irrespective of their different religious faiths. People wary of the present life style find solace of their souls in the simple but profound teachings of Gautam Buddha.

Geographically, culturally and socially North-East India and South-East Asia are similar. But one big question is why Buddhism thrived in South-East Asia and East Asia but this religion did not find its followers in North-East India when Buddhism prospered in India. This may be due to rise of Tantrikism and Shakti cult in Kamarupa Kingdom in ancient period of the history of Assam. Tantrikism and Shakti cult even influenced Buddhism heavily and led to the development of third sect of Bajrayana in Buddhism and ultimately led to the decline of Buddhism in India.

One reason for prosperity of Buddhism in the Asian continent is its simplicity, liberalism and egalitarianism. Patronization by a few important monarchs in different periods of history was also one important factor for the rise of this religion.

For the egalitarian views both the religions-Buddhism, and Vaishnavism of Sankardeva can be considered similar and relevant in the present social context. There may be a time gap of two thousand years, but for the reason of the similarity of egalitarian principles both are being followed avidly by millions of people.

Religion is a way of life. So religion influences every aspect of an individual. Sankardeva's Vaishnavism, and Buddhism are no exception in this regard. Influences by Sankardeva and his religion made such an impact on Assamese society that it gave an unparalleled identity to the mainstream Assamese society.

Between Sankardeva and Buddha there is a time gap of two thousand years. Though this huge time gap exists, the social conditions in which they were born same to some extent. Religious bigotry prevailed in the society. In the name of religion a few sections in the society were not given due recognition and position in the society. Brahmanical rigidity stopped the vertical social mobility completely. Nobody dared to protest against it. Both of them were rebels. Both of them protested against the erroneous social and religious systems prevailed at the time.

Even the so called Sudras got their rightful status in the society in both the religion for the reason of egalitarian principles. Women were also given a respectable position. However, in the medieval age both Sudras and women lost their due status.

Both Buddha and Sankardeva were initially family men, married and had children. Buddha later on completely renounced his family. Though Sankardeva did not renounce his family he was able to shun all worldly possessions and desires inspite of being in the family.

Sankardeva was a versatile genius. A religious preacher, a litterateur per excellence, a dramatist, an artiste, a social organizer, Sankardeva was also a great social reformer. So he was called Sarbagunakara (owner of all qualities).

Sankardeva was not a Brahmin, he was a Kayastha man. Buddha was also not a Brahmin, a Khastriya in the Chaturvarna system prevailed in the society of North India. In medieval Assam as in ancient Assam four-fold divisions of the society were not present in the true sense of the term. Sankardeva is considered in the Assamese society as the Mahapurusha, a great man, but Gautam Buddha is considered by his devote followers as one of the incarnations of Vishnu, a Hindu god. Though Buddhism is non-theistic, Buddha is said to have achieved godhood.

Sankardeva was born out of the liberal spirit of the age in the medieval period. He preached fundamental equality of all religious faiths, and the unity of Godhead. He gave initiation to the so-called lower class people as he did to people of so-called higher castes. A liberal movement in religion was going on throughout the country at that time. Kabir, Ramananda, Chaitanyadev were some of these liberal gurus. Buddha was also born out of the liberal spirit of the age of 6th century B.C. which was a century of transition. Many new ideas came up during this century. So this had impact on Buddha and his philosophy and religion.

Sankardeva's religion was actually a protest against the ongoing religious intolerance and conservatism. So was Buddhism against the Hindu religious bigotry. The time was against them. But they moved against the wave. They succeeded and brought profound change to the society.

Basudhoiva Kutumbakam. This world view was imbibed by Sankardeva after the end of his travelling for about twenty years around the country. So in that way he obtained egalitarian view from different faiths and gurus from different places of India. At that time roaming of the country on foot is like roaming the whole world. India or Bharatavarsha was like a mini universe. India was much developed in comparison with other countries of the world existed at that time.

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