

A Sociological Study on Gender Role in Religious Organizations: with special reference to Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha of Assam

Dr Santana Dutta¹, Priyanka Gayan²

¹Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Jhanji Hemnath Sarma College, Sivasagar, Assam

²Guest Faculty, Dept. of Sociology, Jhanji Hemnath Sarma College, Sivasagar, Assam

Abstract:

Medieval history of Assam is largely depended on religious movements. The Neo–Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva in 15th century was a socio-religious and cultural movement. In Assam religious norms and values play a significant role in regulating gender roles in social life. The medieval Assamese society was very conservative and women were almost confined to their homes. Women had no respect at that time. Srimanta Sankardeva tries to extend the role of women in the practice of devotional religion. Over the years Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha emerged with the aim to introduce brotherhood and harmony in Assamese society. The Sangha also leads to all round development of women. The paper focuses on the ways in which gender role has changed significantly in Neo-Vaishnavism as well as religious organizations in Assam. This study also focuses how religious institutions such as the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha bring changes in the role of women in the religious sphere.

Keywords: Gender, Role, Religious Organization, Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha etc.

Introduction:

The Bhakti Movement started in South India in sixth and seventh centuries A. D. The movement gradually spread throughout India in the following centuries. Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam was a powerful reflection of the Bhakti Movement which stirred the social consciousness of the Assamese people.

Srimanta Sankardeva involved as a flag bearer of the Bhakti Movement in Assam in the late fifteenth century A.D. He introduced the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam as a transformative force that brought about significant changes in all aspects of life. He chooses the aesthetic form as the best way to promote the Bhakti Movement to appeal to the general public. The Bhakti Movement in Assam is commonly referred as Neo-Vaishnavite movement and the official name of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism is *Ek - Saran – Harinam - Dharma* (belief in one God). The Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha was a product of Neo - Vaishnavism which played a vital role in Assamese society to spread communal harmony and brotherhood. After the death of Sankardeva some of his followers established the organisation as Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha which try to spread the ideology of Neo- Vaishnavism.

Neo-Vaishnavism was originated and accelerated its pace in that background and it wanted to establish the superiority of one God instead of worshipping many Gods and Goddesses. Sankardeva was the mentoring soul for the growth and development of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. There were multiple waves of the Neo - Vaishnavism movement in Assam because its evolution belonged to a particular

historical period that lasted for a long time. This movement went through the process of institutionalization with devotion and established a strong religious system. Consequently, *Satras* and *Namghar* are played an important role as carriers of Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam. Sankardeva and his devotee Madhavdeva established *Satras* and *Namghars* in Assam as places of worship of the Lord Krishna. After the death of Sankardeva, many *Satras* and *Namghars* were established by his devotees.

Over the years the *Satra* developed a hegemonic order by incorporating Brahminical ritualistic practices against the norms of the Neo-Vaishnava ideology. The *Satras* continued to act as a dominant institution creating deep impact in the socio-cultural lives of the people of Assam. At that time the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha was emerged with the aim of ending this domination of *Satras*. The Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha is an organisation that introduced brotherhood and equality in Assamese society based on the *Ek-Sarana-Harinam-Dharma* of Sankardeva.

Emergence of Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha:

In the sixteenth century, Srimanta Sankardeva's Bhakti Movement was remarkable for bringing social, religious and cultural renaissance in Assam. But, after the death of Srimanta Sankardeva, different opinions grew amongst the followers regarding successor ship, Edward Gait (1926) mentioned "Sankar Deb had appointed as his successor another Kayastha named Madhab Deb, but on his death this nomination was not universally accepted and several of his Brahman disciples seceded and formed separate sects of their own. The chief of these '*Bamunia Gosains*' were Damudar Deb, Hari Deb and Gopal Deb, who founded numerous *Satras* or religious centers". In the case of a sect emerging around a leader generally depend on his teachings and his organisational ability. Vaishnava sect of Assam, in this context emerged over a long period of time where institutionalisation of the monastic order gave a concrete form.

In 19th century at the time of National Movement Haladhar Bhuyan and Ramakanta Muktiar Ata established an organisation named as 'Sankara Mission' and propagate the Mahapurusiya faith. Ramkanta Muktiar Ata managed to arrange for the setting up of such an office at Palasani village in Nagaon district. After that Mahikanta Mahanta suggests that the name should be *Sankara Sangha*. The first *Sankara Sangha* came into being with Rai Saheb Dambarudhar Barua as President and Haladhar Bhuyan as Secretary. (Haladhar Bhuyan, 1991). They established this organisation to spread the ideology and culture of *Ek-Sarana-Harinam-Dharma*. The main idea of this organisation is to avoid prejudice and superstition and established harmony among the people of plains and hills of Assam. After some years Bagmibor Nilamoni Phukon renamed the organization as 'Sri Sri Sankardeva Sangha' in place of 'Sankara Sangha'. B. N Deka writes "During the periods of political turmoil and social upheaval, Sankardeva's Bhakti Movement suffered. However, during the early years of the twentieth century, the Freedom Movement of India gained momentum. The spirit of freedom found expressions in Assam also in the political, cultural and intellectual spheres. The revival of Sankardeva's ideal was a historic necessity."

In the words of Chutia (1998), "It is interesting to note that there has been revival of Srimanta Sankardeva, Neo- Vaishnavism in the mid- twentieth century through a great Vaishnavism religious association named Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha. It is but a natural process of unification and purification to be in the *Ek – Sarana – Harinam – Dharma* of Srimanta Sankardeva".

Hariprasad Hazarika (2006: 400-401) also states "The Sankara Sangha was formed with the active help of the residents of Ouana village, Karaini village, Lataimari village etc. near Palasoni village. Haladhar Bhuyan formed a local management committee with these people for the organizational works. The

president and secretary of this committee were Manipad Bora of Ouana village and Sanatram Bora of Palasani village”. Thus, Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha was established in 1930 at Palasani village with the co-operation and integrated effort of different people of Nagaon district along with Haladhar Bhuyan and Ramakanta Muktiar Ata.

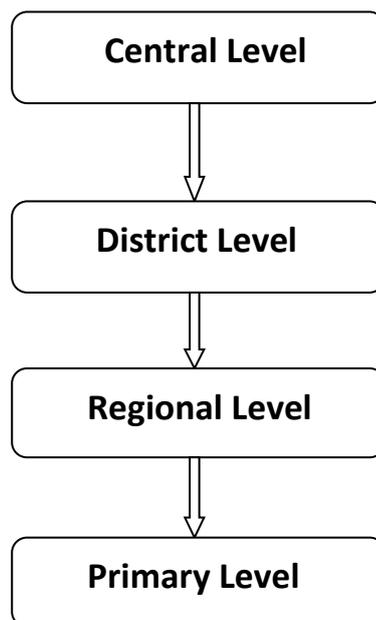
Organizational Structure of Sankardeva Sangha:

Structure of the organization means the patterns of relationship among various components or parts of organization. This prescribes the relationship among various activities and positions. These positions are held by different persons in an organization.

Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha has four layers of organizational structure from the primary to the central level. The grass root of the organization is the primary unit (*Prathamik Sakha*) which covers one village or a part of village or town along with a Namghar. According to the constitution of the Sangha, the primary unit consists of at least 10 families and 25 members and it has an executive committee consisting of 7 to 13 members out of which at least 2 must be female. In the executive committee of the primary unit, there is one president, one vice-president, one secretary and one assistant secretary. The ex-president and secretaries of primary, regional and district units are the advisers of that primary unit.

According to the constitution of the Sangha, 7 or more than 7 primary units of a *Mauza* together constitute regional or *Anchalik Sakha*. Each regional unit has an executive committee consisting of 15 to 31 members out of which 3 must be female. The Sangha has established district units on the basis of government subdivisions. The district level unit or *Jila Sakha* is formed by at least 10 members of *Anchalik Sakha*. The executive committee of the district unit consists of 33 to 45 members out of which 5 must be female.

At the central level, there is the main executive committee which is formed by elected members from the district unit. The main executive committee consisted with the president of the Sangha, called *Padadhikar*, the vice-president (*Upa- Padadhikar*) the chief secretary, two joint secretaries along with the presidents and secretaries of the branch committee.



Organizational Structure of the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha

There are nine main branch committees of Sangha for smooth functioning of all activities of the organization. *Sisu Aaru Aai Matri Kolyan Samiti* is one of the committees in which women involved actively and encourage women to participate every activity of the Sangha. Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha also has established a separate branch for the all-round development of children and women members in 1994, which is known as *Sisu Aai Matri Kolyan Sakha*. This branch committee consists of eleven members with one president, one vice president and one secretary. The women play important role in this committee.

Methodology:

This paper used secondary sources of data. Secondary sources of data include subject related various books, articles, research papers and journals. Descriptive method is used to analyze the content.

Discussion:

Gender role attitudes are opinions and beliefs about the roles of men or women that they fulfill in families, work life and in the society which shared a traditional understanding that men and women should fulfill distinct roles – the bread winners’ role being a natural role for a man, whereas the caretaker role was considered the best option for women. In the religious sphere there are some beliefs and rituals take place in the society which differentiate the role of men and women. Some religious rituals are performed only by man. The medieval Assamese society was very conservative and women were almost confined to their homes. Women were not permitted to move around like man. Therefore, it is important to understand these issues to know the status of women in the society. It is one of the social characteristics of Vaishnavism, that women are seen to be equal to men in all aspects.

At the time of Sankardeva women were described as a source of temptation. Women are the greatest sources of temptation in all their forms. They can pierce a man’s heart at a single glance and by their very appearance can break his meditation and disturb his thoughts. Knowing all these, the wise avoids the company of women. In Assamese society women are traditionally considered subordinate to men. Traditional thinking is that a wife must do what her husband does, she has no right to behave otherwise. But Srimanta Sankardeva recognized the independent thinking of women. He showed it in his personal life as he never forced his wife Kalindi to accept *Ek – Sarana – Harinam – Dharma*. He inspired Kalindi to follow *Ek – Sarana – Harinam – Dharma* when she wanted to follow it. He allows women to enter *Namghar* to worshipping God as like the man. He played a pivotal role to established gender equality in the society.

After the death of Srimanta Sankardeva, the egalitarian ideology of Vaishnavism was not maintained regarding gender role. The purity and impurity related norms occur vary rigorous in the society. The patriarchal society of Assam followed different rules and norms in the *Namghars* and *Sattras*. They followed strict gendered rules in the *Namghars*, rituals are performed by male *bhakats*. In Assamese society women devotee are referred as *aai*. At the time of Sankardeva women get equal position in the religious places. After that male centric norms are followed vary strictly in the *Namghar* and *Sattras* by the Vaishnava devotees. Women are restricted to entry *Manikut* (place of God) in the *Namghar*. Such customs are based on purity and impurity.

Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha promote women’s participation in every religious aspect. Women made significant contributions to different aspects of the Sangha’s activities. They have actively participated in religious and cultural events. Women also played a vital role in organizing community welfare programs,

such as health camps, education etc. Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha believed in the concept *Ek – Sarana – Harinam – Dharma*, which emphasizes surrendering to the Almighty irrespective of caste, creed or gender. The Sangha provide a platform for both genders, actively engage in *Kirtan* (devotional singing), *Borgeet* (a form of Assamese devotional song) and other cultural performances. Women play prominent roles as singers, dancers, actors and musicians within the Sangha. The Sangha tries to follow Sankardeva's ideology of equality in the religious sphere. The organization tries to remove the male centric customs and norms in the religious places. But it is still existing in some places in the society. The Sangha gave *Sarana* to women. They try to include women as equal to men in every aspect.

Women also participate in organizational roles within the Sangha. The organization has provided leadership opportunities for women through the establishment of *Mahila Samiti* at various levels. The *Mahila Samiti* aims to empower women within the Sangha and society by organizing events, workshops and initiatives that address gender specific issues and challenges. Women also actively participate in decision making process and hold key executive positions within the organization. Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha allow women to take seat with men in every religious activity. Women take part with men in devotional prayer in *Namghar* and they also light lamp in the *Manikut* (Place of God). The Children and Women Welfare Branch of the organization encourage women to participate in the socio – religious activities to create a position in the society through spiritual ideology. They also encouraged the youth unmarried girl to involve such activities for development of their personality and spiritual identity. But there also some rules and regulations for women. Women are restricted to perform some devotional instruments.

In the contemporary period there are still exist some gender-based norms and roles in the Assamese society. Women get higher position in every sphere of the society but in the religious places purity and impurity related norms restrict women to fully involved in the rituals. For example, in the *Barpeta* and *Patbaushi Sattra* women entry are still prohibited. Women's position is pushed to the margins from history to contemporary times.

Conclusion:

Women are an integral part of society. Women and men together build this society. As human beings, both men and women should equal social status and rights. The upliftment of the status of women promotes gender equity, and Sankardeva made an utmost effort through Neo-Vaishnavite Movement. The time when Srimanta Sankardeva started his reform activities was a very adverse period in the history of Assam.

The Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha in Assam plays an important role in promoting gender equality and challenging traditional gender norms. The Sangha provides equal platforms for both men and women in every aspect. However, societal attitudes and existing cultural practices continue to pose challenges to achieving complete gender equality. It is through sustained efforts, education and awareness that the Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha strives to create a more inclusive and equal society. The Sangha also give importance on economic independence of women.

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