

CHAPTER -III

***BHAKTI* MOVMENT IN INDIA IN GENERAL AND ASSAM IN PARTICULAR**

Bhakti movement was a devotional trend spearheaded by some great poet-saints all over in the country. The movement was indeed a reformative one. It brought enormous changes to the lives of the people of contemporary societies in India in both social and religious sects. The movement can be considered as one of greatest theistic revolutions of the world. It was first started in southern part of India and spread gradually to northern, eastern, and western part of the country later on.

In Assam the movement was lead by Śaṅkaradeva. The socio religious scenario before the time of Śaṅkaradeva was very much unstable because of casteism and religious discrimination were major problems of the society. Śaṅkaradeva took initiatives and a prominent role to abolish those social ailments prevailed in the society by focusing on his own ideology of worshipping to only one God.

3.1 Bhakti Movement in India:

3.1.1 Origin and development

The *Bhakti* movement dates back to a hoary past. To realize and know the history of *Bhakti* movement one has to go to the Deccan India region. It was in Tamilnadu where the first ever root of *Bhakti* movement originated¹. Later gradually

¹ Goswami, U.N. (1987). *Vaishnav Bhakti Dhara Aru Santa Katha*. P.5

that root was expanded towards the northern part, then eastern and then towards the entire country. In southern India the movement developed centering round the worship of Śiva. But the worshipping of Lord Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu took the preferable place when the movement was developed in North-India.² The movement which was originated centering round *Bhakti* (devotion), took such a new and reformed shape that it brought a revolutionary change to the land of Bhāratvarṣa and the people of it.

The Tamil literature is considered to be the oldest literature of India. In Tamil literature, the period from 6th century to 9th century was called as the Period of *Bhakti* (*Bhakti kāl*). It was during that time the forefathers of *Bhakti* movement, the Ālvārs and the Nayanmārs, came into being and established Bhakti firmly. Though at first the exponents of Bhakti persons created literature for enrichment of their literary treasure but they changed their tune to later religious outlook and wrote mainly for religious purposes. Again from 2nd century to the starting of *Bhakti kāl* the period was called as Pre-*Bhakti* Period (*Purva Bhakti Kāl*) or Buddhist – Jainism period.³ The movement was spearheaded by the Ālvārs. They were a group of twelve devotees including one woman. Both the *Brāhmins* and non- *Brāhmins* were in the group. They were- Alvar, Vutālvārs, Tirupanlvar, Nammalvar, Tirummangaialvar, Tirumalisai, Kulasekhara, Periyalvar, Madhurakari, Andal, Tondartipudi, Tiruppan and Tirumangoi and lastly Audal or Goda who was a woman.. Through the literary works the Ālvārs, the Viṣṇu

² Choudhery, M. (2002). *Sarba Bharatiya Bhakti Andolon aru Sankardevar Mulyayan*. P.68

³. Goswami, U.N. (1987). *Vaishnav Bhakti Dhara Aru Santa Katha*. P.11

worshiper, and the Nayanmārs, the Śiva worshipers were openly rebelled against the turmoil condition of the society.⁴

The *Bhakti* movement was basically boosted up through the messages and principles of *Gītā* and *Bhāgavata*. The relationship between human beings and God or the *Jivātmā* and *Paramātmā* was the main theme from where *Bhakti* movement received its original force and vitality. The various *līlās* (divine activities) of Lord Kṛṣṇa found in *Bhāgavata*. A concept of divine and pure love was systematically developed by Lord Kṛṣṇa. Lord Kṛṣṇa himself took initiative in popularizing a cult based on *Bhakti* (devotion). Consequently the idea of the cult formed a mass-movement. Gradually different philosophers and sages shaped up the idea through various schools of philosophy.

The origin of *Bhakti* movement dates back to a prolonged past. The movement was born due to some extraordinary socio religious causes. The socio-religious situation of the contemporary Indian society was totally unstable and full of chaoses. Various socio religious factors constantly affected the social arena. As it has been already pointed out that *Bhakti* movement was first started in the southern part of India and gradually it was extended towards the northern India and then towards the eastern part and eventually it spread to every part of India. And according to Tamil literature, which is considered to be the earliest literature of India, the period from 6th century to 9th century was called as period of *Bhakti*. And right from the 2nd century to the 6th

⁴ Ibid. P 10

century, it was a period of Buddhism and Jainism. These Buddhism and Jainism were the chief background responsible for the evolution of *Bhakti* Movement.

Initially the purposes of literary works of Buddhism and Jainism period were to create and enrich their literature. But later on the purpose shifted to be a religious one. These literatures used to criticize the other religions and religious customs. The Buddhists and the Jains wanted the people to convert their religion to Buddhism and Jainism. But the ideological philosophy of Buddhism as well as Jainism was not welcomed by common people as they did not accept the customs. There was no place of God in Buddhism. People felt irritated by treats and rituals of Jainism. On the other hand the Jainas were divided into two groups of people: Digambar and Svetambar. The digambar's group harassed the people while the swetambar did not wear clothes. In such adverse circumstances the common people felt hesitated to adjust themselves and refused to accept Jain religion. Consequently they had to suffer several mental even physical tortures from the Jainas. Among the Jainas who followed Sāktism, were engaged even in animal even human worship. The common people feared them and their unsocial rituals.⁵

At the same time the Brāhmaṇas were in belief of priestly activities. But they were solely permitted to take part in ritual functions. They did not maintain close relation with the common people other than Brāhmaṇas. The Brāhmaṇas possessed discrimination in their minds with the people of other castes. The Jainas and the Buddhists became arrogant in their religious aspects during the 5th and 6th centuries.

⁵ Ibid. P.6

The social rites and rituals were managed under the direction of some selected group of people.

But the other people of the contemporary society wanted a different social status which would be completely apart from the rigid socio-religious customs. They wanted a society of equal status to all, where status of social judgment would be high and simplified religious customs could dominate the existing religious rigidity of the other castes and the complex Vedic rituals would be replaced by other simple and well-accepted norms. The society wanted salvation not through any complex devotional practices but through some simplified and easier ways. They wanted to establish the Hindu religion with a reformed shape that could be accepted by common people. The reformed religion evoked itself among the people fulfilling all socio-religious lacunae. Ālvārs and Nayanmārs provided new lives to the people of South India during 6th to 9th century fighting against the social injustice and bondage to emancipate the common people and laid the foundation stone of *Bhakti* movement-a new revolution.

3.1.2 Salient Features of *Bhakti* Cult:

- I. The Vaishnavites believe in *Bhakti* as the ultimate way to realize God.
- II. The Vaishnavites believe in monotheism. They do not believe in multiplicity of different deities and gods.
- III. There is no place of costly rituals and sacrifices in *Bhakti* cult. Devotion is the only method of praying.
- IV. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Gītā* are the most important source books of the cult.

- V. The *Bhakti* cult always supports a casteless and classless society with a view to establish a humanistic society.
- VI. Lord Kṛṣṇa occupies the supreme position as their God to be worshipped.
- VII. The vernacular language was used as the medium of propagation of *Bhakti* cult.
- VIII. The propagators and saints of *Bhakti* cult took to literary expressions, mainly versifications as medium of propagation.

3.2 Bhakti Movement in Assam

3.2.1 Origin:

After South and North part of India the wave of Bhakti Movement gradually entered towards the Eastern part of India. The movement centering round *Bhakti*, started to spread in Assam which was mainly spearheaded by Śaṅkaradeva. During his time Assam was torned by divisive forces. The prime aim of the cult was to make the people free from social bondage and injustice.

The Bhakti Movement was no doubt a reformative movement of entire India of medieval period. The current of the movement took a revolutionary shape in the socio-religious history of Assam also. Towards the ending decades of 15th century of the Christian era, the movement firmly established the *Vaiṣṇava* faith as the supreme religious order in Brahmaputra valley. Like other parts of the country, in Assam also the *Bhakti* cult was evolved centering on the principles of *Gītā* and *Bhāgavata*. The movement of *Bhakti* stood against the priestly activities of some restricted classes of

people. But the revolutionary inspiration did not come to Śaṅkaradeva's mind all of a sudden. He possessed such deep philosophy from early days of his life. Just after returning from pilgrimage with vast and comprehensive knowledge and experiences, he laid the foundation stone of Bhakti movement in Assam. The movement which was already became a vibrant force in the country spread far and wide in Assam under the leadership of Śaṅkaradeva. He with the help of literary and cultural outputs alongwith some institutions as media did communication with the common people. The teachings of *Gītā* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* reached closer to the masses through such media which were powerfully implemented by Śaṅkaradeva with his own direction, management and supervision.

3.2.2. Background:

In order to know the background of Śaṅkaradeva's preaching of *Bhakti* cult in Assam, it is required to go back to the background and circumstances in which Śaṅkaradeva had to propagate a new cult of religion. During his period the social, political, economic and religious conditions were very much unstable. It can be said that he did it not only to bring a new era to the religious aspect, but also to reform the society. Fortunately in 15th century four social reformers came forward in india following the ideology of the Bhakti Movement. They all were from Aryan group. They were Jula Kabīr(1440) a Muslim, Nanak(1469) a *Kṣatriya*, Caitanya(1486) a *Brāhmin* and Śaṅkaradeva(1449) a *Kāyastha*.⁶

⁶ Choudhery, M. (2002). *Sarba Bharatiya Bhakti Andolon aru Sankardevar Mulyayan*.P.76

Geographically this region was a backward one as the most of the habitat areas were covered with dense forest, large swamps and marshy lands. Mighty Brahmaputra was the only means of communication. The habitat areas were like some separated islands. Communication of one society with the others took place rarely. And individual communication was also limited. All the activities of the agri-based societies were village-centered.

Assam has been considered to be a meeting ground of various ethnic races from beyond historical records. Both the plains and hills were the habitat of different groups of people. But politically it was divided into different parts. The *Cuṭīyas*, the *Āhoms*, the *Kachārīs* and the *Koches* ruled in different parts of this multiethnic region. Moreover the *Marāṇ*, the *Maṭak*, the *kārbi*, the *Jayantīyā*, the *Lālung* and the *Rājbamśī* also had their separate territories. Consequently the groups did not have most powerful as well as strong enough kings or rulers.

The economy, in that period, was mainly based on cultivation from the earliest time. Almost hundred percent of the total population lived on agriculture. Land belonged to the king or the state. People had to pay the revenue for using of the land.

During that period various religious rites and customs prevailed among the people. In fact the religious environment of the whole country was disastrous for centuries. From the beginning decades of Christian era the Aryans had been living in this region. During the middle decades of fourth century the Guptas came to reign. Under the leadership of Guptas the Hindu religion evoked. But there was no record of the performance of *Asvamedha Yajña* or any major Vedic sacrifices during the

medieval period of history of Assam.⁷ Bhagadatta brought a hundreds of *Brāhmaṇas* from Kanauj to perform Vedic rituals. It took place after the fall of the imperial power of Guptas towards the later part of 5th century A.D. The system of settling *Brāhmaṇas* in Assam continued up to the *Āhom* period.⁸ The *Brāhmaṇas* spread the Vedic culture and Puranic rituals with the support of the Kings and they became the most powerful class of the society. That Vedic system permitted only the direct participation or supervision of *Brāhmaṇa* priests. The priestly rituals received a great impetus from the 4th A.D. Under the leadership of the *Brāhmaṇa* priests some religious rites were followed by some naked people in the temples. The Non-Brahmins were considered as untouchable and were deprived of reading any *Saṃskṛt* books. They were prevented to cooperate in any ritual function. But beyond the pale Brahmanic system, some other special cults were developed adopting worship of deities and religious myths. These cults were mainly associated with Śiva, Viṣṇu and Śakti.

The religious scenerio of Assam in the pre-Sankarite period was too worse. Like in other parts of India, the *Brāhmaṇas* became more dominant in Assam too. They spread the Vedic and priestly rituals whereas the non-Brahmins were prevented to join them. Gradually the common people lost both their interest and knowledge regarding the Hinduism. And the newly-entered Brahmins got the golden chance of it and enjoyed supremacy power over the common people.

3.3. Religious Scenario of Assam before Śaṅkaradeva

The popular cults prevailed in the land were Śaivism, Saktism and Vaishnavism.

⁷ Barpujari, H.K. (1994). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol-III. P.211

⁸ Barua, B. (2011). *A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period)*. P.120 & 163

3.3.1 Śaivism:

The origin of Śaivism is lost in obscurity, but it is clear that the Śaivism of history is a blend of two lines of development, the Aryan or Vedic and the pre Aryan.⁹ It is amply warranted by epigraphic evidences that all the principal royal families of ancient Kamarupa were devotees of Śiva.¹⁰ The royal families were worshiper of Lord Śiva. Poet Hemasarasvatī composed *Haragaurīsambād* under the patronage of Dūrlabhanṛāyana, which was concerned with the theme of the marriage of Lord Śiva and Pārvatī, clearly indicates king's support on worship of Śiva. Another poet Kaviratna Sarasvati mentions King Indranārāyana as the devotee of Śiva. Significantly Śaṅkradeva's father Kusumbara Bhūñā was a real devotee of Śiva worshipping whom Kusumbara got Śaṅkaradeva as a son. Śaivism is not a single cult but a federation of allied cults, whose practices range from the serenest form of personal life in the faith to the most repulsive excesses that alienate one's sympathy for the cults.¹¹

Śiva temples have always outnumbered the temples associated with other individual gods and goddesses.¹² Such statistics clearly indicated the popularity of Śaivism during those days. Rāi Bāhādur Gunābhirām Baruā in his *Asam Burañjī* states that Śiva worship was first introduced in early Assam by Jalpeśvara, a king of North Bengal (Jalpaiguri) which was formerly included in the Kingdom of Kamarupa.¹³ Under the reign of Hindu Lords of Puṣyavarma, Sālastambha and Brahmapāla

⁹ Sastri, K.A.N.(1993). Cultural Heritage of India. P.63

¹⁰ Barpujari, H.K. (1994). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. Vol-III. P.213

¹¹ Sastri, K.A.N.(1993). Cultural Heritage of India. P.63

¹² Kakati, B. (2003). *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. P.10

¹³ Baruā, B. (2011). *A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period)*. P.120 & 163

dynasties in ancient Assam during 4th to 12th century the Śiva worship got its popularity. Worship of Viṣṇu and Devi is not found in the historical records of these dynasties.

The worshipping style of Śiva was to be said that it accompanied by human sacrifices and sexual amusement. Wine, women and raw flesh were basic needs of Śiva worship. Temple women or prostitutes have been referred to in all periods of Assam history as standing features of Śiva temple. Abduction of dancing girls from the temples and corruption were regularly been noticed in the Śiva temples. At that time the *Kacharīs* were directed to worship Śiva sacrificing animals such as swine, buffaloes, goats, pigeons, ducks and cocks along with the rice and liquor and dancing women (deo-dhāi). The Agniya Mec also worshipped Śiva sacrificing animals such as buffalo, goat and pigeons and the Jāti Mec by pork and cock.¹⁴

Thus both the aboriginals and the Aryanised people worshiped Lord Śiva freely using the wine, women and flesh as their compulsory accompaniments. Besides these things, open sexual activities were also seen in the name of worshipping God.

3.3.2 Śaktism:

Traditionally the Śākta cult is considered to be originated in Kāmrupa with its chief temple at Kāmākhyā as its main centre. The *Devī Purāṇa*, a work composed about in the end of the seventh or the beginning of the eight century A.D., states that the Devī was worshipped in her different forms in different places, for instance in

¹⁴ Kakati, B. (2003). *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*. P. 20-21

Kamarupa, Kāmākhyā, Bhottadesa etc.¹⁵ In the early history of Assam Goddess Kāmākhyā was a dominating name. Various religious histories also centered round her. In *Kālikā Purāṇa* Kāmākhyā is portrait as one form of Goddess *Sākti*.

Kāmākhyā is said to be considered as goddess of sex and virgin. The origin of the goddess is found with various interpretations in *Kālikā-Purāṇa*. The name Kāmākhyā was originated from the term *Kāma* (amour). According to history, goddess herself came to Nīlācal secretly to satisfy her amour with Śiva. But significantly the temple of Goddess Kāmākhyā differs from other temples of India because it enshrines no image but only a block of stone in a corner of a cave. The worshipping of Kāmākhyā was associated with various rites, mantras, mudrās and sacrifices. Kāmākhyā has her different manifestations with different names- Kāli, Tārā, Ugratārā, Cinnāmastā etc. This cult emphasized upon the worshipping of act of sex and sex organs as mentioned in *Kālikā-Purāṇa* and *Yoginī Tantra*. Some fundamental elements to be worshiped to Kāmākhyā were flesh, fish, women, wine etc. According to *Kālikā-Purāṇa*, the sacrificial animals were birds, fishes, alligators, tortoises, buffaloes, bulls, goats, antelops, wild boars, inchneumons, rhinoceros, iguanas, reindeer, lions, tigers etc. Significantly human worship was more dominant activities than anything else. Horses and elephants were not accepted by the Goddess when these two were special for kings to be sacrificed. Kāmākhyā had another forms namely, Kecaikhāitī, or Dikkarvāsini. Dikkarvasini had two forms- Tīksna Kāntā and Lalita Kāntā or Ugratārā. The dreadful form was the Kecaikhāitī (the eater of raw flesh) because human sacrifice

¹⁵ Barua, B. (2011). *A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period)*. P.169

was done there at her temple. In Ugratārā temple the major sacrificial things were liquor, flesh, curry, coconut, sugarcane along with human sacrifices. Blood drawn from one's body might also be offered.

Sacrifices to goddess with such raw flesh and materials were mostly popular among the various tribal groups of Assam.

3.3.3 Vaisnavism:

Viṣṇu -worship was prevalent in Assam from early times. But in *Kālikā-Purāṇa* Viṣṇu worship did not occupy any important place. The kings of Kāmarūpa traced their lineage to Viṣṇu through Naraka. *Kālikā-Purāṇa* mentions only five manifestations of Viṣṇu namely Haya-Grīva, Fish, Bhairava, Varāha and Vasudeva. The worship to Viṣṇu was based on the principle of *Ekāntīa Bhakta* or Monotheistic which was promulgated by *Śrīmadbhagavad Gītā*. The great sectarian mantras *om namo bhagavate vāsudevāya* or *om namo nārāyaṇa* were used to worship Viṣṇu. Along with Vāsudeva other complementary deities were also worshiped- Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Brahmā, Śambhu and Gaurī. The worship was to be performed with flowers and vegetarian offerings. Various mantras were also used while worshipping these gods and goddesses.

3.4. Conclusion:

Thus the *Bhakti* movement with a missionary vision provided its own existence all over in the country from north to south, east to west. Such a vibrant renaissance was emerged with a view to abolish all the illnesses which worsened the contemporary

socio-religious conditions. The saint poets therefore considered the *Bhakti* as its central theme to bring all round stability among the masses. As a result the wave of that vibrant renaissance was spread all over the country with a spiritual flavour. Śaṅkaradeva, who spearheaded the trend of *Bhakti* movement in Assam, took the concept of *Bhakti* as the key factor to eliminate the prevailing social disorders. During that period Assam was in a turmoil situation in all areas like social, political and religious etc. The common people were dominated by some royal families in socio-political fields while some were dominated by priestly community in religious life. Moreover various anti-human and anti-social deeds were done in the name of worship to God which deteriorated the social condition day by day. Śaṅkaradeva spread the concept of *Bhakti* among all levels of people to establish a reformed society.