
Women And Agency in Sankaradeva's Literature: A Critical Study of the Kirtanaghosa and Uttarakanda Ramayana

Dr. Priti Deka

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, MSSV, Nagaon

Abstract:

Srimanta Sankaradeva was a versatile genius. He was not only a preacher but also a great social reformer, poet, philosopher, economist, educationist, feminist and a master playwright. It was a horrible time when Srimanta Sankaradeva was born. The woman was not given due respect in the society. They were the objects of enjoyment and worship in the name of Tantrism. Srimanta Sankaradeva redeemed women from this degraded state of being object of enjoyment and elevated to the equal status of men in performing Nama Kirtana in *Eka Sarana Nama Dharma*. The emergence of women organiser like kanaklata became possible in the history of Eka Sarana Nama Dharma because of the tradition of high status and importance to women initiated by Sankaradeva. Moreover he gave more emphasis on female characters in his plays that are Rukmini (daughter of king Bhismak)in Rukmini Harana nata and Satyabhama (wife of Srikrishna) in Parijat Harana Nata.

Sankaradeva gave much emphasis on women empowerment which was proved by many of his writings. In Harichandra Upakhya the description given by Sankaradeva of king Harichandra offering apology to his wife Shaibya is recognition of right of women as well as the selfrespects of women.

In traditional Indian society the wife must do what her husband does. She has no right to behave otherwise. But Sankaradeva in his personal life showed that he recognised independent thoughts of women. Although Sankaradeva preached Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, he never forced his wife Kalindi to accept that religion He initiated her in Eka Sarana Nama Dharma when she wanted to get initiated of her own accord. In Uttarakanda Ramayana of Sankaradeva, Sita is not losing her personality. She has raised questions and accused for censuring her pureness of character. She does not surrender in the hands of Rama. She was blamed for more than once, yet she has not lost her dignity, self respect and decency. At the end she expressed in public her esteemed quality and purity. Rama who was the root cause of all evils happenings remained erect stand and still and could not utter a word in his self defence. Thus Sankaradeva's Sita is occupying a place in a high rank of personage as a woman of high esteem.

Key words: *Sankaradeva, feminist, reformer, Eka Sarana Nama Dharma, versatile, religion, Sita, Shaibya, preacher.*

Introduction:

Srimanta Sankaradeva was born into Siromani Baro Bhuyan family near Bardowa in Nagaon District, Assam in a village called Alipukhuri in 1449. Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva was a saint, scholar, master playwright, socio-religious reformer, writer, an educationist, a composer, a musician, a dancer, a preacher, a designer, an artist, a feminist and a philosopher is an immense figure in the socio-cultural and religious history of Assam, India. Sankaradeva was a great unifier and also a great social organiser. Sankaradeva was one of the important proponents of the famous Bhakti movement in Eastern India. He remoulded and consolidated the fabric Assamese social life through setting up of Namghar and Satra which are knitting together the diverse section of Assamese society irrespective of religion, creed and culture with the single fold of Eka- Sarana- Nama- Dharma. At the time when Srimanta Sankaradeva was born, the social and political condition of Assam was in turmoil. The people were following different religious faith like extreme form of saktism, saivism, and tantric rituals inclusive of human sacrifice at many temples. At that time women were not given due honour in the society.

They were just the objects of enjoyment and bhogis in the name of Tantrism. But Sankaradeva stood up alone unaided to remedy those social evils. Many people do not know that Sankaradeva had introduced the feminism way back in the 15th century itself.

In 1568 after leading a most eventful life dedicated to enlightening humanity the Mahapurusha died at Bheladonga at remarkable age of 120.

Significance of the study:

The gravity of the study of women empowerment in Sankaradeva's literature is very much relevant in the context of the following present day situation.

Women are the indispensable part of a society. Education has been recognized as an essential agent of social change and development in any society. Hence, to think of harmonious development without educating women is impossible. Still now in most of the society women suffer from various forms of discrimination, inequalities, oppression and harassment. They have been discriminated in all aspects like-social, political, economic, education and access to right, without any co-operation of women it is not possible for development in such areas.

But it is not known to most of the people that Sankaradeva was the pioneer of empowerment of women as Sankaradeva in 15th century made most important contribution for women empowerment by establishing Satra and Namghar for sustainable development of progressive and egalitarian Assamese society. Sankaradeva pronounced his own daughter-in-law Kanaklata as a Satradhikari, the principal head of a Satra. Therefore the present study is important to highlight the contribution of Sankaradeva in empowerment of women which is yet to be discovered.

In his creative works of Ankiya Natas or Bhaonas Sankaradeva had given more emphasis on women empowerment. Almost all the important character of women i.e. Rukmini in Rukmini harana nata, Satyabhama in Parijat harana nata, Sita in Uttarakanda Ramayana are reflected beautifully which are Sankaradeva's own creation. So it is important to undertake the study.

Objective of the study:

The Research paper has been intended with the following objectives-

1. To highlight women empowerment in Sankaradeva's Literature.
2. To highlight Social and Religious empowerment of women by Sankaradeva.

Methodology:

It is a historical method of research. The data are collected through primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources: By direct observing the personal record like autobiography of Sankaradeva, manuscripts, original book of Sankaradeva, photographs, drawing, painting, remains and relics like instrument and art objects.

Secondary sources: By reviewing of books on Sankaradeva written by various authors, theses, dissertations, Journal of Mahapurusha jyoti, bibliography, research journals.

Analysis:

1) Women empowerment in Sankaradeva's literature:

Sankaradeva gave much emphasis on women empowerment which is clearly reflected in his writings. The description by Sankaradeva of king Harishchandra seeking apology from his wife Saibya is the

recognition of the right of women as well as the self-respect of women. Sankaradeva wrote-in Harischandra Upakhyana-

***Keli koutuhale asilihi mora
Kririta karilo toka jiba parihasa
Yena bhaila rangara samaya mana rosha
Ehi tota sadho tata nadhariba dosha
(Harishchandra upakhyana/438)***

The bestowal of the status of Saibya by king Harischandra implies equal rights for women. Srimanta Sankaradeva would not have incorporated such comments or descriptions in Harischandra Upakhyana had he not subscribed to that ideology himself. Thus Sankaradev wrote in Harishchandra Upakhyana-

***Karma Samayata Toke Mantree buli lekhi I
Rangara belaata yena tai praana sakhee II
Snehara Prastaave tai maatri yena thaana I
Shayana belaata tai daaseera samaana II
(Harishchandra Upakhyana/432)***

[Meaning: You seem to be adviser at the time of deed; and during recreation you seem to be the best friend. During care with love you seem to be mother, and at bed time like maid you are.]

Sankaradeva also emphasised on the education for all the people irrespective of gender including women which is very much clear from his writings—

***Kaaka buli Hari katha Harira Keertana kibaa
Yito save ekove najaane I
Stree soodra antya jaati taako shikshaa dibaa maati
Dharibe sisave adhoprane II
(Shrimadbhagavat: Eleventh part, Nimi-Navasidha Sambad/332)***

[Meaning: All are without the knowledge of Hari kathaa and Hari kirtana; So teach about Bhagavata to women and even low caste and they will learn with heart and soul]

The way in which Sankaradeva depicted the character of Sita in his Assamese rendering of ***Uttarakanda Ramayana*** is also a proof of his respect to the concept of woman's right or independence of woman. Sankaradeva wrote in Uttarakanda Ramayana-

***Mahaa shoke kope atikampamaana kaaya I
Jaajvalya samaana aganira sikha praaya II
Anargate Raamara milila mahaa bhaya I
Dekhi samajyaara bhaila parama bismaya II
Kope apamaane ati citta nuhi thira I
Hiyaata pashila shaala nohlaai gosaaneera II
Bulibe laagila dunaai manata aasukha I
Aaura ito swamee Raghavara nahaao mukh II
Aaura yena nushuno Ramara ito naau
Phaat diyaa basumati paataale lukaao II
(Uttarakanda Ramaayana)***

[Meaning: Sita devi trembled in extreme grief and anger, as it was the expanded ignited fire.(Seeing the condition of Sita) Ram was in extreme fear and the people of society became astonished. (Her) mind-stuff was instable in extreme anger and dishonour, as the thorn entered into her heart. She again started saying with unhappiness in mind: I will never see the face of my husband Ram, hope I will not listen again this name Ram, O' the Earth; make a crack to hide me.]

Sita also said that she would have given up her life in Lanka itself had she known Rama to be so cruel which was reflected clearly in his writings. Sankardeva wrote in Uttarakanda Ramayana-

***Moi Jeve Jano Rama enuwa nirdaya
Lankate tejilo hante pranaka nischaya
(Uttarakanda Ramayana/303)***

The incident of Sita entering earth after again facing trial in the court of Rama on her return to Ayodhya is there both in the original Ramayana as well as Srimanta Sankardeva's Assamese rendering of Uttarakanda Ramayana. But whereas Sita takes leave of Rama after expressing love for him in the original Ramayana, she takes leave of Rama ventilating her anger against him in Srimanta Sankaradeva's rendering-

***Duste dila apajasha tate ana trasa
Sale niya diyailanta amaka nirbasa
Dekha dekha ito kene swamira maryada
Kisaka karile etamana salab
(Uttarakanda Ramayana/371)***

In general Sita in Valmiki's Ramayana was an epitome of sadness. She was a princess and a queen of respectable families but throughout her life she had to bear extreme pang of sorrows that is why Bhavabhuti in his drama "Uttara Rama carita" terms her as an idol of sorrows. She was self-restraint and soft spoken. Her beloved husband Rama banished her without informing her faults. She was not given a chance to utter a single word for her self-defence. Facing such a misfortune, which can never be imagined, she felt disheartened but silently tolerated it without raising any kind of protest. But Sankaradeva takes much liberty to depict Sita in a different manner. Sankaradeva Sita in Assamese Uttarakanda Ramayana shows her anger, resentment and pride twice. Firstly it was in the hermitage of Valmiki. Knowing Kusa and Lava as his sons, Rama repented a lot and sent Satrughna, Vibhisana, Susena and Hanumana bring her back. They reported Sita the sorrows and sufferings of Rama and the people of Ayodhya arising out of her separation. They prayed to pardon Rama and insisted her to go with them. Remembering the cruelty done to her by her dearest husband, Sita addressed to them-----

"Why you are troubling me again? I have forgotten all these and you are kindling the fire of sorrows again. If I would go back to Ayodhya to enjoy royal happiness and to see the face of Raghava again and be the wife him, then there would be none unchaste lady than me. Nothing was left to do me harm by Rama. I request you not to say again. Why Rama would take me again who was left to die with womb by him? (Uttarakanda Ramayana7016-18)

There are good natured messengers in the Sanskrit Ramayana, but Sankaradeva sent Satrughna and others which is a reflection of deep love and attachment of Rama to Sita. In the original Sanskrit Ramayana Sita is docile, bashful and with few words in her mouth. But in translated form of

Sankaradeva's Ramayana she shows her strength, authority and control over herself. Her eloquence in defending herself is indeed praiseworthy.

In Original Ramayana Valmiki puts three Slokas in Sita's mouth just before her departure to the nether world. Sankaradeva makes her eloquent. In original Sanskrit, Sita was taken to the chariot by Vasumati(earth) herself. She did not bid farewell to anyone else nor has showed her resentment. Not a single word was taken uttered to her children. But Sankaradeva gives a detail description of the scene making it more pathetic and sorrowful. The Assamese poet perhaps could not bear the silent and subdued Sita. He feels infinite compassion to her and so he has given long description to express Sita's anguish and that too through her voice. She was humiliated and insulted for no reason. She could no longer endure it. Her patience came to an end. At this circumstance, her mental agony was overflowed and poured out spontaneously. Thus Sankaradeva makes the whole description highly pathetic.

Valmiki's Sita is pure, chaste, mild, polite, humble, epitome of patience and absolute true, chaste mild polite humble, epitome of patience and absolutely true to her husband. She has not raised any word of accusation to anybody else. She has taken everything to be a fruit of destiny and with any kind of protest she submitted herself as the last resort. But Sankaradeva's Sita is not losing her personality. She has raised question and accused for censuring her pureness of character. She does not surrender completely at the hands of Rama. She was blamed for more than once, yet she has not lost her own dignity, self-respect and decency. At the end, she has expressed in public her esteemed quality and purity. Rama who was the root cause of all evil happenings remained erect, stand and still and could not utter a word in his self-defence. Sita entering into the nether world in this way has taken a vengeance to his beloved husband for his disregard shown to her.

Thus Sankaradeva's Sita occupying a place undoubtedly in a high rank of personage in comparison to Valmiki's Sita as a woman of high esteem.

2) Social and religious empowerment of women by Sankaradeva: Sankaradeva was not only the religious preacher but also a social reformer. The present concept of women empowerment was started by Sankaradeva way back in 15th century. He elevated the woman equal status with man. The time of Srimanta Sankaradeva's advent was a horrible time. Women had no honour in those days. A woman could be taken by the bhogi (a man selected for sacrifice before the deity) at any time.

Women had the right path to arrange offerings in the Kirtan-ghar, perform Nama-Kirtana etc. in the Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma preached by him, which was not possible in other branches of Sanatana religion. Srimanta Sankaradeva initiated many women in his Eka- Sarana-Nama –Dharma. He advised the married couples to offer Bhakti to God together. So women played a crucial role in the propagation of the Eka-Sarana- Nama- Dharma. Kalindi, the second wife of Srimanta Sankaradeva initiated devotees after the passing away of the Saint. Such a thing was not possible in any other religious order in those days. There are many evidence that Srimanta Sankaradeva accorded honour to women. The instance of making a woman named Radhika alies Yogamaya the leader of the volunteer-force at Tembuwani for construction of the dam is an important example of this. It was because of that tradition of giving high status and importance to women, initiated by Srimanta Sankaradeva, the emergence of women organizers like Kananlata or litterateurs like Padmapriya became possible in the history of Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. Contrary to that, even the so-called communists of India did not include a single woman in their politburo till the twenty-first century. So Srimanta Sankaradeva was more progressive than the so-called progressive intellectuals of the modern era.

That Srimanta Sankaradeva was progressive in his thought is known from his writings. A revolt against the traditionalists was brewing in his maiden book "Harishchandra Upakhyaana" itself. The people who torture women are strongly condemned here.

***Streeka durbala kara konano niskhale
Jvalanta bahnika bandhe baatrara anchale
(Harishchandra upakhana/75)***

Women are considered as subservient to men in the Indian society. The wife must do what her husband does. She has no right to behave otherwise. But Srimanta Sankaradeva showed in his personal life that he recognized the independent thought of women. Though he preached a religion named Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma. He never forced his wife Kalindi to accept the religion. He initiated her in Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma, only she wanted to get initiated of her own accord.

Conclusion:

The time when Srimanta Sankaradeva started his reform activities was a very adverse period in the history of Assam. He was faced with opposition at every step. The women empowerment of today does not have to face such inconvenience. So, even the utterance of a single word in support of women's honour in those days was equivalent to writing a book on the topic in current times. We can judge the contribution of Srimanta Sankaradeva to the women empowerment movement only if we proceed with a comparative assessment. Srimanta Sankaradeva certainly deserves the status of a pioneer in the movement of women empowerment on that criterion.

References:

- Bezbaroa, Lakshminath . *Mahapurusha Sri Sankaradeva and Sri Madhabadeva*, Bholanath Boruah, 1914
- Borkakati, Sanjib Kumar. *Srimanta Sankaradeva An Epoch Maker*, EBH Publishers, 2012.
- Chaliha, Bhaba Prasad, eds. *Sankaradeva: Studies in Culture*, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, 1978.
- Mazumdar, Bimal, eds. *Descriptive Bibliography of Sankaradeva Studies*, Center for Sankaradeva Studies, Dept. of Assamese, Gauhati University, Nil.
- Medhi, Kali Ram. *Studies in the Vaisnava Literature and Culture of Assam*, Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1978.
- Murthy, H.V.S. *Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva and Ramanuja :A Comparative Study*, Dept. of Assamese, GU, 1961.
- Neog, Maheswar. *Sri Sri Sankaradeva*, Chandra Prakash, 1949.
- Neog, Maheswar. *The creative Force behind Sankaradeva Renaissance*, Chandra Prakash, 2011.
- Neog, Maheswar, eds.. *Biographical account of the Vaishnava Saints of Assam*, Chandra Prakash, 2012.
- Neog, Maheswar. *Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of the vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam*. Dept. of Assamese, GU, 1995.
- Pathak, Dayananda. *Srimanta Sankaradeva : The Great Master*, Chandra Prakash, 2009.
- Patk, Dayananda. *Beautiful mind of Srimanta Sankaradeva*, Aank Baak, 2012.
- Pathak, Dayananda, *Playwright –preacher Sankaradeva Plays*, Pee Gee India, 2015.
- Patgiri, Jagadish. *Thinking and Reasoning*, Chandra Prakash, 2001.
- Rajkhowa, Benudhar. *Gunamala*, Bani Mandir, 1927.
- Saikia Nagen(ed). *Bezbaroa Rachanali, Vol-II, Banalata*, 2010.43. Bezbaroa, Lakshminath. *Sankaradeva*, Asom Sahitya Sabha, 1911.
- Saikia, Purnananda. *The Kirtana- Ghosa*, Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, 2005
- Sarma, Satyendra Nath. *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, Dept of Publication, GU,

19. Sharma ,Nilima. *The Philosophy of Sankaradeva :An Appraisal*, Srimanta Sankardeva Mancha,2000.