

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Satyendra Nath Sarma: The Vaisnavite Scholar

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Abstract:

Satyendra Nath Sarma is one of the renowned scholars of Assamese literature. His student life in Calcutta perhaps influenced him to be a scholar of Vaisnavite religion. Sarma obtained highest mark in his Master's Degree course. He was awarded by prestigious Asutosh Gold medal for his talent. Dr. Sarma started his research work under the supervision of Dr. Birinchi Kumar Baruah on the subject 'The neo Vaisnavite Movement and Satra Institution of Assam'. The research work of Dr. Sarma appears as an eye opener and the works can be labeled as a reliable document to the genre of Vaishnavite movement and the background of Vakti movement in Assam.

1. Introduction

One of the scholars, professors, critics of Assamese literature of the 20th century who left a tremendous impression among his disciples and readers was Satyendra Nath Sarma. He was born in 1916 at Sivasagar, Zazi. His father was Golap ch. Sarma and mother Senehi Devi. Since his childhood he was a brilliant student. He was matriculated in 1934 from Zazi High School under Calcutta University, obtaining distinction mark in Sanskrit. After matriculation he started to study in prestigious Cotton College and stayed in hostel. He passed I.A. examination in 1936, and stood second in Degree examination in 1939.

During that period Assamese students had to go to Calcutta for university education. Dr. Sarma also went to Calcutta University and took admission in the department of MIL (Assamese). In Calcutta he started to stay in a rented house with his brother Tirthanath Sarma who was a famous lecturer of the department of Assamese. In the final examination he obtained first class first and he was the only student who obtained first class in the department of Assamese from Calcutta University. As Dr. Sarma obtained highest mark in M.A. examination, he was awarded *Asutosh* Gold medal along with a packet of books, worth Rs. 200/- (Rs. two hundred).

His student life in Calcutta perhaps influenced him to be a scholar of Vaisnavite religion. In Calcutta University he was influenced by prof. Ambika Nath Borah, who while giving lecture on *Parijat Harana*, *Rukmini Harana*, of Sankardeva's drama using (*Sasipat*) manuscripts inspired the students and told about the need of collecting and editing such manuscripts. Such lectures determined Dr. Sarma to study old Assamese Literature, especially Vaisnavite literature. In Calcutta he came in contact with some renowned scholars and made familiarity with *Bangia Sahitya Parishad*, *Asiatic Society of Bengal*, *Imperial Library* (National Library) etc. and other world standard libraries, where he saw the scholars being engrossed in study.

With that exposure he came back and joined in Cotton College as Assistant Lecture in 1942 in the department of Assamese. In 1949 he was appointed Lecturer in the Department of Assamese in Gauhati University. In 1957 he became 'reader', in 1967 he was promoted to the HoD of MIL and honoured with *Rabindra Nath Tagore* professorship. It is in Gauhati University Sarma started to delve deep into study. In this context he was inspired by Dr. Banikanta Kakati and Dr. Birinchi Kumar Baruah. He started his research programme under Dr. Birinchi Kumar Baruah and took the subject '*The neo Vaisnavite Movement and Satra Institution of Assam*'. In 1955 he obtained honorable doctoral degree along with two other scholars, Dr. Prafulla Dutta Goswami and Dr. Maheswar Neog, on the topics *A study of Assamese folklore of Assam: The Ballads and the Marchen* and *Sankardeva and his Time: Early history of the Vaisnava faith and Movement in Assam* respectively. The trinity of Assamese literature compress in their works different issues related to language, Literature and Culture of Assamese society. The two research works of Dr. Sarma and Dr. Neog appear as an eye opener and both the works can be labeled as a reliable document to the study of Vaishnavite movement and the background of *Vakti* movement in Assam.

Dr. Bhaba Prasad Saliha has divided the works of S.N. Sarma in two categories;

- (I) Works related to *Vaishnavite* culture and literature
- (II) Miscellaneous works.

He said that since his birth Sarma was influenced by *Vaisnavism* as he was born in a Vaisnavite family. His elder brother Pandit Tirtha Nath Sarma was also a renowned Vaisnavite Scholar whose influence upon S.N. Sarma cannot be denied. The following compiled and edited books of S. N. Sarma show that he was a *Vaishnavite* scholar per inch.

- 1) *Katha Ramayana* (1954)
- 2) *Git Gobinda* (1956)
- 3) *Rukmini Haran Kabya* (1962)

- 4) *Bhakti Git Pod Sanchyan* (1961)
- 5) *Kotha Gita* (1962)
- 6) *Parijat Haran* (1963)
- 7) *Partha Sarathi* (1964)
- 8) *Ankamala* (1973)
- 9) *Sri Sankardev and Madhav Devar Bani* (1987)
- 10) *Madhav Deva* (1984)
- 11) *Glimpses of art of Sankardeva's poetry* (1990)

Dr. Sarma's *The Neo Vaisnavite Movement and The Satra Institution of Assam* was registered for awarding Ph.D and after completion in 1966, G.U has published the book. He has divided the research work into ten chapters as given below.

- Chapter 1: *The background of the Movement*
- Chapter 2: Sankardeva and Madhav Deva: The Movement
- Chapter 3: Fundamental Teachings of the Sects
- Chapter 4: History of Sub-Sects and Expansion of the Satra Institution
- Chapter 5: Nature, Origin & Development of the Satra Institution.
- Chapter 6: Religious Rites & Practices.
- Chapter 7: Customs and Manners.
- Chapter 8: Cultural Contribution
- Chapter 9: Relation of the Satra with the State and
- Chapter 10: Concluding Review.

The Appendix part has been divided into five parts-

- i. *Caitanya Vaishnavism* in Assam
- ii. Monastic Buddhism & Satra *Vaishnavism*
- iii. Democracy in Satra *Vaishnavism*
- iv. IV .Source Materials: Bibliographical Notes
- v. List of Satras, Glossarial Index, Bibliography and word Index.

As per the above chapterisation Prof. Bhaba Prasad Chaliha, has opined that the writings of S.N. Sarma exposes two dimensions

- (a) The background of Assamese *Vakti* Movement, its growth Development, Education and Contribution.
- (b) The History of Assamese Satra Institution.

In the preface to *The Neo Vaisnavite Movement and The Satra Institution of Assam* Dr. Srama has written that he has studied ancient Assamese devotional books and the *Charit Puthi* of the Vaisnavite saints and the history of the satras while preparing the book. He has met different *Satradhikars* of the respective Satras. He studied different documents on religion and religious sects available with the government.

Dr. Sarma has 37 books in total to his credit, fifteen criticism books written in Assamese language, seven criticism books in English, two translations and thirteen other edited books, among such books *Bighneswajanmodoya*, *Kamakumarharanam*, *Sankhachurbadham*, which were written in Sanskrit in the influence of *Vaisnavite* movement of Assam in the middle age.

Dr. Sarma has proven his Vaisnavite Scholarship through the books edited from ancient literature mentioned below.

Raghunath Mahant's *Kotha Ramayana* (1954)

Ramsaraswati's *Git Gobinda* (1956)

Pitambar Kavi's *Usha Parinoyi* (1957) and

Ankamala (1974) etc., which was written in the model of *ankiya nat*

2. Conclusion

Dr. Sarma as a Vaisnavite scholar is well known owing to his scholarship in *Ramayani* Literature. Before him Prof. Upen Ch. Lekharu contributed to the study of *Ramayani* Literature but that was not sufficient to fill the need. Sarma's *Ramayanar Itibritta* (1984), written in regional language contributed to the trend of studying Ramayana. In this book Dr. Sarma discusses different issues like introductory description of *Ramayani* literature, rituals related to Rama and wide expansion of the story of Ramayana in different states.

Like L.N.Bezbaruah and Kaliram Medhi, the study of Dr. Sarma was centered round the study of Sankardeva, the Vaishnavite scholar and his works. He has analysed as well as recognized the gravity and grandeur of each of the creation of Sankardeva and thereby highlighted the tradition which appeared as a reference to the practice of Vaishnavism. Dr. Sarma has not forgotten to mention about the structure, management, principles of the satra Institution as well as circumstances under which the Institutions have been uplifted under the aegis of Sankardeva, Madhabdeva, Damodardeva and political patronizers and how the Institutions have started to dwindle owing to lack of unifying leader like the saints mentioned and many other reasons why the great Institutions have been sub divided into different sects from the main one, into the sects like Damodardev, Haridev, GopalDev, Padma ata, Purusuttamthakur etc. with enough proof from the *charit puthi* and other documents.

The range of contribution of Dr. Sarma to the Assamese Literature in general and Vaisnavite study in particular is beyond measure. He has bridged a big gap and given us a lot of scope to understand and study Vaiushnavite movement in Assam.

3. References

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