Chapter - 5

SUFISM AND BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN REGION AND THEIR MUTUAL INTERACTION
The mystics and Saints belonging to various Bhakti and Sufi religious sects and groups promoted love and affection among the people of different religions. They had trodden a new path. They followed “unconventional and anti-ritualistic” ways and ignored the age-old restrictions of caste and creed. In their theological discourses the principles of “Love for God, human brotherhood and service” to mankind were highlighted. They opened the gateway of spiritual realization to one and all. They also stimulated liberalism, humanism and nationalism based on religion for which areas of conflict prevailing in different spheres of life were narrowed and ingredients of mutual appreciation and assimilation developed.  

1 Amalendu De, Theological Discourses in India History (Presidential address- 2003-04) Asiatic Society, pp. 4-5, Kolkata
The Bhakti movement which originated in the Southern parts of India through the Tamilian mystic-Saints of the 7th-9th centuries A.D. Ramanuja one of the earliest exponents of this movement systematized it. He taught that even the Sudras and the out castes could attain salvation through the Bhakti. Besides his attempt to reconcile the thought of Upanishads, the Gita and the Brahman sudras with the faith and belief of the vaishnava Saints.

Being influenced by Ramanuja's philosophy of vishnistadvaita. Ramananda, a seer of 14th century A.D. took the initiative in spreading the Bhakti movement in the North.

In Northern India Bhakti was popularised by Ramananda, the celebrated Saint of Ramanuja's school. He substituted the worship of Rama as the incarnation of God himself. He admitted disciples from all castes, from both sexes and even from among Musalmans. The experiences which Ramananda acquired through discussions with different scholars, including some learned Musalmans in Varanasi during his travels about the country, is said to have greatly influenced his preachings. We may, therefore, presume that it was perhaps not during the time of the Alwar Saints but only after words that Islam might have some influence on the Bhakti movement in India. But by that time, as we have already noticed, the elements of Hinduism had already found place in the texture of Islam.

A strong monothesim and absolute surrender to God and a direct realisation of God through devotion were the cardinal tenets of Ramananda's preachings which his disciples, Tulsidas and Kabir, popularised. But it was actually under the healing shade of Kabir's towering personality that a convenient compromise between Hinduism and Islam became possible.

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2 Ibid p-5
3 Tara Chand, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, p- 145
4 Amalendu De, Theological Discourses in India History (Presidential address) Asiatic Society 2003-04, Kolkata, p- 5
5 Tara Chand, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, p- 145
6 K.M. Panikkar, Survey of Indian History, p- 131
It is however true that like his preceptor, Kabir also made a bold departure from the original school to which he belonged. Being born of a Brahmin women and adopted in a Muslim family Kabir’s personality grew as a holy confluence of Islam and Hinduism. It was again from that there flowed the sacres stream of the new and long awaited harmonious religious life of the Hindu-Muslim India. Though Kabir selected from Hinduism and Islam their common elements and similarities and found analogies in their philosophic ideas, their dogma and ritual; yet he had no preference for their religion.

On the contrary, he rose and condemned in strong terms the idolatry as well as the distination of caste, colour and country. He asked the Muslims to forsake their blind trust in one prophet and his book and also condemned the Hindu doctrine of divine incarnation. To him a religion at all, and “God is not conception but an experience beyond the grasp of intellect.” In some of his preachings we hear an echo of the Sufi Saint Jilis doctrine. It is said that the expression of Kabir’s teachings was shaped by that of Sufi Saints and poets. It may, therefore, be said that in the preachings of Kabir, the ancient Bhakti philosophy of the Hindus merges harmoniously with the Sufi doctrines of Islam. Kabir preached through Bhasa or the Hindi language. As in the case of religious thought, so also in the case of language we find that Kabir brought about a harmonious compromise between Sanskrit and Persian having conveniently used words and expressions from both the languages side by side in his preachings.

The bhakti movement was in a real sense the movement of the people as the reformers preached their teachings to the masses through their mother tongue. In this way they also enriched the modern Indian languages. They kept alive the spirit of harmony through the principles of ‘love and

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7 Tara Chand, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, p. 147
8 S. Abid Hussain, The National Culture of India, p. 58
9 Roy Choudhury and Majumdar, Advance History of India, p. 403-f.
10 M.K. Saikia, Assam Muslim Relation and its Cultural significance, p. 18
devotion' for several centuries. As a result of this movement the Hindus and the Muslims could come close to each other.\(^{11}\)

The eastern parts of the country also came under the influence of vaishna philosophy and bhakti cult. In Assam, the bhakti cult was spread by Sankardeva (1449-1569 A.D.), who was a Kayastha by caste. He had Brahmin, Sudra, Naga, Mikir and Muslim disciples. His followers enjoyed equality in the vishnava congregation. He could tone down much of the stigma attached to the existing caste division.\(^{12}\)

The Muslim mystics called Sufis, attached great importance to the ideals of service to mankind and generated the spirit of love and affection among the people depending on the teachings of Islam. Though they arrived long before, they organised Sufi Silsilas. Since then a large group of Sufis migrated from Islamic countries and settled in different parts of the region of our study. In course of time the Sufi saints promoted the 'conception of a loving god', imbued the ideals of 'Pacifism and non-violence'. During this time the Hindus were acquainted with the wealth of Islam through the activities and teachings of the Sufi Saints. Being influenced by their teachings the lower stratum Hindus who were the victims of caste ridden society embraced Islam. Several powerful Muslim Silsilah played very important part in the expansion of Islam as well as in the formation of Muslim demography in this country. The female Sufis like Bibi Sara, Bibi Zulaykha, Bibi Fatima Sam, Syeda Jainab Khatun and some other women saints were venerated by the people.\(^{13}\)

From all that has been said above it becomes clear that in the fields of social and religious thoughts, a process of give and take have been continuing between Hindus and Muslims from long before the rise of the Muhamadan empire of India. "In philosophical and religious thought, as Dr. RadhaKrishnan observes, "there were a number of school both among Hindu and Muslim thinkers some borrowed elements from one another, but

\(^{11}\) Amalendu De, *Theological Discourses in India History (Presidential address)* Asiatic Society 2003-04, Kolkata, p- 7

\(^{12}\) Ibid - p- 7

\(^{13}\) Amalendu De, *Theological Discourses in India History (Presidential address)* Asiatic Society , Kolkata,2003-04, pp- 7, 8
others tried to find a synthesis between the two.\textsuperscript{14} Dr. Tara Chand has also justly observed that “in the give and take of culture between the Muslims and Hindu, it is difficult to assess accurately the share of each.”

Islam does not seem to have provided the expansion of Vaishnava Bhakti movement in Assam with a source or incentive. The speedy expansion of this movement appears to have been an inevitable result of prolonged sufferings of the people under the oppression of a professional priestly class and the pressure of ritualism which gained great importance in the Country in the period of its unstable political conditions prevailing from the downfull of King Jayapala in the early twelfth Century to the ascendancy of Ahom rule in the Sixteenth Century. During this period the ancient Kingdom of Kamrupa broke into a number of small and independent principalities. Perpetual conflicts, jealousies, and infiltrations culminating in wars become the dominant factors to determine the relation among these principalities, and the people of the country as a whole become overwhelmed with feelings of uncertainty, terror and despair so much so that they were bound to seek solace in religion. But when the greater part of the people was ignorant they were bound to be attracted towards the ritualistic aspect of religion. This again in its turn helped the growth of a strong priestly class which finally brought about a state of religious anarchy in the country. Thus with the disappearance of a strong, central government, the people of Kamrupa became the easy prey of all sorts of oppression and exploitation so much so that their hope for peace and progress in the political, Social and spiritual spheres was curbed. To save the people from such a sickening state and to enthuse them with new hopes a great social reformer and saint like Sankardeva (1449-1568 A.D.) become the crying need of the hour.

In an age when religion formed the basis of all social and cultural life and even of political thought of a people, any reform mooted for them would inevitably require of their reformer to concentrate his endeavours first of all on the reorientation of the religious system followed by them. This is what exactly happened to Sankardeva in Assam. He was a great

\textsuperscript{14} M.K. Saikia : Assam Muslim Relation and its Cultural Significance, p. 219
protagonist of the Vaishnava Bhakti faith. For his compatriots who had so long been stumbling in the darkness of ignorance and under the pressure of extensive ritualism, his preachings of monotheistic cult through the direct, easy and practical system of Bhakti (consisting of Sravana and Kirtana) ushered in a new hope for peace, unity and progress in their spiritual life. Sankardeva does not appear to have been a follower or agent of any of the Vaishnava reformers of other parts of India. With his own interpretations of the text of the sastras, he evolved his own faith of Vishnu-bhakti which, it appears, is distinct from those followed in different parts of India. The cardinal tenets of his preachings are:

(1) It preaches supreme surrender to one god, Vishnu or Krishna, who “is the central reality of soul and matter” and ‘the first and final cause of creation’.

(2) Lord Krishna is the full incarnation of God on earth. Unlike some of the Vishnu Bhakti Schools in their parts of India, it banishes the dualistic conception of God as Krishna and Radha or Krishna and Gopi. It upholds that Madhava is the controller of both Prakriti and purusha.

(3) It provides ‘only one mode of worship of God’ and that is through love and intense devotion. It indicates the idea that Bhakti is superior even to Mukti or final release and strictly prohibits the idolatry of any kind.

(4) This religion knew no caste, and universal spirit is the main principle of this faith.\footnote{M.A. Rahman: Assam Muslim Fallacy and Fallout, p. v. (Foreward)}

(5) It attaches utmost importance to the preaching of the Bhagawat-Gita.

Another noteworthy feature of this school of Bhakti appears to be that, like Islam, it also urges its adherents to accept this world and life respectively as the best place and time to prepare for the selfless services to god through love and devotion. In some of their Bargits Sankardeva and
Madhavadeva sing the glory of life (Narajanma), human body (naratanu) and the world in the shape of Bharatvaisha.

With the abrogation of idolatry of any kind and the dualistic conception of God as Radha-Krishna or Gopi-Krishna and also with the glorification of human life and the world, the Bhakti cult of Sankardeva seems to have conformed greatly to Islam. It was probably for such qualities that it could not only attract several Muslims to be its votaries, but also rouse the profound feelings of administration as well as respect among the Hindus and Musalmans of Assam for each other's religion, and thus succeeded in forging a sustaining fraternity between the communities even during the long period of evergrowing hostilities and wars of Assam with the Muhamadan powers of India. Whether these affinities of the Bhakti preached by Sankardeva with Islam were mere coincidences or an outcome of any direct or indirect influence of the latter, cannot be established with absolute certainty. But the influence of the Vaishnaves on the Assamese Muslims can perhaps be inferred from the reverential references to Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and the occurrence of the word 'nama' (ef: nama-dharma the official name of the faith preached by Sankardeva) as a substitute for 'Kalima' (qalma) in the Assamese Zikirs.

In some aspects the Vashnavism preached by Sankardeva appears to have a close affinity to Islam. But there is no evidence to show that he ever studied any Islamic work or came into close contact with any Muslim Saint before he began to preach his doctrines in Assam. It is, of course, found that the name of Kabir has been held in high esteem by the followers of Sankardeva. In the Katha-Guru-Charit it is stated that during his second pilgrimage he visited the place of Kabir but met his grand daughter only. According to this biography, this act of Sankardeva was not liked at first by his followers, who held Kabir as a more Yavana. But Sankardeva stated that Kabir was the son of a Brahman and was himself a worshipper of Vishnu. This shows that a hatred for Yavanas was prevalent during the time among the Vaishnavas of Assam. We have noticed earlier the influence of Islam and Hindusim or Kabir's preachings. We have also noticed that the language and
style of Kabir’s preachings were shaped by that of Sufi Saints and poets. It is therefore, not unlikely that some elements of Islam found place, if at all, in the preachings of Sankardeva through the songs of Kabir and others he heard in different holy places in India. Chand Khan, The Muslim disciple of Sankardeva is sometimes identified with or known as Kabir. All this shows that Kabir is held in esteem in Sankardeva’s school, at least from the second pilgrimage of the Saint.

From the biographical details of Assam’s vaishnava Saints and from all the different religious texts it would, however, hard to establish any direct influence of Islam on the sect. Sankardeva always insisted that all practical efforts even if it be just a basis in some authoritative text so far as it is practicable. Particularly in the doctrinal aspect of the faith, this dictum was most strictly adhered to. It is true that Vaishnavism as a whole had at least something to do with the Islamic ideal of monotheistic principles, etc. but Sankardeva, Madhavadeva and others in Assam always fell back upon the old Sanskrit texts like the Bhagawatpurana and the Bhagawatgita for the enunciation of the doctrines of the faith and even for poetic inspiration. About the identity of thought and sentiment of the Assam Vaishnavas on the other, we have spoken elsewhere, but these appear to be more chance coincidences than any deliberate community of philosophy.

The cardinal tenets of new Vaishnavian preached by Sankardeva under the patronage of the Koch King Naranarayana being as simple, straightforward and practical as those of the Islamic faith. People in the lower strates of Assamese society, felt more attracted to it than to the latter. To this again was added the rise of the Vaishnava fraternity which the Saint had stirred up by the social reforms through the new Institutions like Namghars (temples) and Satras (residential establishments). The new hopes and aspirations which Sankardeva thus gave to the people of Assam, whose social life did not suffer from so much wider horizontal divisions as that in the Hindu society in the rest of India, removed the probability of falling under the spell of Islam.
The blessings of Islam was gradually deepening into the blossoms of Assamese society, alike other parts of India, the wave of Bhakti movement washed over the Assamese socio-religious atmosphere in the form of Vashnavite Movement under the leadership of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva the former one of whom is said to have visited twice throughout Bengal and Bihar. With a view to gather deep knowledge on Bhakti Movement and returning back from these tours he started the Vashnavite Reformation, the sole belief of whom concentrated to the existence of one and only creator, in the country and consequently the pious activities under the leadership of Vaishnavite Gurus and the Sufi Saints proceed together side by side primarily. This was possible only because both the religious groups adopted the principle of “Wahadatul Wuzud” the existence of one god as at an atmosphere where the principle of “Wahadat-us-Shuhud” existence of many Goddes was prevailing among the masses. This joint venture of Sufisim and Vaishnavism may be as certained from the following verses of Zikir and of Borgit:

hindu musalman, ek allar farman
gorasthane kabar sari sari
hinduk puriba musalmanak gariba

(Hindus and Muslims are bounded by the same self of the divine rules of Allah. The act of cremating a Hindu and the entombing of a Mumin only signify one end death of all.)

“Santa mahanta auliya sakale
eketi namate khate”

(The Sants, Mahantas, that is, the Hindu holy man and the Awliyas also duplicate to one name, the name of god.)

mor manat an bhab nai o Allah
mor manat nai an bhab:
hindu musalman ek Allar forman
akherat ek Allar nam.
(In my mind, oh Allah; I have no different thought, save that the Hindus and different thought, save that the Hindus and Muslims are under one law, the will of Allah, and the final word of all services of Allah.)

In the same tone Sufi Saint Sultan Baba used to sung that-

main musalmano nahoi, hinduo nohoi,
mollao nohoi, qazio nohoi
mur manat mrityu bhayu nai.

I am neither a muslim nor a hindu, nor even a Mullah or a Qazi. I also do not fear to be died.

The Assamese Zikir, though filled with the spirit of Sufism, sing the glory of Gurus or religious preceptors and urge upon the detachment from mundane pleasure for the sake of the selfless services of God,

Even in speaking about in services to God the Sufi Saints like the vaishnavas vindicate the path of “Dasya Bhakti” or loving devotion of a selfless servant to his master, which is declared in Zikir as:

ati sukhemali sewami bhakti
thako bridayate dhari

(The most pleasure is the path of Suwami bhakti, that is, the loving devotion of a servant to his master, and I ever cherish it in my heart.)

It becomes very much amusing, whenever it is seen that similar tune has been acquired by both the trends to show love and devotion to God. As because when Zikir says:

nameche parnam dham
sona mor bhai o
suna mor bhai

(Oh my brethren, listen, the name of God is the greatest of all treasures.)

Similarly Sankardevas’ writing echo’s like this

matharo pakilo chuli
paramu manaiye bujibe noware
namehe sar katha buli

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17 M.K. Saikia : Assam Muslim Relation and its Cultural Significance, p- 221. T.B.K.
Baruah ed. : Sankardeva The Vaishnava Saints of Assam, Tp-91, 92, 96, 99
("My hair has grayed, yet my sinful mind understand not that praises of the 
lord is the essence of all matter.")

The conception of Maya (illusion) appears to become 
repugnant to Islam, which does not deprecate the value of this world and life, 
as the field of action and the training ground for life of the world to come. 
therefore the present world is of great importance to man. Similarly in the 
doctrines preached by Sankardeva, we find constant references to Maya. His 
Ibn Sina's conception of ultimate reality as eternal beauty, seeing reflection 
in the mirror of the universe. The Assamese Zikirs also seems to have 
brought in a similar conception. It is not possible to as certain whether their 
authors were directly inspired by the conception of Ibn sena, which is 
believed to have found an echo in the thoughts of Kabir or whether they 
received such ideas from the doctrine preached by Sankardeva. It may, 
however be presumed that they were inspired by the latter. In order to prove 
this contention the following illustration would be helpful. In one of the 
Bargit Sankardeva says:

narayan lila janaba koi
jita dekhu kaya sutta vilta jaya
mayako sava dhandha

(who can understand the divine sport of Narayana? All that you see the 
body, children, wealth and wife- are agencies of Maya.) A similar view is 
found expressed in some Zikirs:

dhana jan puttra bharya sabe akaram
chaya muthe beri ache mayar kasam.

(The wealth, friends as well as wives and children are all futile. They are only 
shadows that surround you on account of Maya.)

It was perhaps for such persistent endeavours on their part 
that many of the Zikir look like attempts at a synthesis of Hindu and Islamic

18 M.K.Saikia: _Assam-Muslim Relation and its cultural significance_ , Golaghat, 1967, pp-
222, 223, _influence of Islam on Indian culture_, by Tara Chand, p-147 Allahabad, 1946
19 Ibid. pp-223, 224, _Katha-Guru-Charit_, ed. U.C. Lakhau, p- 146
thoughts and ideals, which was an utmost need for the survival and growth of both the religious groups in scenario of the country.\textsuperscript{20}

At this context, it may be mentioned that there are many combined Hindu and Muslim villages in Assam where the two communities do not reside separately. They used to live together having different prayer houses, Namghars, Temples, Mosques and Dargahs, in different places in the same village, but they jointly take part in the welfare of the particulars village. In these villages the communal relations are so harmonious that Muslim villagers are often found visiting their Hindu friends in Namghar and delighting them having unhesitatingly accepted “Mah-Prassad” that is part of offerings made during prayer of the latter. Similarly, the Hindu villages are also often seen visiting the Mazars of Pirs, Khanqahs and Dargahs and making offerings as well as having threads on trees or posts in such places indicating their wish to obtain fulfillment of their prayers.\textsuperscript{21}

The ancient custom which is said to have been followed till today in the chamariya sattra, the renowned Hindu vaishnava temple in the Kamrupa district, is that once in a year the Hindu and Muslims meet together in the Namghar or the prayer house of the Sattra and a large quantity of “Prassad” prepared for the occasion of “community prayer” is served to them all in a large basin from where everyone take his own share with his own hands and enjoy it sitting all huddled together.\textsuperscript{22}

In this way, the close relation which developed between “Sufism and the Vaishnava Bhakti Movement” helped not only in the growth of a deeper sense of mutual respect and tolerance in the minds of their adherents, but also mutually exchanged and adopted the religious rituals of each other. Thus alike Sufism many rituals are found in Vaishnavism, which has their origin in Islam. Perhaps imbied with this influence, Vaishnavism laid stress on honest earning and plain living; both ends and means, must be justified. Those who do not abide by the rules of morality or religion in earning for the maintenance of his family, must suffer from deficiency. It also

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p-187
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, p-187
stressed upon external purity of men. After sleeping, eating, sexual intercourse etc. One became impure and should take bath. A Vaishnava should not be addicted to intoxicating drops and should keep honest company. It also advised women not to mix with other male persons freely and they should cover their body from head to foot with cloth. So that nobody can see any part of their body. All these teachings of Socio-economic factors in Vaishnavism is assumed to be imported from Islamic teachings, which became possible only as a result of harmonious relations between the two pious groups. The impact of this harmonious relation between sufism and Vaishnava bhakti Movement pervaded the fields of fine arts and material culture of the people. Such a fine relation between the Hindus and Muslims of Assam, greatly helped the germination of a deep rooted secular outlook in Assamese social life since the beginning till today. If any riot took place, this was absolutely due to dirty politics but not due to religious, social and cultural assimilation. This secular social trend waxed ever stronger and stronger as it passed through the long corridor of centuries. So much so that even in the hectic days of Hindu-Muslim riots in different parts of India, Hindus and Muslims of Assam could assemble in courtyard of a Namghar or a Mosque or Dargah to express their disapproved of any hostility among the people of the same land. Rather in the present times, such a non-communal feeling is gradually being developed in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.