

ANIRUDDHADEVA : THE GREAT SAINT OF ASSAM

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Abstract:

Aniruddhadeva (1553-1626 A.D.) the great saint of post Sankardeva era was born at Vishnu Balikunchi, in present Lakhimpur district. He was a great *Vaishnavite* to propagate Neo-Vaishnavism side by side creating a new society. He spent his later years at Naharati *Satra* and passed away in 1626 A.D. It was Aniruddhadeva, who stood out among the post Sankardeva's Vaishnavites, had asympathy towards downtrodden and backward classes. He gave '*Saran*' (initiation) to his religion, those who could not get *Saran* at other *Vaishnavites* finally chose to his *Vaishnavism*. Aniruddhadeva, a *Bhuyan* (large land owner) like Sankardeva, and a scion of the *Kala-Samhati* of Gopaldeva, created his ultra-revolutionary branch of *Neo-Vaishnavism*- The Mayamara order. He established the Mayamara *satra* in Upper Assam, as the centre of his activities. He worked for a society that experienced little of Sankardeva's reform. This paper is an attempt to reconstruct the life history of the saint.

Srimanta Sankardeva was the pioneer of *Neo-Vaishnavite* movement in Assam. He was also a saint scholar, poet, socio- religious reformer and the figure of importance of cultural and religious history of Assam. He was widely credited for introducing new forms of music (*Borgeet*) theatrical performance (*Ankia Naat*, *Bhaona*) dance, literature and language. Besides he worked as extensive transcriber of scriptures, (*Bhagabata of Sankardeva*) poetry and theatrical works written in Sanskrit. He had his right hand man in his disciple Madhavdeva (1489A.D.-1596A.D), who was also an important preceptor

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of *Ekasaran Nam-dharma* and known for artistic brilliance as well as his loyalty to his *guru*(teacher) Srimanta Sankardeva. Initially Madhavdeva was a *sakta* worshipper but later he was converted to the *Eksaran Namdharma* by Sankardeva and became his most important disciple. He became religious as well as artistic successor after the death of Sankardeva, in 1668 A.D. After the death of Madhavdeva *Vaishnavism* of Assam came to be divided into four orders known as *Samhatis*. In the *Brahma Samhati* Brahmanical elements predominated. The *Purush Samhati* was so called because the *satras* of this order were founded by preceptors belonging to the direct line of Sankardeva or *Purusa*. Mathura Das Ata and Badula Padma Ata organized their *satras* in strict conformity with rules and regulations laid down by Madhabdeva and their purified sub sect came to be known as *Nika* or *Nistha* (pure, clean). They laid great emphasis on outward cleanliness. *Kala Samhati* derives its name from Kalzar, where its founder Gopaldeva established a *satra* (religious establishment of Assam).¹

With other leaders of *Neo-Vaishnavism* of Assam, Aniruddhadeva also occupies a prominent place. His disciples who were called Moamariya or Mayamariya, organized the rebellion called the Mayamariya rebellion during the reign of Lakshmi Singha (1769-80 A.D). They dethroned the Ahom king and made Raghab, one of their leader as their king. But they couldn't continue the process. Later Raghab was killed and the *Ahoms* recovered the throne. But the event had a great influence in the history of medieval Assam. The event was the death knell of the *Ahom* government. The *Ahom* government ordered a mass slaughter but it could not suppress the rebellion. They continued their struggle and their kingdom *Matak Rajya* was recognize by the *Ahom* government in 1805.² It was the ninth day of the Solar month of *Vaishaksha*.

Aniruddhadeva was born in Dhalpur in the present district of Lakhimpur, in the year of 1553 A.D. In his biography it is mentioned that he was the third of the five sons of his father.³ His father was Gondagiri, a *Bhuyan*, and his mother was Ajoli. Ajoli was the daughter of Sankardeva's paternal uncle.

There are two biographies of Aniruddhadeva. First one was composed by Sri Sri Utshabananda Goswami of Mayamara Puronimoti *Satra*, which is not published yet. The published biography is entitled as *Sri Sri Aniriddhadevar charit aru mayamora*

satrar gosaisakalar vamsavali by Sri Sri Cidanandadeva Goswami, 16th *Adhikar* of main Mayamara *satra*.

The unpublished biography mentioned some legend about the lineage of Sri Sri Aniruddhadeva. According to this legend his ancestor Sumita, who belongs to the Sun family (*Surya Vamsa*) is referred to the first king of *Kali Yuga*. His son Suryasamasar was the king of Nepal. His successor were Sasavindu, Suravindu, Dharmavindu and Harivindu. Harivindu was called Padma Brahmagiri because of his knowledge on spiritualism. He first migrated to Konauj and than to Gauda. From Gauda he came Western Assam or Kamata. His son Harihar migrated Upper Assam. Harihar's son Mahipal became the *Gamtgiri* or the head of the *Bhuyans*. He had three sons. One of them was Gondanavagiri. Gondanavagiri's son was Gondagiri was the father of Aniruddhadeva.⁴

Aniruddhadeva saying about his family background in 5th *Skonda* of the *Bhagabata* as well as *Puranjan Upakhyan* traces the genealogy from Mahipal.⁵ But he is silent about the connection of Mahipal with Nepal. Gondagiri, who was the son of scholar Gondanavagiri, inherited most of the qualities of his father. It was because of his talent that he could make matrimonial relation with Sankardeva's family. The two biographers mentioned about five sons of Gondanavagiri but their names and order were not same. In the published biography of Sri Sri Chidanandadeva, Anirudhadeva was described as the middle of the five sons of his father.⁶ But in other hagiography Aniruddhadeva was made the eldest son followed by Mohanamurari, Niranjandev, Rupnarayan and Valkamidev. Two of his brother stayed with Aniruddhadeva and helped him propagating his ideas and the other brother Mohanamurari founded the Bangeaati Satra. Therefore it may be said that Aniruddhadeva was born in a noble family known for scholarly qualities infatuated a great veneration to God Vishnu.

Aniruddhadeva got the name Harakanthagiri by his family. As mentioned in the *Chaitpathis* about the amazing events of Sri Sri Sankardeva, Aniruddhadeva was also associated with some such events. Some times child Aniruddhadeva was described as protected by a cobra, from a stern hailstorm that took away many lives.⁷ Another instance describes that once he got veiled under a huge log while he was

playing. But he astonished everybody and went out without any harm.⁸ Once to divert his attention from study his brothers employed him to pluck black pepper seeds. He completed his job with stunning speed. A Muslim tailor watched him with four hands. As a result when Aniruddhadeva asked him to make a jacket for him, the tailor made it with four sleeves.⁹

It cannot be said clearly about the education and marriage of Aniruddhadeva. The published biography is silent about it. But according to the unpublished biography Aniruddhadeva had two wives and had five sons and one daughter. In *Aniruddhadeva Charita* he wrote

Aniruddhadeva matri Namat Ajali Ai.
Dehamadhyakhini Parama suwani dharmaru tats parai
Tahan tanai jestha Aniruddha bihelenta dui Kanya,
*Rup gsa ati gaur kalavar jagat Mahini dhanya.*¹⁰

(Aniruddha's mother Ajali Devi is very beautiful lady and had saintly qualities. His son Aniruddhadeva married two wives who were very beautiful and possessed good qualities)

Aniruddhadeva first married Ajana, who was the daughter of Sakai Maji and then the daughter of Bohikhowa Bhuyan of the locality.¹¹ Utsabandanda Dev Goswami mentioned about his six daughters, but Chidananda Goswami mentioned about his five sons and only one daughter.

The Narayanpur area at that time had a rich cultural background. So, born and brought up in such a surrounding he possessed a mental outlook. The influence of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva was enormous in those places. This can be measured from the line:

*Sankara Madheva upasa kariya achile bhakta ashesha.*¹²

The worship of Vishnu was prevalent in Narayanpur area from the early time. The Basudeva *than*, which was not far from Narayanpur area, is an example for the

same. The land grants of *Chutia* king Satyanarayan and his son Lakshminarayan to the devote worshippers of God Vishnu, shows the royal patronize to this process.¹³

Though Aniruddhadeva was well versed in *Vedas* and *sastras*, he did not adopt the *bhakti* philosophy propagated by Sankardeva through his philosophy *Ekasarana nam dharma* till that time. He felt the need of a proper guidance. Sankardeva and Madhabdeva died at that time. Gopaldeva, the disciple of Madhabdeva was propagating the *Vaishnava* faith by establishing a *satra* in Kalzar, near Bhabanipur. Gopaldeva was called as *Kothar Sagar* by Madhavdeva for his knowledge and proficiency in explanation.

As Aniruddhadeva determined to change the situation through the dynamic force of religion, worldly affairs couldn't distract him. At the age of 45 he sailed down the Brahmaputra in the year of 1598 to take initiation from Gopaldev at Kalzar *satra*.

The ACMSV mentioned that Gopaldeva reveried about the coming of Aniruddhadeva and sent Narayan Thakur to welcome him. Narayan Thakur constructed a new route from the bank of that river to Gopaldeva's residence. At the same time he repaired the old one. But Aniruddhadeva didn't come through the new route and took the way through the old. So, Aniruddhadeva was named as *Purani bhakat* (old devotee) and his disciple were also known by that epithet.¹⁴

Aniruddhadeva composed a song after meeting Gopaldeva and performed it in front of him, who was highly impressed. The song was based on a Sanskrit *sloka*,

Girou Kalapi gagane payuda

Lokhyantara bhanu jalesha padmang

Dvila kshya induh kumudashya bandhu

Ju joshya mitrang nahi tashya doram.

(When the sky is covered with dark clouds, the peacock dance of the hills, although the sun is at distance of one *loka* (*yojana*) the lotuses blossom with its light. The moon, the friend of water lily is two *lakh yojana* from the earth. Hence there can be no distance in friendship.)

Aniruddhadeva composed it as,

Gopala sonar prabhu dehu Darishna,

*Mahantaka nedekhila narehe jivan*¹⁵

(Gopala, the golden *guru* give me your *darshan* (a glance) life of a devotee goes in vain if he cannot have a look at his *guru*)

After knowing the purpose of Aniruddhadeva, Gopaldeva became happy and accept him as a disciple. At that time Gopaldeva was at a mission to propagate the philosophy of Sankardeva. In order to achieve this goal he started preparing a group through his *Sishya Prasikhan Kendra* (educational training centre). Along with Aniruddhadeva there were six *Brahmans* and six *Kayasthyas* as a disciple of Gopaldeva in Kalzar *satra*.

By his pious qualities and scholarly talents, he soon became the most prominent disciple among them. Aniruddhadeva was also very happy to get the company of eleven co-disciples and the guidance of an efficient and dedicated *guru* like Gopaldeva. ACMSV described The initiation of Aniruddhadeva as,

Harakothegiri ati parama nipuna

Gopalar pawa kare bhakti sanmpurna

Gopaleo bulilenta dekhi bisakhyan

*Tahana Pawato loke leibenta sarana.*¹⁶

(Aniruddhadeva, the well versed disciple laid prostrate at the feet of Gopaldeva with complete devotion. Gopaldeva already impressed by his Excellency and efficiency that the people would surely lay prostrate at his feet to accept initiation from him.)

The name Aniruddha was given by Gopaldeva. In his biography it is beautifully cited that,

Anyatra shastrar path kariyo nirodh

Bhakatira path matra karaibaka bodh

Etekese an nama hoiba Aniruddha,

Samasta Sastrara pracharibe gurha-tattva

Itu dharma Aniruddha tumate thapilu,

*Mur tej sakti mane sava samarpilu*¹⁷

(Closing all the paths, follow the path of *bhakti*, explaining the spirit of all *sastra*. For this you are named as Aniruddha. I have entrusted on you the responsibility of propagating the faith and bequeath you with my energy and spirit)

In Kalzar *satra* religious discussion were held among the proficient disciples. Aniruddhadeva took active participation in it. In his biography Aniruddhadeva is also described as an expert cook,

Gopalar Mukhe suni Paramartha katha

Aniruddhadeva randhani loila tatha.

Sudra santa save ek sange bhunje anna

*Eka atma hana boli namanile bhinna.*¹⁸

(Aniruddhadeva was engaged as a cook to all *sudras* and *santas* (considering them to be of a single soul) at the time when they were hearing the sermons from their *guru*.)

Aniruddhadeva became so proficient in religious matters that sometimes Gopaldeva also sought suggestion from him. His presence was so charming that discussion was not held in his absence.

jehidin Anirrudhadeva Nahakai

Gopaldevar man Prassana nahai

tere Achilane dharma karai Prakash

*hi Bikhamat at Sabh asantosh.*¹⁹

(When Aniruddhadeva happened to be absent, Gopaldeva and other devotees felt sad. Gopaldeva would offer religious sermon only after the return of Aniruddhadeva)

Meanwhile, Aniruddhadeva learnt that his parents were falling ill. Aniruddhadeva explained it to his *guru* and seek permission to leave for home. As Aniruddhadeva became an integral part of Gopaldeva, he did not want to let him go, Gopaldeva advised to take his parents in a boat to Kalzar. But he replied that his parents are too old or almost bed-ridden to move from home. Learning it Gopaldeva permitted him to go with a heavy heart, entrusting on him the charge of *guru* or preceptor.

Tumar Amar aji vaila pasichad

Eteke amara manat maha khed

Tumi sama Mahabhakhta nahike Amar

*Ehi hetu diu laiya jai gurubhar*²⁰

At the time of parting, Gopaldeva gave Aniruddhadeva a religious scripture. It is believed to be a copy of *Bhagabata*. Gopaldeva received it from Madhavdeva and Madhavdeva from Sankardeva. It is beautifully narrated in his biography,

Srimanta Sankar jibe sastrakhani

Ata Madhabaka dila acharyya bakhani

Madhava Guru dila Moka sehi shastra

Tumi bine shastrar asha hun patra

Eteke tumaka Ami sehi sastra dilu

*Aji honta tumaka acharya patilu*²¹

(Srimanta Sankardeva gave this scripture to Madhavdeva while entrusting on him the charge of an *Acharya* (religious head) Madhavdeva give this to me telling who else worthy to get it? I therefore give this *sastra* to you and authorize as an *Achcharya*)

Then Aniruddhadeva asked his *guru* that how he could dine with his non-ordained parents. Aniruddhadeva was advised to make his parents bow down in front of the scripture and also convey the essence of his religious teaching which would purify their mind.

He constructed a *Namghar* (prayer hall) in his village. The scripture the he got from Aniruddhadeva was installed in it. Following the advice of his *guru*, Aniruddhadeva initiated his parents by making them lay Prostrate in front of the scripture.

Imitating Sankardeva and Madhavdeva he started regular *Nam -Prasanga* four times a day in his *Namghar*. The people of the villages started gathering at the *Namghar* to take participate in it.

In those times war like *Daflas* were living in neighboring areas of Narayanpur. They used to rob and ransack the people of Narayanpur area. Once as a counter policy, the *Bhuyans* invited some *Daflas* to their *Bihu* festival and killed some of them. Deciding to take a revenge of it the *Daflas* attacked the residence of Aniruddhadeva, as he was also a *Bhuyan*. Aniruddhadeva managed to escape but his mother was kidnapped by the attackers. On their return, the *Daflas* lost their way and left the old lady alone in the midst of jungle. Biographer of Aniruddhadeva described it as an act of illusion created by Aniruddhadeva.²²

In search of a peaceful and safe environment, Aniruddhadeva left Bishnu-Balikunchi and made an establishment in a suitable place, six mile south from present Bihpuria in Lakhimpur district. He planted rows of *Nahar* trees there. He built a *kirtanghar* and excavated a tank. He also constructed rows of *hat* or residential house for the disciples. With a performance of *Nam-Kirtana* he celebrated the opening ceremony.²³ The saint stayed in this *satra* till his demise.

Aniruddhadeva centred himself at Naharati *satra* and started his missionary activities. He concerned more with the down trodden people. His equal treatment irrespective of their caste and class increased his disciples day by day. Among the people, initiated by Aniruddhadeva were *Brahmins*, *Kayasthas*, *Kalitas*, *Chutias*, *Ahoms*, *Koches*, *Nadials*, *Kaivartas* and poor artisans like potters blacksmiths etc.

Aniruddhadeva composed most of his literacy works in Naharati *than*. The Assamese rendering of the 5th *skanda* of *Bhagabata*, two hundred songs of 'Git-Sastra' were the main. In the line of Madhavdeva's *Namgosha* he composed the *Bhakti Mangal Gosha*. Another work *Nij Sastra* was written in both prose and verse.

Later Bar Ydumanideva who founded a *satra* in Banbari (Dihing) accompanied Aniruddhadeva in his missionary works. Bar Yadumanideva visited the *Naharati Satra*. On the way of his return with Aniruddhadeva the latter noticed a open wide place near the Kakila river in present Jorhat district and put there a *khuti* (post) considering the place suitable for a *satra*.²⁴ His dream was fulfilled by his son Krishnadeva, who established a *satra* there.

Aniruddhadeva was a Kayastha by caste and also a landlord. But he gave up the Bhuyanship before starting his missionary activities. Most of his disciples were from the depressed or backward classes. Maniram Dewan described him as the eater of dried fish which was a taboo of the upper caste people at that time.²⁵ He honored the habits of the lower caste people. Gopaldeva was also entertained with the special dish. But the guru was dissatisfied with that incident.²⁶ Though the truthfulness of that incident is debatable, it implies the attitude of Aniruddhadeva towards the habits of tribal people.

Gait writes regarding his disciples that they were mainly persons of the social rank such as *Dooms, Morans, Kacharis, Haris, and Chutias*.²⁸ His first disciple was a Muslim whose original name was Deli *Darji*. Delhi Darji was named as Dhyanapati by him. Dhyanapati later became a *Bora* (an official rank of *Ahom* Government). Aniruddhadeva also ordered for same dining with Dhyanapati, otherwise the disobeying disciples would be ex-communicated.

Thus Aniruddhadeva promoted a strong community feeling among his disciples. It became so solid that they dared to challenge the *Ahom* Government and resisted the successive attacks of the *Mughal*.

Aniruddhadeva died on 11 *puh* or *pusha*, that being the 10th day of the bright fortnight of the month, of the *Saka* year 1548 corresponding to 27th December 1626a.D., after a short illness caused by fever. He was cremated in *Naharati Satra*. Therefore *Naharati Satra* is considered the most sacred place by the Mayamariya society.

Notes and References

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2. S.L. Baruah, *Last days of Ahom Monarchy*, New Delhi, 1994, p. 88
3. C. Goswami, "Sri Sri Aniruddhadevar Charit aru Mayamara Satrar Gosai Sakalar Vamsavali", Tinsukia 1933, v.135, henceforth abbreviated as ACMSV.
4. The manuscript is in the possession of the *satra* located at a distance of 11 km. to then north-west of modern Jorhat.
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6. ACMSV. v.135
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