

Book Review

Title: Nirguṇa Bhakti in Eastern India: Ideology, Identity and Resistance

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Dambarudhar Nath's comprehensive analysis of the Bhakti tradition in the Brahmaputra Valley, focusing on its Nirguna elements, is poised to become an essential reference for scholars in this field. The monograph offers a meticulous examination of Vaishnavism's philosophical and social underpinnings in pre-colonial eastern India, specifically present-day Assam and Koch Behar. It integrates and critiques much of the recent research on this subject, presenting a coherent chronological narrative of Vaishnavism's evolution in the Brahmaputra Valley.

The book has seven chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The introduction serves as both a historical and historiographical examination of the Bhakti movement, discussing the shift from Vedic ritualistic practices to devotionism. This chapter problematises scholarly works on the Bhakti movement, which often conclude at the borders of Bengal. The author attributes this to the prevailing belief that the Bhakti movement in Assam was merely an extension of the movement propagated in Bengal. In contrast, scholars from Assam have long studied Sankaradeva (c. 1449-1569), the founder of the Bhakti movement in Assam, as a symbol of Assamese nationalism, treating him as an independent thinker untouched by developments in contemporary India. Nath, by situating the Vaishnavite movement in Assam within the broader Bhakti historiography, provides a nuanced understanding of its ideological and historical contexts. He contends that due to the diversity in proselytised beliefs, it is more accurate to consider the 'Bhakti Movement' as a "cluster of individual bhakti movements."

Scholars have classified Bhakti into two distinct categories: Saguna (manifest) and Nirguna (unmanifest). There exists substantial debate concerning the historical origins of this division and the distinctions between the two forms. Nath points out that both the Saguna and Nirguna conceptions of divinity were ultimately aimed at reforming existing social, religious, and philosophical systems, but this reformatory fervour waned with time.

These discussions, nevertheless, have not been extended to the Bhakti movement in Assam, which experienced a similar decline in reformatory potential and fragmented into multiple sects. The Māyāmarā sect, examined in detail in the latter portion of the book, maintained this reformist ethos for the longest duration within the movement and focused its efforts on the tribal population in the eastern Brahmaputra Valley.

The second chapter explores the origins of the Bhakti movement in eastern India, specifically in Assam, Kamrup, and Koch Behar. The author provides the historical context, noting the presence of the caste system and the ongoing process of Brahmanisation among various ruling elites. While elements of the Bhakti tradition began to disseminate in the Brahmaputra Valley by at least the mid-fourteenth century, it was Sankaradeva who significantly propagated it. The chapter includes a detailed account of Sankaradeva's life, emphasising how his pilgrimage facilitated the adoption of contemporary ideas and ideologies from other parts of India. The author discusses the tenets of Sankaradeva's religion, which included monotheism (Krishna worship), the rejection of external rituals, emphasis on Nāma (congregational prayer), and advocacy of vernacular language instead of Sanskrit. The institutional aspects of Sankaradeva's creed, which set it apart, are also examined. These included the establishment of Satras (monasteries) and Namghars (prayer halls). Though Sankaradeva initiated these institutions, his successor Madhavadeva was instrumental in giving them a formal structure.

The third chapter is a major contribution to the study of the historical development of Vaishnavism in the Brahmaputra Valley, skilfully synthesising dispersed literature into a cohesive narrative. The chapter underscores the complexity of the post-Sankaradeva period and provides a valuable framework for understanding the subsequent evolution of the movement. Nath analyses the schisms that emerged within Vaishnavism following the death of Sankaradeva, highlighting how the absence of a

unifying central figure led to the formation of divergent creeds and situating the schisms within both personal and ideological contexts. These schisms resulted in the formation of four distinct sub-sectarian divisions, known as Samhatis: the Bramha Samhati, Purusa Samhati, Kala Samhati, and Nika Samhati.

In the fourth chapter, Nath transitions from a broad examination of the early Vaishnava movement to an in-depth analysis of the Māyāmarā sub-sect, which forms part of the Kala Samhati. The author notes that its activities were confined to the eastern part of the Brahmaputra Valley, which, before the ascendancy of Vaishnavism during Ahom rule, was dominated by Sakta-Tantrika and Buddhist traditions. The early history of this sub-sect is closely intertwined with the Ahom state's attempts to consolidate its authority by extending its control over emerging Vaishnavite monasteries. The chapter provides a detailed genealogical and biographical account of Aniruddhadeva (1553-1626), the founder of the Māyāmarā sub-sect. The literary contributions of Aniruddhadeva are examined, with a particular emphasis on the 'Nij Śāstra', a doctrinal work credited to him and kept secret by the sect members. Nath argues that the 'Nij Śāstra' was instrumental in shaping a distinct identity for the members of the sect. The author also contends that from its inception, the social base of the Māyāmarā monastery predominantly consisted of lower caste and tribal individuals, which culminated in the formation of a distinctive non-caste social identity. The few Brahmanas who joined the sect often renounced ritual practices and abandoned their sacred threads (Janeu).

The fifth chapter analyses the events leading to the Māyāmarā rebellions against the Ahom state in the late 18th century. Nath posits that, over time, the Māyāmarā sect evolved into a social protest movement that actively challenged the entrenched socio-religious and political order. As the Ahoms converted to Hinduism, caste consciousness began to play an increasingly prominent role in the policies of the Ahom state. This shift, combined with conservative forces' opposition to the Māyāmarā's ideological stance rejecting caste and ritualistic norms, resulted in the consistent targeting of the sect. Nath examines the history of the Māyāmarā sect as one marked by continuous silent protest, which ultimately culminated in overt violent resistance against the injustices perpetrated by the Ahom state.

Chapter six examines the historical development of the Māyāmarā and Matak identities. Nath traces the origins of the name 'Moamariya', which was historically used for the Māyāmarā community, and the term 'Matak', which some have used synonymously with the Moran tribe. Nath asserts that 'Matak' is a broad appellation encompassing multiple ethnic communities. He discusses

the importance of the Morans in shaping the distinct identity of the Māyāmarā sect. The complex relationship between Sarbananda, the ruler of the Matak kingdom, which broke away from the Ahom state, and the Matak community is also examined. The chapter foregrounds the unique position of the Guru within the Māyāmarā sect and their ideological differences with other Vaishnavite monastic orders, including different quotidian ritual practices. For example, Aniruddhadeva's rejection of the priesthood led to the absence of Brahmanas and priestly rituals in the sect. The practice of congregational prayers (nāma-kīrtana), unlike other monasteries, is absent. Instead, recitations from the Bhakti Mangal Ghōṣā are performed.

In conclusion, Nirguna Bhakti in Eastern India stands as a seminal scholarly work that significantly advances the understanding of Vaishnavism in pre-modern Assam. The book is invaluable for scholars seeking to contextualise Vaishnavism as practised in the Brahmaputra region within the larger Bhakti movement. Nath traces the origins of the later sectarian schisms to the ambiguities in Sankaradeva's teachings, juxtaposing contemporary practices with historical traditions, albeit sometimes too liberally. A notable contribution of the text is its detailed analysis of the historical development of the Māyāmarā sect and its distinctive characteristics. Furthermore, Nath's exploration of the socio-political contexts surrounding the compilation and creation of religious texts such as the 'Nij Śāstra' offers a holistic understanding that transcends their purely religious significance, underscoring the interplay between religious and socio-political dynamics in the formation of these texts.

Further, Nath's exploration of previously untapped Vaishnavite sources is admirable. It allows for an in-depth exploration of the movement from within. However, it occasionally results in a narrow focus that overlooks broader socio-political contexts. For instance, Nath's discussion of the conflict between the Ahom state and Vaishnavite monasteries emphasises religious factors and downplays the political dynamics shaping the interaction. He also categorises the Māyāmarā rebellion as a social protest movement organised under a religious guise against the dominant socio-religious ideology. He disagrees with the previous historiography, which characterised it either as a religious conflict or located its roots in social and economic exploitation of the community. Such a rigid demarcation obfuscates the complex nature and origins of the movement.

The text is also characterised by an exceptionally detailed engagement with intricate debates concerning certain minor points of contention. For instance, the author delves into discussions on the birth dates and origins of pivotal figures of Vaishnavism, such as Sankaradeva

and Aniruddhadeva. While these discussions constitute a valuable addition to the scholarly discourse, they may appear overly exhaustive to some readers and detract from the overall readability of the work. These debates could have been more appropriately addressed in footnotes. Also, certain sections of the text could be more

meaningfully integrated into other chapters. This issue is particularly evident in the sixth chapter, which reiterates much of the information already covered in chapters four and five. Such integration would have enhanced the coherence and readability of the narrative.