



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH, IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY

ISSN: 2454-132X

Impact Factor: 6.078

(Volume 9, Issue 2 - V9I2-1437)

Available online at: <https://www.ijariit.com>

Women Through Hagiographies: Analyzing women's role within Neo-Vaishnavism

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ABSTRACT

Medieval history of Assam is largely depended on religious and mystical literatures, which forms a major portion of its sources. The historical study of the medieval Bhakti and Sufi movements paved the way for utilizing the wide corpus of 'hagiographies', which are the biographies of the religious saints. The existing hagiographies are accounts which are centered around the glorification of the saints in which facts are intertwined with mystical imaginations. In addition, these are produced by male saints and their disciples and in many ways are inadequate to capture the experiences of females, associated to the religious movement. Understanding the lives and role of women within these movements and within the different spheres of society is important. Also equally important is to acknowledge the gendered nature of the past to connect women's experiences, for a better and broader picture of the past. This article is an attempt to analyze the lives of women within the Neo-Vaishnavite movement through the existing hagiographies, since there is a dearth of written sources coming from the womenfolk.

A lucid description of Sankardeva's life is found in the hagiographical works related to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. His life story is deeply conditioned by a number of women which includes his mother, grandmother, his wives and his daughter and numerous female disciples and devotees. However, the mention of their contribution as individuals throughout his spiritual accomplishments is miniscule and time and again we see more weightage being placed on the advices, support and intellect of the men in his life. In describing a wife or a daughter, the hagiographer Ramananda Dwija merely emphasizes the high caste she was born into, her inherent piousness, chastity and sanctity. The women who are directly associated to the great men were expected to adhere to certain social norms and patterns of behavior and there is an absolute absence of any personal aspiration and socio-economic venture in which they were involved. While describing the birth story of Sankardeva's daughter, her caste, piousness and successful marriage to an eligible man was all that was mentioned.¹ Similarly, while describing his wives, the names of their respectable fathers, their caste identities and pious nature is mentioned particularly. This indicates the existence of such women only within the restrictive domain of the 'domestic sphere', in relation to the great men in their lives.

Within the spiritual domain, there is dearth of sources which mention about female saints or their contributions. There is only mention of one of the wives of Chaturbhuj Thakur, the grandson of Sankardeva, named Lakshmi who was a preacher², without any details of her spiritual journey and practice. Further, Kanaklata, the grand-daughter in law of Sankardeva was the head of a sattrā and also initiated a disciple during her stay at Bheladunga sattrā³ finds a passing-by reference. Bhubaneshwari was the daughter of Ramaraya and wife of Chilaraya, a prince of the Koch kingdom deeply revered Sankardeva and was influenced by his teachings.⁴ There were women disciples who could participate in the organization and working of the sattras even though no woman was allowed to live the life of a nun within the monastic order. This exclusion went to such an extent that women were not allowed to enter the inner sanctum of any

'Naamghar', the community prayer hall and some sattras, on grounds of their menstruation. The notion of pollution was thus attached to women and it influenced the nature of their participation in the movement. Both 'Women' and 'Shudras' were often categorized as inferior social groups in many instances in these hagiographies, signifying a strong notion of social impurity attached to these two categories. The medieval society was essentially polygamous in nature, evident through numerous stories. The Katha-Guru Carit mentions two elderly Vaishnavite saints having upto three wives each⁵. There are also other instances which portray the higher status of married women within the hierarchy of women in the society. One such instance is when Sankardeva taught a lesson to an influential chief named Jayanta Doloi. Sankardeva refused to accept a feast organized in his honour by him because he kept unmarried mistresses in his residence, despite having a wife who was a believer in God.⁶ The emphasis on marriage, as a social institution for legitimizing a woman's relationship which a man is clearly evident. Moreover, those women not linked to a man by marriage was clearly looked down upon by the Vaishnavites. In another instance, Harihara Ata, one of the Vaishnavite saints, put forward certain conditions for his wife. It is mentioned that since she could not abide by these conditions it resulted in her abandonment by the husband. But she requested to be with him as a slave (dasi) as her bond as his wife was unbreakable even in the next world. Thereafter her living conditions were miserable as she had to live in a shade outside the house and lived on the grain she could collect by husking the rice by her hands⁷. The element of economic dependence of such wives can be analyzed as a major cause for their deplorable social condition. In contrast to such economically weak women, there is also mention of a group of women called "Poharis" in the Hagiographies who were actively involved in small trade ventures. These women were however from the Vaishya caste and their involvement in trade was within their caste norms.⁸ One example of an economically strong woman was Gopal Ata's mother, who was engaged in the selling of goods in the capital of the Ahom kingdom in a market called Nazira hat. She was a widow and became a trader only after her husband's death. She became the head of the weaving looms of the royal palace⁹. Therefore, it is probable that caste norms played an important role in determining the relative independence of the women in the society and the limitations imposed upon them. Moreover the restrictions accompanying the institution of marriage seems to fade away after the death of the husband and women no longer had to abide by the conditions imposed through the marriage.

Within the upper castes, there were a few women who were known for their intelligence and knowledge. Sankardeva himself took advice of his second wife 'Kalindi', in taking important decisions¹⁰. Once while sending Madhavdev to Sundaridiya, Sankardev was anxious for the region was known for its beautiful women who could distract him from performing his duties but his wife suggested that the latter was a man with strong moral values and would not be lured by seduction¹¹. The advisory role of a woman was thus crucial while at the same time women were objectified as sources of sensuality and distraction for duty-bound men. Once the wife of Narayan Das, a disciple of Sankardeva, posed various interesting questions to Madhavdeva who was disguised as a beggar¹². The wife of Barvishnu Ata was described as "gomchakari", meaning furious and shrew and as such she was unmarried for long till she herself chose her husband¹³. As such a few women were not totally subordinate to their husbands and had their own decisions. But we cannot undermine the fact that they are referred to as the wives of prominent Vaishnava preachers and not as individual beings.

The oral traditions of medieval Assam reveal some reflections on the status of women among the masses. This includes the sayings of Dak (Dakor bachan). For example, Dak says, good women tend to be bad when they frequently visit market places¹⁴. In addition, Dak states a list of food an ideal woman must consume, qualities and auspicious body marks she must have¹⁵. These sayings reflect the influence of dharmashastric traditions on the social norms concerning women. Moreover, popular proverbs among people of different regions of Assam sometime reveal certain aspects of female sanctity. John Kitchen highlighted this obsession of the medieval society with "special female sanctity"¹⁶ in his work. Women being linked to chastity in many ways imposes unseen restrictions on their day to day activities, creating walls of social dominance. If they dared to break these walls, they are destined to face humiliation and misery. The notion of an ideal woman was thus becoming popular and stronger and was not only limited to the privileged sections of the society. Conclusion- Reconstructing the lives of women through hagiographical works is filled with challenges for historians. The hunt is to gather definite and reliable elements within sources which are filled with religious and spiritual elements, which are essentially unreliable. Locating gender within such sources and understanding the social connotation of the term 'gender', treating it as an agency which can maneuver history is the need of the hour. The condition and status of women is often treated as an important criteria in judging whether a society was progressive or not. Therefore it becomes important for us to view the past as multi dimensional and analyze aspects of gender, caste, class, ethnicity and race within the broader subject matter of history.

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