The Charismatic Authority Of Sankardeva And Routinization Of His Charisma: A Weberian Analysis

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Abstract: The theory of authority is at the heart of the sociology of Max Weber where he focusses on the historical shifts in the exercise of power. The third type of authority explained by Weber is the theory of charismatic authority where he talks about the charismatic powers of different personalities like prophets, heroes in wars, religious leaders etc; by dint of which they are considered superior to the ordinary people. This paper attempts to experiment this celebrated theory in the life and legacy of Sankardeva, a 15th century polymath who founded the vaishnavism in Assam and propounded a reformed version of Hinduism. His eternal charisma on the Assamese society in many ways corresponds to the theory of Weber. The notion of the recognition of validity of charisma, the concept of felt duty, the emancipator and revolutionary spirit of charisma and repudiation of the past- can be very easily attributed to the charismatic personality of Sankardeva. Weber also talks about the routinization of charismatic personality i.e. the demands placed on the charismatic personality while settling the crisis of succession, validation of the positions of authority, social status and the economic privileges of the subjects, and the demand of giving it an administrative apparatus; which clearly corresponds to the routinization of charisma of Sankardeva after his death in the form of shifting of the authority to his favourite disciple Madhavdeva and in increasing bureaucratization of the Sattra institutes. This culminates into traditionalization of the charismatic authority and emergence of a feudal structure within the sattras which is a prediction of Weber in his theory. Hence, this paper attempts a theoretical study of the charismatic authority of Sankardeva, its routinization and transformation into a traditional authority at last.

Index Terms: Charismatic Authority, Max Weber, Sankardeva, Routinization, Traditionalization of charisma.

1 INTRODUCTION
This paper is an attempt to examine the charismatic authority of Sankardeva, a Vaishnavite saint of Assam; in the light of the theory of Charismatic Authority put forwarded by the German Sociologist Max Weber. The Weberian concept of charismatic authority in many ways coincides with the everlasting charisma of Sankardeva in the greater Assamese society. The objective of this study is to experiment the analysis of Weber on the life and the strong legacy of Sankardeva and to look into how his charismatic authority converts into a traditional authority over time. Moreover, the process of routinization of his charisma and institutionalization in the form of Sattras would also be studied on the basis of the concept of ‘Routinization of Charisma’, coined by Weber. The charismatic authority of Sankardeva on the Assamese society is very significant and unique in many ways. There were few personalities in the history who were so versatile, colourful and virtuous like him, yet not much attention has been paid to him as a socio-religious reformer in India. Though he founded the vaishnavism in Assam and contributed one of the finest sacred works in Indian literature, yet he didn’t find place in most of the great works on our sacred literature. Sanakrdeva initiated the Bhakti movement in Assam known as the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and propounded a reformed version of Hinduism namely, Ek Sarana Bhagawati Dharma. He is also regarded as the greatest contributor to Assamese literature and culture. The inclusive, equilitarian and democratic character of his religion established on the basis of equality of man; his successful efforts to free Assamese society from all forms of social evils in the 15th century itself, along with his literary and cultural genius- establishes him as a charismatic personality which continues even after five centuries of his death. Moreover, propounding and promoting equality and democratic ethos and creating oneness among the people at a place like 15th century Assam, which is a rainbow of diverse cultures and communities; is indeed a miraculous deed. On the other hand, he connected the then isolated Assam to the mainstream India through his literature, pilgrimages and creation of a new language Brajavali by combining Maithali, Assamese and Sanskrit. For all these reasons, a study on his charisma is of great significance and relevance.

2 MAX WEBER AND HIS THEORY OF AUTHORITY
Max Weber is a German Sociologist who is considered to be one of the pioneering figures of the discipline. His writings reflect the historical grasp of modern Western societies and their political, economic, religious and legal development. The theory of authority is at the heart of the sociology of Weber where he focussed on the historical shifts in the exercise of power. A comparative analysis of the different forms of domination existed in different periods of history is also found there. ‘Domination’ and ‘Authority’- these two are used interchangeably by Weber. He derives these words from the German word ‘herrschaft’ which refers to political authority, leadership and domination at the same time (Weber, 1978, p. 213). Weber focuses on different systems of domination that had existed in different historical periods. On the very outset, Weber assumes that various systems of domination vary from one another in the ways of issuing the directions by the ruler and his expectation of obedience by the masses who are subjected to these. According to him, every system of domination is a set of apparatus of authorities as it denotes the ordinary people. This paper attempts to experiment the analysis of Weber on the life and the strong legacy of Sankardeva and to look into how his charismatic authority converts into a traditional authority over time. Moreover, the process of routinization of his charisma and institutionalization in the form of Sattras would also be studied on the basis of the concept of ‘Routinization of Charisma’, coined by Weber. The charismatic authority of Sankardeva on the Assamese society is very significant and unique in many ways. There were few personalities in the history who were so versatile, colourful and virtuous like him, yet not much attention has been paid to him as a socio-religious reformer in India. Though he founded the vaishnavism in Assam and contributed one of the finest sacred works in Indian literature, yet he didn’t find place in most of the great works on our sacred literature. Sanakrdeva initiated the Bhakti movement in Assam known as the Neo-Vaishnavite movement and propounded a reformed version of Hinduism namely, Ek Sarana Bhagawati Dharma. He is also regarded as the greatest contributor to Assamese literature and culture. The inclusive, equilitarian and democratic character of his religion established on the basis of equality of man; his successful efforts to free Assamese society from all forms of social evils in the 15th century itself, along with his literary and cultural genius- establishes him as a charismatic personality which continues even after five centuries of his death. Moreover, propounding and promoting equality and democratic ethos and creating oneness among the people at a place like 15th century Assam, which is a rainbow of diverse cultures and communities; is indeed a miraculous deed. On the other hand, he connected the then isolated Assam to the mainstream India through his literature, pilgrimages and creation of a new language Brajavali by combining Maithali, Assamese and Sanskrit. For all these reasons, a study on his charisma is of great significance and relevance.

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3 THE CONCEPT OF CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY

The third type of legitimate domination explained by Weber is the theory of Charismatic Authority. According to him, borrowed from the early Christian vocabulary, the word charisma means ‘gift of grace’ (Weber, 1978, p. 216). He defines charisma as

“A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a “leader”. (Weber, 1978, p. 241)

These kinds of personalities can be prophets, religious leaders, reputed persons and heroes in wars and hunts. Weber further writes that the power of such individual is considered to be superior than the everyday life of the common masses and are believed to be based on their claims to see the future (Weber, 1978, p. 241). However, what is decisive in this regard is the recognition of the validity of charisma. The personality of the charismatic individual is regarded as valid and true by his subjects is the most significant aspect of charismatic authority. This ‘recognition’ is freely given and guaranteed on the basis of proofs, originally which is always a miraculous act. Such recognition reflects in the devotion to such a personality, hero worshipping and absolute trust on the leader that he has undergone some extraordinary experience or posses some revelation into the future. According to Weber, there are two levels of origin of the legitimacy of the charisma. Firstly, it is derived from believe of the people that the leader has extraordinary qualities and posses a unique ethical vision. Secondly, the legitimacy is derived from the degree of ‘felt duty’ where the subjects consider it as a duty to observe the commands issued by the leader. This ‘recognition of duty’ is the key to the felt belief of the followers that they should follow the commands of such a personality (Weber, 1978, p. 242). Max Weber further explains that if for a long time the charismatic leader cannot produce proof and success, if he seemed to be betrayed by his divinity and magical powers, and most importantly, if his subjects are no more benefitted by his powers; the charisma of that leadership is likely to disappear. Further, Weber terms an organization of group of subjects sharing an emotional relationship as a community as a ‘charismatic community’ (Weber, 1978, p. 243). According to him, ‘officials’ do not consist in what he calls the administrative staff of the charismatic authority, rather it is chosen on the basis of charismatic capabilities of its members. There no appointment or dismissal, salary or benefice or career or promotion as such in this; rather charismatic leadership summons those who are extraordinarily qualified to receive such a calling (Weber, 1978, p. 243). One of the most important characteristics of charismatic authority as Weber mentions in the ‘Economy and Society,’ is the charismatic leader’s ability to repudiate the past or what he calls the ‘renunciation of the past’. According to him, the charismatic authority is often emancipator or revolutionary. Such a personality rejects the past on the basis of some historical wrong or injustice committed against people (Weber, 1978, p. 244). Most often the charismatic leader rejects the worldly desires and needs of a mundane everyday life i order to fulfill some higher calling or religious mission. Such a personality keeps distance from the worldly desires to confer ‘religious grace’ and attains legitimacy. Weber indicates that such rejection serves as a weapon to show that the charismatic personality is above the everyday needs and desires of the ordinary people and is obliged to choose an ascetic way of life (Weber, 1978, pp. 244-245).

Because of such characteristics, Max Weber believes that the charismatic authority often emerges during the periods of social crisis. According to him, when the nation or the people are considered to be in a crisis, when darkness prevails; the people see a ray of hope in such a leader’s divine powers or extraordinary vision that such a leader emerges as the authority to repudiate their pains and sufferings.

4 ROUTINIZATION OF CHARISMA

By the term ‘routinization of charisma’ Weber refers to the demands that are placed on a system of charismatic domination- settling the crisis of succession, the issue of legitimizing of the positions of authority, social status and the economic privileges received by the subjects of the charismatic leadership, the demands of giving it a administrative apparatus and commands necessary to adjust to the everyday needs and conditions required for ruling the state (Weber, 1978, p. 252). It can be defined as any external demand raised against the ruler which would cause charisma to conform its instruments of administration to the mundane routines and needs of everyday life and the utilitarian economics required for running the state. In its purest form, the charismatic domination is alien to daily routines and structures. Here the social relationships are completely personal and depends on the validity and continuity of the extraordinary capabilities of the charismatic personality. For its transformation from a purely transitory phenomenon to a permanent relationship, for it to become a community of followers, an organized party, a political or hierarchical organization; the nature of the charismatic authority has to be thoroughly altered. Such a situation culminates in either traditionalization or rationalization of the charismatic authority, or a mixture of the two processes. According to him, this transformation arises due to two key areas of adjustments. First is the settlement of the crisis of succession and replacement of the charismatic leader when he dies or quits the stage. Weber believes that the charismatic domination is subject to the vulnerability of the problem of succession as the new leader would be subjected to validation and recognition as possessing the same extraordinary capabilities as the original leader. Secondly, the strong economic interests of the greater section of the subjects and the administrative staff of the departed charismatic authority may cause transition of the charismatic authority to an administrative apparatus adapted to the conditions and demands of the mundane everyday life (Weber, 1978, p. 246). According Weber, in absence of the charismatic leader; there are few processes to look for the new leadership. The first is the find a new leader who qualifies to occupy that position. In this case, it’s
obvious that the new leader will be bounded by certain characteristics or rules, which leads to the process of traditionalization. It reduces the purely personal character of the charismatic leadership (Weber, 1978, p. 246). The second process is called ‘revelation’ in which the successor is selected on the basis of oracles, lots, divine judgements or a combination of such techniques’ (Weber, 1978, p. 247). The third is the process in which the charismatic leader himself designates a successor and the followers recognized him. The fourth process, according to Weber, is the succession of the leader by the process of designation, where a successor is appointed by the administrative staff of the charismatic leadership and recognized by the charismatic community (Weber, 1978, p. 247). The fifth process is called by Weber as the ‘case of hereditary charisma’, in which the charisma is treated as a quality passed on hereditarily. In this process, recognition is paid to the position acquired by the leader, it is no longer attributed to his charismatic qualities. The concept of charismatic authority on the basis of extraordinary qualities or divine rights is altered, and becomes a hereditary case in which recognition from the followers no longer requires. Now personal charisma may be completely absent as the charismatic leadership has become a personal right on the basis of hereditary. Again, it leads to the direction of either traditionalization or legalization. In the sixth or the last process, Weber talks about the transmission of charismatic quality from one person to another or it’s incubation in a new person. As a result, charisma becomes a transferable entity where it no longer rests on individual, but the acquired capabilities and to the efficacy of the performed rituals (Weber, 1978, p. 248). According to Weber, in the long run, only a small fraction of the disciples or followers would dedicate their lives wholeheartedly to the calling. The majority of the subjects, in the long run, would earn their living out of their calling as well. As a result, he opines that the routinization of charismatic authority also culminates in the extraction of powers and economic benefits by the disciples and regulation of appointment. While the earlier basis of appointment is personal charisma, the subjects may create novel norms and criteria of recruitment, involving instruction or ability tests. As a result of traditionalization, charismatic norms would be transformed into those defining social status on the basis of hereditary charisma. Similarly, this process may also be taken up while recruitment of the staff and even the followers. Moreover, creation and appropriation of administrative staff may also take place, in which individual administrative positions are created and appropriated corresponding to the economic advantages of the members. Accordingly, irrespective of whether it is being traditionalized or legalized; there will stem up benefices, offices or fiefs respectively. According to Weber, these will result in a prebendal organization, patronimorialism or bureaucracy or feudalism respectively (Weber, 1978, pp. 249-250).

5 SANKARDEVA: THE VAISHNAVITE SAINT

There was a bulk of factors that worked for the growth of a new religion during the 14th and 15th centuries in India. This new religion was based on the liberal notion of Bhakti as manifested in the Bhagavata Purana. This progressive, democratic movement focussed on the unity of the God, propounded a faith based on constant devotion, stood against excessive ritualism, contended against the caste discriminations and centred on the equality of man. There were many great saints who emerged in different provinces of India to convey the gospel of the new faith to the masses by extending the Sanskrit texts into vernacular languages. Sankardeva was one them who initiated the Bhakti movement in Assam. He was a saint-philosopher, poet, dramatist, pedantic writer, social reformer, religious leader, a polymath who was the framer of the greater Assamese consciousness, designer of a purer spiritual and social life. Though circumstances confined his influence within the boundary of eastern part of the country, as a Social reformer, vaishnavite leader; he is undoubtedly amongst the pioneers and deserves mentioning with the likes of Ramananda, Ramanujacharaya, Basavappa, Kabir, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Tulsidas (Barua, 2009, p. 1). Sankardeva thrived into the socio-religious and cultural history of eastern India in the 15th and 16th centuries and washed the mind of the people with the liberalising breath of Neo-Vaishnavism, giving individual life a new dignity and meaning. He presented Assam a liberal perspective, an unburdened religion free of ceremonies, excessive rituals and superstitions that prevailed during those days (Rajkhowa, 2012, p. 5). He was born in the year 1449 at Bardowa, presently in the Nagaon district of Assam. His father Kusumbar Bhuyan was the chief of the Bhuyan clan, originally hailing from Kanauj about hundred years back. He lost his parents very early and was looked after by his grandmother Kherusuti. Though Sankardeva started his education at the school of Mahendra Kandali, a shrewd Brahman; very late, yet he showed his scholarship in Sanskrit and other Hindu scriptures. He displayed his imaginative and literary genius by composing a magnificent poem using only consonantal sounds without the vowels just after learning alphabets. Hariscandra Upakhya was the another composition by him during that period (Barua, 2009, p. 12). After completing his studies, Sankardeva shouldered the official responsibilities of his clan and also married Suryavati. Only after four years of their marriage, Suryavati passed away leaving a girl named Haripriya. Sankardeva also lost his father during this period. These two heartbreaks left him in profound grief and he handed over all the responsibilities of his clan to his grandfather and set out on a long and extensive pilgrimage. He paid a visit to almost all the holy places of northern and southern India, including Mathura, Vrindavan, Prayag, Kashi, Ayodhya, Badarikashrama, Dwarka, Jagannath Puri etc. His meetings and discussions with many vaishnavite leaders and saints at these places had a profound influence on him. After twelve years of long pilgrimage, he returned home and initiated the Bhakti movement in Assam with a unique ethical vision. He propounded a new form of religion known as Ek Sarana Dharma or Neo-Vaishnavite movement. As Dr. Banikanta Kakkati said, “The Eksarana system is not a religion of bargain and barter between God and men or sacrifice and easy recompense; it is one with exclusive emphasis on slow spiritual regeneration, on growth of a new spiritual outlook by laying flesh and spirit in the hands of the Lord.” (Barua, 2009, p. 5)
Sankardeva set up his first Sattra (monastery) and created the institution of Namghar (a village hall for routine worshipping, community offerings and cultural activities) at Bardowa. He was able to attract people to his new religion and held the religious discussions and daily devotional recitations there, popularly known as Naam-Kirtana. Based on the secular, democratic and equalitarian principles of the religion, these two institutions are unique in character. He started writing in vernacular language for the benefit of the common illiterate people. Thus he rendered these writings to the subordinate classes of the society. He wrote Kirtan-Ghosa based on Bhagavata so that common people can access it. Kirtan and Bhagavata are two most important and worshipped texts in the neo-vaihnadvite movement of Assam. At a time when Tantricism and excessive brahminical rituals were dominant in Assam, Sankardeva put forwarded a simple notion of Bhakti which appealed the common masses to his religion. With the passage of time, his religion spread throughout Assam and fought against the social evils like superstitions, caste prejudices, ignorance, untouchability, inequalities, excessive brahminical rituals, black magic, tantricism and sacrifices practised in Assam in those days (Phukan, 2012, p. 25). Sankardeva made huge contributions in almost all the fields of the society. Apart from the profound socio-religious reforms in Assam, he is also credited with the act of pioneering the development of learning and literature in the state. Even after being exceptional in Sanskrit, he wrote mostly in the vernacular language with the objective of making the literatures available to the common population. Sankardeva is credited with an extensive collection of texts, extending up commentaries, translations and his original works expound to his cult. As he was deeply influenced by the Bhagavata, he undertook an extraordianry and bold attempt to translate the book into Assamese. As the rendering of the entire text was humanly impossible for one man, so he allotted different chapters to various disciples of him. He translated major portions of the text himself, namely, chapter 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 7th, 9th, 10th and 12th of the book (DevGoswami, 2005, p. 101). The translation of the Bhagavata marks an era of renaissance in Assamese poetry. His translation was interpretative in character as he not only translated the Bhagavata into Assamese words, but into Assamese idioms. His translation endeavours to elaborate, illustrate the different ideas and episodes of the original Sanskrit texts perfectly so that even an illiterate man can appreciate and understand. The Assamese version of the Bhagavata is, therefore, looked upon both as text and commentary of the original. It was a remarkable and valiant decision to render such a revered text into a vernacular language composed exquisitely in the classical style. He also wrote ‘Adi Dasama’, ‘Nimi Navasidha Samvada’ based on the Bhagavata(Gohain, 1997, pp. 43-48). One of the most significant literary contributions of Sankardeva is the ‘Ankiya Naat’. These were plays wrote by Sankardeva and performed to attract people to his religion. These plays were written in the Brajvallai language which is a combination of three languages- Assamese, Maithali and Sanskrit. His composed his first play ‘Chihnayatra’ in 1468,which denotes the seven ‘Vaikunthas’ performed through music and paintings to the great pleasure and delight of the spectators. He was the first modern playwright in the world, preceding even the great Shakespeare by more than hundred years. He wrote six Ankiya Plays-Ram Vijay, Rukmini Harana, Keli Gopal, Kaliya Daman, Parijat Harana and Patni Prasad. All these bears great literary significance and value to Assamese literature. Borgeet (devotional songs) composed by Sankardeva is the only classical form of music in Assam. These are basically devotional songs which were created to owe people to his religion. Moreover, his literary creations include ‘Gunamal’, ‘Anadi Patan’, ‘Boi Cholon’, ‘Ajamil Upakhyana’, ‘Bhakti Pradip’, ‘Bhakti Ratnakar’, ‘Kurukshetra’, ‘Uttarakanda Ramayana’ etc (Neog M. , 1987). What is remarkable in the history of Assamese literature is that it is augmented by the immense contributions of a man who had no intention to become a writer. He only used his writings as a weapon to convey his faith to the common people. His expertise on Brajaval, his masterful presentation of a new phraseology in Assamese language and his exquisite style and rhythm establishes him as a role-model for the generations to come (Rajkhowa, 2012, p. 5). Dusan Zbavitel, a famous European scholar observes that countless incomers were profoundly influenced by his invaluable literary contributions. Equally remarkable is his contribution to the development of the Assamese language, which rarely observed in case of the religious leaders (Barman, 1989, p. 12). Moreover he created many dance forms emphasizing on the development of Assamese culture and stressing on physical exercise. His creation Sattriya dance is the only classical dance form in Assam and one among the eight classical dance forms recognized by the Sangeet Natak Academy. Sankardeva was the renaissance man of Assamese society. He is best known for his efforts to reform the Assamese society and his life long fight against the social evils like casteism, social exclusion etc. He took religion as a powerful weapon of social change. There was no discrimination of caste in his religion and people belonging to any caste, community, sex and race could become his disciple. He advocated secularism and promoted democratic values in that 15th century Assam six centuries ago. Due to his immense contributions to the Assamese society, he is regarded as the greatest Assamese of all time (Bezbaruah, 1988).

6 CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY OF SANKARDEVA

Max Weber’s concept of charismatic authority in many ways coincides with the everlasting charisma of Sankardeva over the greater Assamese society. Let us experiment his analysis with Sankardeva’s charisma. Weber begins by defining charisma. According to him, it refers to the specific qualities of the individual persona, by dint of which he is separated from the common masses and considered as bequeathed with superhuman, supernatural or at least distinctly extraordinary capabilities or qualities of a person. These qualities are rare amongst the ordinary people and considered as an attribute of divineness and sanctity (Weber, 1978). The charisma of Sankardeva completely satisfies this definition. In the Assamese society, Sankardeva is considered as an embodiment of holy spirit or an incarnation of God by his disciples. He is believed to have divine powers under his possession which has established him as a superhuman entity in society. His biography, ‘Guru Charit’ of the 18th century is full of stories
of his supernatural deeds beyond the capacities of ordinary people. It is believed that Lord Krishna reincarnated Himself as Sankardeva in the 15th century Assam in the north-eastern India at a time full of political, spiritual and social turmoil (Neog M., 1987, pp. 27-30). Noted Assamese historian Gohain Baruah mentions the following praise of Sankardeva in his chronicle.

“Right from his early childhood, Sri Sankardeva had exhibited his extraordinary talents, in physical power, intelligence, courage, knowledge, religion and many other areas. During his adolescent days, he used to chase the wild deer in the jungle and catch them; while in the month of Bhadra, when the Brahmaputra was swollen to the brim with water, he used to cross the mighty river, unaided. In the ideological arena, as also boldness for the right cause, he was second to none in his times. Having been convinced of his profound knowledge, the people of his times, used to call him as ‘avatars purusha’ or the God-incarnate.” (Baruah, 1976, pp. 25-26)

I would like to mention few instances from ‘Guru Charit’ here. According to ‘Guru Charit’ Sankardeva was born as an incarnation of Vishnu after a boon was granted to Kusumbar by Lord Shiva. On the eve of Sankardeva’s birth, Satyasandha saw in a dream that Lord Shiva has entered her womb through her temple and she could also see the fourfold image of Lord Vishnu emitting the brightness of thousand sun. The family was delighted expecting the arrival of a son as an ‘avatara’ of Vishnu (Thakur, 1989, p. 3). One is about the acquisition of the epithet ‘deva’, which was usually granted to the Brahmins only. When Sankar was in school, one day his teacher Mahendra Kandali saw that Sankar was sleeping in the schoolhouse, after school hours in the four-fold avatar of Vishnu and a serpent was extending its hood over his head to protect him from the burning rays of the sun. On the presence of Mahendra Kandali, the serpent glided off. The Pundit could realize the divine power of the special pupil and asked the other school boys to call him ‘Sankardeva’ not Sankar. He also exempted him from the ordinary students’ routine of the sweeping and washing of the school precincts (Thakur, 1989, p. 9). Moreover, Weber further says that the key element in the authority is that the power of the individual is recognized as valid and true. This validation and recognition is the most significant aspect of the charismatic authority. “It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma” (Weber, 1978). In the case of Sankardeva, it was almost six centuries ago, when kingdoms like the Ahoms, the Kochis, Kacharis were existing in Assam who were patronizing Shaktism; when tantricism, magic, mantras, sorcery and sacrifices were practised, a man wearing khadi was able to mobilize people even after so many obstacles and threats and to bring renaissance to this remote region of the country, is something unbelievable. Even after six hundred years of his death, the 21st century Assamese society is also based on his philosophy and thoughts. People worship him, worship his works as having divine power. The absolute trust and confidence in the unique ethical vision of Sankardeva is the basis of his charismatic domination, which corresponds to what Weber’s conception of charisma is. Again, Weber is of the opinion that charismatic leaders emerge from the ordinary population and they transcend the routine of everyday life. It is seen valid in Sankardeva’s case. As Weber mentions that the leader’s claim of charisma derives legitimacy from the ‘felt duty’ of the population. They recognize the duty and follow the commands of the leader on the basis of an inner conviction that he will resolve the long-standing conflicts and sufferings from which they hope to be emancipated. In Sankardeva, people could see that emancipator power and they were of the belief that he will bring an end to their sufferings. People also believe that his path of devotion is the right path to achieve the supreme goal of human life i.e. the attainment of salvation. They treat it as a duty to follow his cult without questioning and believe that constant devotion is the only path to fulfillment. One of the most significant characteristics of Charismatic authority according to Weber is that it emerges during social crisis and repudiates the past. This is what Weber calls as ‘renunciation of the past.’ According to him, the charismatic movements are generally either emancipator or revolutionary and repudiates the past. The charismatic leader often rejects the past on the basis of some unacceptable inequality, long standing suffering or some historical wrong or injustice that has been committed against the people. He further argues that charismatic leaders often come to power when the nation or the people are thought to be in some kind of political or economic catastrophe. When Sankardeva was born there was great political turmoil in Assam. The ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was going through a process of dissolution since the 13th century. After the falling of the Pala dynasty, a fraction of local sovereign rulers called the Bara-Bhuyans were keeping a vigil over the remaining of the Hindu kingdom. However, that vigil was defied by the emergence of the Ahoms, the growth of Kacharis in the east and the Koches in the West. This political unrest was visible in the anomalous social conditions under which even the existence of a society was at stake (Mahanta, 1999, pp. 61-65). Socially, Assam’s condition was even worse. In the name of religion, all sorts of heinous acts were performed. Innumerable gods and goddesses were worshiped with sexual rites and sacrifice of animals. The priests or religious people were guided by their extremely selfish motives and dominated the politics and theology. All kinds of ill practices culminating from Saktism and Tantricism were pandemic. Even human sacrifice was performed in the Kamakhya and Tamreswari temple. The most pathetic result of the vedic legacy was the nasty concept of casteism in the name of which the castes belonging to the higher positions in the hierarchy closed all the doors of knowledge and learning. People belonging to lower positions in the hierarchy were denied all the privileges in the society and politics; even their presence in a religious temple or a festival was considered as an act of impurity (Hossain, 2008, pp. 19-31).

In such a socio-political condition, Sankardeva was sure that a new faith, a rational religious philosophy must be introduced to people in order to rescue the society from the darkness of time. So he took religion as a weapon of social change and showed people the proper way of worshiping.
He initiated the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam on the basis of Gita,Bhagavataand spread the idea of one single deity. He opposed the evils in the name of religion and established that surrendering before one God wholeheartedly is the proper way of worshipping. Devotion doesn’t require material elements and sacrifice. As his disciple Madhavdeva wrote: 

“Sheerana kirtanath/ tahidesha kala patra
Niyam sanyam eko bidhi;
Harito sharana loya/ kevale harir nama
Kirtana karante howe
siddhi’(Madhavdeva, 1950, p. 10).

(“For chanting the name of God, neither time nor place, status, rules are fixed. By seeking refuse in God, and singing the name of God alone, one can attain one’s fulfilment”). That was the main philosophy of his religion. He didn’t confine himself only to preaching the Bhakti cult in Assam, but established a new democratic, egalitarian social order in Assam. According to Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Sankardeva had a profound impact on the life, literature, culture and religion of the greater Assamese society which could only be compared to that Tulsi dasa in the upper Gangetic valley. His credentials as a poet, religious reformer, social visionary deserves mentioning in other parts of the country, something which is prevented by various factors. His philosophy of simple divinity freed Assam from the darkness of excessive and unmeaning practices; bringing in a purer and simpler spiritual life. He further terms him as the medium through which the spirituality of mediaeval India could reach Assamese society. He claims a certain position of Sanakardeva amongst the first ranked religious reformers of the country(Rajkhowa, 2012, pp. 2-3). Sankardeva formed a society based on Harinam-Kirtan( singing the name of Vishnu), the principles of which were to lead a simple life and developed the sense of life-style (truth, politeness, sound-cultural thinking), morality (respect, devotions, patience), character (free from carnal desire, anger, greed, avarice, liquor and smoking), humanism, non-violence, integration etc. He was the only religious leader who granted equality to all human beings irrespective of religion and culture. He has written in the Bhagavata: 

“Shatri balya briddha samastore adhikar,
Chandalako kore namey tekhane uddhar.”

(Women, children and the aged- all have equal rights; even an untouchable may be liberated by singing the name of God). He again said in the ‘Bhaktipradip’:

“Parar dharmak nihinsiba kodachit
Kariba bhutak daya sakarunchita.”

(Do not envy other’s religion, be merciful to creatures with pathetic minds.)

With these liberal thoughts, Sankardeva fought against the caste discriminations in the society six hundred years ago. He not only propagated religion but rather built the broad platform of secularism and integration. This liberal view of Sankardeva paved the way for the spread of his religion outside the state of Assam breaking the narrow boundaries of casteism, cultism etc. For this liberal view he could sow the seeds of revolutionary religion in ancient Kazir, Ahom Kingdom, Kochbighar, Orissa etc. In the latter period, that seed grew into a big tree. Its nucleus was this message of Sankardeva:

“Nabase bhakat jati ojati bichar,
Hari bhakatit samastore odhikar”.

(There is no difference between caste and non-caste in devotion to God. Everybody has equal rights in the devotion to God.) Thus his advocacy for a inclusive society was an appealing trait of his charismatic personality. Govinda from Garo tribe, Narotam from Naga tribe, Chand’ai belonging to Islam became his disciples and Sankardeva granted them equal status of a devotee of God. Thus he was successful in elevating the previously oppressed and subjugated communities and accorded them with equal status and privileges as a devotee of God. He wrote that the person who ridicules the lower castes and behaves to them with cordiality, at that very moment forfeits all the virtues acquired since his birth. What has been incorporated in the constitution of India centuries later, was introduced in effect by Sankardeva five hundred years ago. Granted women equal status in his religion and voiced for their rights in that fifteenth century itself. Moreover, he created institutions like Satra and Namghor which has remained as the seedbed of development of Assamese culture and all round development of the society. Namghor and Satras are run according to democratic principles where all villagers have equal rights and say. In every village, there is a Namghor where people offer their prayers. People of all sections of society irrespective of their differences in terms of caste, ethnicity, gender, sex or religion actively participates in the activities. It is a reflection of the democratic, egalitarian and progressive society that Sankardeva imagined (Rajkhowa, 2012, p. 2). Thus Sankardeva was able to free people from the sufferings of the past and structured the society with a new ethical vision. His vision for a better society attracted people towards his religion and his charisma continues even in his 21st century. What Dr. Banikanta Kakati said can be repeated regarding his charisma over the Assamese society—“Sankardeva has given Assam a new life, letters and a state. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdoms perished in the dust, but Sankara’s state endures and broad in the hearts of men his power survives” (Kakati, 1998, p. 15).

7 ROUTINIZATION OF CHARISMA

As I have already discussed, in its purest form, charismatic domination devoid of daily routines and structures; while the nature of the social relationships involved in this are strictly personal and relies on the validity of charisma. For its transformation from a purely transitory phenomenon to a permanent relationship, for it to become a community of followers, an organized party, a political or hierarchical organization; the nature of the charismatic authority has to be thoroughly altered. Such a situation either culminates in either traditionalization or rationalization of the charismatic authority; or a mixture of two processes. According to Weber, this transformation is the result of the two key areas of adjustments. Firstly, the settlement of the crisis of succession and replacement of the charismatic leader when he dies or quits the stage, as the new leader would be subjected to validation and recognition as possessing the same extraordinary capabilities as the original leader. Secondly, the strong economic interests of the larger section of the followers and administrative staff of the
departed charismatic leader may cause transition of the charismatic authority to an administrative apparatus adopted to the conditions and demands of the everyday life. By the term ‘routinization of charisma’, Weber refers to the demands that are placed on a system of charismatic domination – settling of the crisis of succession, the issue of legitimizing the positions of authority; social status and economic privileges received by the subjects of the charismatic leadership, the demands of giving it an administrative apparatus and commands necessary to adjust to the everyday needs and conditions necessary for ruling the state (Weber, 1978, p. 252). If we look into the charismatic domination of Sankardeva, after the death of the polymath; the same situation aroused. There was a crisis of succession and replacement of the great leader. As Weber has mentioned in the process of routinization, it was Sankardeva himself who passed on the baton to his most famous disciple, Madhavdeva and gave a clear message that no one should differentiate between them. This is the third kind of process of routinization, as mentioned by Weber. This is the process of “designation on the part of the original charismatic leader of his own successor and his recognition on the part of the followers” (Weber, 1978, p. 247). Moreover, according to Weber, only a small fraction of the disciples or followers would dedicate their lives wholeheartedly to the calling. The majority of the subjects, in the long run, would earn their living out of their calling as well. Weber further mentions that the administrative staff creates and appropriates the administrative positions for the corresponding economic advantages of its members. It will cause a tendency to traditionalization or legalization and there will develop prebendal organization, patronimialism or bureaucracy and feudalism chronologically. This is exactly what we observe in the case of the charismatic authority of Sankardeva. The Sattra institutions created by him were expanded by creating new administrative positions and corresponding economic benefits against such positions. Originally Sattras are medieval monasteries that were established at places away from the hum-drums of life to educate the disciples in religious learning and to train them in monastic life. To look after the administration, the satras have different ecclesiastical order and a hierarchy of officials. The entire administration is run by the Sattradhikar who is the head of the institution. The ecclesiastical and administrative order consists of Sattradhikars, Bhagawati who recite and expound the Bhagavata, Puranas; Pathak who is the reader of religious texts; Deuri who is the distributor of Prasad; Bhaarali, the store-keeper, Sravani-listeners of daily recitations; Athparya who keeps vigil over the sattra and arranges lights in the Namghor and Hatimota who summons the monks for the prayers. Rajmedhi is appointed to do the collections for the sattra and to ensure the availability of food and resources. Aldhora is a post appointed to look after the Sattradhikar. Dolabhari is appointed to shoulder the Dola when the Sattradhikar goes out of the Sattra. So the sattras have a systematic administrative system which functions smoothly. As Weber predicted, if we look into the history of Assam, we clearly see development of a feudal estate in the Sattras. The amount of land and resources the sattras posses, the man power they have is sufficient to even challenge the greatest dynasty who ruled over Assam. One of the significant causes of the decline of the Ahom dynasty was the Moamoriya rebellion caused by the Moamoriya Sattra (Gait, 1905, p. 85). After the death of Madhavdeva, we see the case of hereditary charisma in the sattras. As Weber had written, the charisma has become a transferable entity where it no longer rests on the individual or his extraordinary qualities; rather legitimization takes place on the hereditary basis.. The charisma is transmitted by observing a ritual and thus charisma has become what Weber has called ‘charisma of office’. This has transformed the charismatic domination into a traditional authority. Charismatic norms has been transformed into what Weber has called ‘traditional social status’ (Weber, 1978, p. 250). Thus the charismatic domination of Sankardeva has been routinized or institutionalized after the death of the great leader.

8 CONCLUSION

As I have already mentioned, Sankardeva has a lasting charisma over the Assamese society which has transcended time. Even after centuries of his demise, his teachings and thoughts have continued to appeal people with the same intensity. His unique ethical vision and the revolutionary thoughts would always be relevant. A man of remote North-East India, in the complex socio-political and cultural background and in the presence of monarchs who were opposing him, was able to dominate the society through his knowledge and wisdom and was successful to build an inclusive society combating evils like casteism, differences; is something itself charismatic. His charisma in many ways corresponds to the theory of charismatic domination put forwarded by Max Weber. As Weber predicted in his theory, Sankardeva’s charismatic domination transforms into traditional authority over time.

9 REFERENCES