

SANKARADEVA
VAISNAVA SAINT
OF ASSAM

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BIRINCHI KUMAR BARUA

**SANKARADEVA
VAISNAVA SAINT
OF ASSAM**

With a Foreword

BY

DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD

President of India

BIRINCHI KUMAR BARUA

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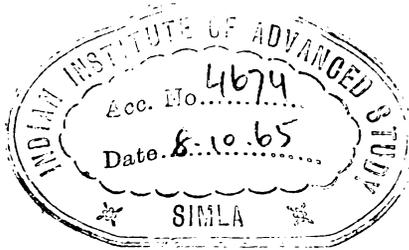
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जय गुरु शङ्कर सर्व गुणाकर
याकेरि नाहिके उपास ।
तोहारि चरणकु रेणु शतकोटि
बारेक करोहो प्रणाम ॥

“Glory to Guru Sankara,
The source of all virtues,
Of whom there is no parallel,
The pollen of his feet,
A hundred crore times,
Let us salute.”

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To

Dr. LALIT KUMAR BOROOAH

who was the soul of

Sreemanta Shankar Mission, Nowgong.

(died on the 24th June, 1960)

FOREWORD

BY

DR. RAJENDRA PRASAD

President of India

Students of Indian history are generally aware of the religious movements which sprang up in various parts of the country in the 14th-15th centuries. These movements were responsible for that religious, cultural and social awakening which arrested the disintegration of our religious system and the Hindu social fabric and at the same time sought to provide a broader and catholic base for the Hindu religion. It had also much to do with the renaissance in the realm of art and literature that followed this religious awakening.

Among the most celebrated names associated with this religious movement of the later middle ages is that of Sankaradeva, the Vaisnava Saint of Assam. He was learned and scholarly so that his original works and translations are, I understand, among the earliest standard works in the Assamese language. Like Kabir and Ramanand in Kashi, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal and Orissa and Namadeva in Maharashtra, Sankaradeva propagated throughout Assam, which was

then a conglomeration of several independent States, the cult of Vaisnavism. The underlying features of this cult were the unity of the Godhead, constant and unalloyed devotion, equality of mind and deprecation of excessive ritualism and caste prejudices. The core of this religious revival was, therefore, democratic, as Prof. Barua has rightly pointed out. There can be no doubt that it was as a result of this revival, the spearhead of which was Sankaradeva, that the people of Assam were able to evolve some kind of unified socio-religious pattern out of the prevailing chaos. As the learned author of this book has said: ‘‘In such an age of political disintegration and religious degeneration Sankaradeva became a beacon-light and cementing force. With an all-embracing loving religion and a common national language and literature, he curved out a way for the political, cultural, spiritual and linguistic growth of Assam.’’

Sankaradeva : Vaisnava Saint of Assam is indeed a remarkable book and provides ample material for understanding present-day Assam. The book is appearing not a day too soon, for there is a deplorable lack of good historical and background material on this eastern State of India.

PREFACE

India is passing through a period of reconstruction and regeneration. Today is a period of new things, fresh thinking and quick action. The most remarkable thing of independent India appears to be her efforts towards a peaceful democratic order. If we, however, look back to Assam's past heritage, we will see that this is not wholly a new thing. The seed of democracy, especially in the fields of religion, society and culture in Assam was first sown by Sankaradeva. Five hundred years ago, Sankaradeva had washed the mind of the people with the liberalising breath of Neo-Vaishnavism and given to individual life a new dignity and meaning. He gave Assam a catholicity of outlook and a loving and liberal religion, a religion unburdened with rituals, ceremonies, and superstitions that had characterised the time. As religion and morality are inter-connected Sankaradeva's writings put much emphasis on the ethical aspects of religion. With apt illustrations from the epics and the Puranas he extolled and elaborated the merits of such virtues as *satya*, truth, *daya* or *kripa*, mercy, *dana*, charity, *ahimsa*, non-injury, *ksama*, forgiveness, *anasuya* absence of envy, *dhriti*, patience, *sraddha*, respect and *dama*, control of senses. The vices that lead to misery, destruction and to hell are enumerated as follows : *kama*, sensual pleasure, *krodha*, anger, *lobha*, desire, *moha*, delusion, *mana*, pride, *matsarya* or *asuya*, envy and jealousy. These ethical virtues did no doubt determine the behaviour of good people (*sadacara*) but they also greatly added a fresh fragrance to social amity, friendliness and human relations.

Further, Sankaradeva did not confine himself only to preaching the Bhakti cult and upholding the ethical virtues but established at the same time a new social order in Assam by removing superstitions, corruption, ignorance, untouchability, inequalities between man and man, and other social evils. Not merely this, he gave the regenerated Assamese people literature, drama, poetry, songs, dance and music, which have attained the status of a distinct school, and entwined the community with unity and oneness.

The Saint attempted to wipe out untouchability—and to establish equal rights of all castes and communities. What has today been embodied in the Constitution of independent India through the lifelong endeavours of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, was in effect introduced in Assam by far-sighted Sankaradeva, five hundred years ago. He raised the erst-while socially down-trodden communities to the level of the higher castes by installing them as *Atais* (devotees) and *Mahantas* (noble men). He also succeeded in getting his noble doctrine recognised and accepted by the Brahmanas and other higher classes who were hostile to these reforms at the beginning, by dint of his unassailable reasoning and apt references to the Sastras, and thus forged a liberal democratic social order.

- Sankaradeva's message of democracy was primarily expressed through his Bhakti religion where he stressed that the realisation of God was not the monopoly of a limited few but within the reach of all those who strove for it. The Namghar, the most important institution which Sankaradeva gave to Assam, is even today run on the democratic principle, all villagers having a voice and hand in its management. Not only are its doors open to all, but all villagers, irrespective of their caste and race, are allowed to participate in its cultural activities which adorn and ennoble life. It is a common practice in the Namghar to recognise individual ability and talent disregarding other considerations. When a man is preferred as a *Sutradhara* to enact the Ankiya play, as *Gayan* or *Bayan* to conduct congregational music, it is not for his social status, but for his attainments in the respective spheres.

Another far-reaching contribution of Sankaradeva towards democracy was breaking the seal of classical learning and making available its literature to the unlettered masses. The good and noble abstract ideas engulfed in the Sanskrit language were unveiled through concrete form of *akhyanas*, stories, *kavyas*, verses, and Ankiya plays so that the common man might apprehend them. Profound even today is the effect of these cultural entertainments on the mind of the village people in spite of the modern cinema and audio-visual attractions.

It is significant that although Sankaradeva employed the people's speech in his major writings, he made no attempt to

vulgarise taste, but gave the people the very best in Indian thought and literature. His *Bargits*—Noble Songs—(distinguished from *Ban-Gits*—pastoral songs) are sung today by unlettered people to classical tunes, Ankiya-nats are danced and performed by villagers according to the orthodox *Natyasastra* style.

It is indeed a happy augury that to renew kinship with our glorious heritage, the national Government through its Ministry of Broadcasting and Information has been making efforts to revive and popularise *Bargits* and Ankiya-nats.

It is no mean credit to Sankaradeva that he collected the villagers at the Namghar not to whileaway their leisure in hearing idle gossips or ephemeral talks as in our modern clubs, but to listen to good poetry, ennobling music as well as to participate in philosophical and religious discussions. All these activities raised no doubt the level of our civilisation and culture, widened the intellectual and imaginative horizon of the common mind, also at the same time spread literacy as effectively as is done at present by the Adult Education Scheme of the Government.

The conception of India as our mother country was conceived by Sankaradeva five centuries ago. He wanted the people to feel proud of being born in this holy country of Bharatavarsha, as she provides an immense opportunity for development of man's moral and spiritual potentialities. Repeatedly did he emphasise the glorious and spiritual experiences of India. In many of his verses he spoke of the great heritage of this ancient country Bharatavarsha :

धन्य धन्य कलिकाल धन्य नर तणु भाल
धन्य धन्य भारतवरिषे ।

Glory to be born as man in Bharatavarsha in the Kali Age.

Sankaradeva widened the geographical outlook of the Assamese people by his travel from Kamarupa to Kanya Kumarika and linked up Assam with the rest of India in diverse ways : linguistic, cultural, religious. In his hymns and dramas he employed an artificial dialect which came to be understood all over Northern India as a national language ; the Satra and the Namghar were patterned to a certain extent after the monastic establishments of the South. Some of his literary and

artistic expressions were suggested by the Alwar saints, Kabir, Vidyapati and other saint-poets of India. In this way, Sankaradeva broke the insularity and isolation of Assam and led the way to Indianness and to the unity of India.

Like human nature, human ideals also change little. Even now, in our Community Development Project and Village Panchayat programme, we find some of Sankaradeva's very ideas reappearing through modern expressions and institutions. We feel, they will work better in our rural communities provided we can weave them into the very texture of our time-honoured traditions.

Assam Academy for Cultural Relations, established in 1960, has now undertaken in a very humble way to implement some of the ideas and teachings of this noble leader and also to propagate his universal message of love, amity, fellow-feeling, toleration, morality, peace and concord and service to humanity in the context of present world affairs and life. This small publication is an attempt to put before the world an unacademic assessment of the aspirations and achievements of the great saint whose contributions not only sustain us, the Assamese people, but may as well prove of immense value to India at large, particularly at this moment of reconstruction and regeneration of the country.

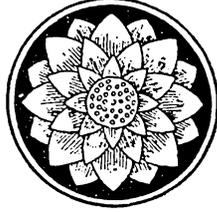
There has been a long-felt need for such an authoritative and readable account in English of Sankaradeva, his religion, contributions, institutions, and literature, as he has abiding influence in Assamese life and thought. A knowledge of Sankaradeva's life and activities is, therefore, indispensable to know Assam and her culture. This will also help in placing Assam in proper perspective in the cultural map of India ; also inspire us to feel the oneness of Indian culture. We are grateful to Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua of Gauhati University for compiling this book for us ; also to Sri H. V. S. Moorthy of Gauhati University who has written the chapter on Sankaradeva's philosophy. Dr. Praphulladatta Goswami, Shri Mahendranath Bora and Dr. Maheswar Neog, assisted us in bringing out this little volume. To make his work authoritative, Professor Barua has freely quoted from the writings of distinguished Assamese authors like Sri Kaliram Medhi, Dr. Banikanta Kakati, Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, Sri Haramohan Das and Dr.

Satyendranath Sarma. To all these friends, we offer sincere thanks and gratitude for their ungrudging co-operation and kind assistance.

Finally, we must express our heartfelt gratitude and indebtedness to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, our illustrious President, who has most graciously written an appreciation of this little book.

December, 1960
Gauhati, Assam.

Publishers.



CHAPTER I

LIFE

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in India there was a plexus of forces which led to the growth of a new religion. It was a religion founded on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti as revealed in the *Bhagavata Purana*. It was a progressive and democratic movement which laid emphasis on the unity of the Godhead, stood against excessive ritualism, preached a faith based on constant devotion, fought against caste prejudices and stressed on the equality of man. Several saints of great endowments appeared in various provinces to carry the gospels of the new faith to the masses by rendering the Sanskrit Puranas into regional languages. Of these saints, Ramananda, a Brahmana of Allahabad, was the most impressive figure and occupied the first place in point of time (1400-1470 A.D.). He worshipped Rama and preached his doctrine in Hindi. Kabir (1440-1470 A. D.) was one of his chief disciples. Another eminent leader of the movement was Vallabhacharya (1479-1531 A. D.), a Brahmana of the Telugu country. He worshipped Krishna and propagated his doctrine in the south. In Maharastra the religion of Bhakti was preached by Namadeva (1400-1430 A. D.) who was a tailor by caste. In Bengal arose the notable saint Chaitanya (1485-1533 A. D.), born

of a learned Brahmana family of Nadia. In Assam appeared the many gifted Sankaradeva (1449-1569 A.D.), a Kayastha by caste, who shaped the religious, social, cultural, and literary life of the people of the province for ages to come.

At the time of Sankaradeva's appearance, Assam was an ensemble of independent principalities on the political plane. The Chutiyas ruled over the easternmost region of the country while the south-east was under the Kacharis. West of the Chutiyas and of the Kacharis on the south were the domains of some petty chiefs called Bhuyans. To the extreme west was situated the kingdom of Kamata, which later on came to be known as Cooch Behar when it came under the domination of the Koch kings. The rest of the Brahmaputra Valley was ruled by the Ahoms. Thus contending political forces worked to separate the Assamese people from one another. Further, Assam happened to be a happy home of different races and tribes, and the beliefs, cults and institutions of these diverse peoples were absorbed in the prevailing Hindu religion and formed the system of Tantricism. Tantricism consisting of elaborate esoteric rituals, magic, mantras, sorcery and sacrifices was practised in Assam in the centuries preceding Sankaradeva. In such an age of political disintegration and religious degeneration Sankaradeva became a beacon light and cementing force. With an all-embracing loving religion and a common national language and literature, he carved out a way for the political, cultural, spiritual and linguistic growth of Assam. The patronage received from some of the rulers of these states greatly advanced the cause of the new faith and though primarily a religious movement it led on to manifold expressions in art and literature. The Koch

rulers patronised scholars to translate the *Mahabharata* and the Puranas. The Ahom kings also greatly encouraged literary activities and made it possible to create a new type of historical prose known as Buranjis.

Sankara was born in a Bhuyan family at Alipukhuri, a place about sixteen miles from the present town of Nowgong, on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in the bright *dasami* of Asvin in 1371 Saka (1449). The Bhuyans were at that time a very important people holding landed estates and enjoying other privileges from the king. Sankara's family was called the Siromani Bhuyan, being the chief among the Bhuyans. His father was Kusumbara. Sankara's mother died within three days of his birth, and he was brought up by his grandmother Khersuti. When Sankara was twelve years old he was sent to a village school maintained by Mahendra Kandali, an erudite Sanskrit scholar.

The earlier years of Sankara's life were spent in hard study and preparation. His scholarship in Sanskrit and knowledge of the scriptures were well revealed in the number of translations and adaptations he made in Assamese in the later years of his life. He compiled a work in Vaisnavism in Sanskrit styled *Bhakti Ratnakara*, and also composed many Sanskrit verses that were incorporated in his plays. His imaginative power and extraordinary intellect were well displayed even in his school days. Just after learning his alphabet, Sankara composed an exquisite poem made up of consonantal wordings without the addition of any vowel sounds except the first. During this period he also composed a little *kavya* *Hariscandra Upakhyana*.

Sankara completed his study at the age of twenty-two (1470) and came out a finished scholar. Soon after his return from school, official responsibilities of

managing the family estates fell upon his shoulders. Now, he also married Suryavati, a Kayastha girl. Suryavati died four years after her marriage leaving behind a girl named Haripriya. During this time Sankara lost his father. These two bereavements filled his youthful mind with overwhelming sorrow and he even contemplated of renouncing the world. After giving his daughter in marriage to a Kayastha youngman Hari and handing over the administrative responsibilities to Jayanta-dalai and Madhava-dalai, Sankara set out on a long and extensive pilgrimage (1481 A.D.). He was accompanied by about seventeen companions including his former Guru Mahendra Kandali. The detailed account of this pilgrimage has been recorded in the biographies of Sankaradeva, compiled by his disciples. He visited most of the sacred places and temples of northern and southern India. Among the important places and temples that he saw were Gaya, Puri, Vrindavana, Mathura, Dvaraka, Kasi, Prayaga, Sitakunda, Varahakunda, Ayodhya and Vadarikasrama. At these holy places, he came into contact with Vaisnavite teachers of various schools, and entered with them into many learned and theological discussions. The results of these discussions and the influences they exercised over his mind were reflected in the Vaisnavite movement which he subsequently started in Assam. After twelve years of such wandering through many sacred seminaries of Vaisnavite learning, Sankaradeva returned home a much-travelled man, acquiring firsthand knowledge of Vaisnavite theology, texts, mode of worship, and management of institutions.

Soon after his return, Sankara married again and removed his residence from Alipukhuri to a near-about village, Bardowa. Now his mission of life took a definite

shape ; he started with fresh impetus and vigorous enthusiasm his religious movement for mass conversion. At Bardowa, he set up a Satra (monastery), erected a Namghar (village-hall for daily devotion and place for community singing) and held there religious discourses. Around him, he collected a group of devout disciples, and held daily devotional recitations known as *Nama kirtana*. The official name of Sankaradeva's Vaisnavism is *Ekasarana dharma*—the religion of supreme surrender to one ; and that One is Vishnu Who in the form of Narayana assumes incarnations from age to age. The most favourite incarnation in which Vishnu is to be worshipped is that of Krishna. The surrender to One is very rigorously enjoined. For an Ekasaraniya, the worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. It has been said by Sankaradeva himself that a "Vaisnava should not worship any other god except Vishnu, he should not enter any other god's temple, nor should he partake of the offerings made to any other god. In so doing bhakti would be vitiated."

"The Eka-sarana system", says Dr. Banikanta Kakati, "is not a religion of bargain and barter between God and men or of 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."

During this time, he received a complete text of the *Bhagavata-Purana* from Puri through Jagadish Misra of Tirhhut. A miraculous story is told about his coming across with the *Bhagavata Purana*. The Brahmana pundit Jagadish Misra went to Puri to read out the *Bhagavata* in the temple of Jagannatha. In a dream, the Brahmana received a mandate from Jagannatha to the

effect that he should proceed to Kamarupa and read out the *Bhagavata* to Sankaradeva. Jagadish Misra searched out Sankaradeva at Bardowa and read out the book before him. The Brahmana survived only a year after the mission of reading out all the twelve books of the *Bhagavata* to Sankara was fulfilled. Sankaradeva then began to study deeply the *Bhagavata* with its commentary, and seriously took up propounding and propagating the cult of bhakti. He immediately set to translate the Purana into simple Assamese verse and started to compose many songs, narrative poems, and plays on the theme of the Purana.

At the age of sixty-seven (1516 A. D.) Sankaradeva had to leave his ancestral residence at Bardowa owing to the occasional disturbances created by the neighbouring Kachari king and his subjects. He therefrom removed to Gangmau and then to Dhuwahata, a place in the Majuli island on the Brahmaputra. For about fourteen years, he resided at Dhuwahata, and his stay here was marked by two important incidents. The first was the conversion of the famous Sakta scholar Madhavadeva, who later on became the greatest apostle and the most formidable exponent of the tenets of Sankara. The second incident relates to Sankaradeva's encounter with the Ahom king Suhummung (1497-1539). The Brahmanas accused Sankara before the Ahom king of preaching a religion unorthodox and not envisaged by the *Vedas*. The Ahom king summoned Sankara to argue with the Brahmanas of his court. Sankara defeated them and got off from the trial with credit.

In the meantime, another unhappy event took place which forced him to leave Ahom territory forever. The Ahom king was engaged in the operations of elephant-catching, and directed Sankaradeva and his relatives

in this work. The king made them erect a fence of wooden palisades and announced the penalty that those, in whose direction the elephant should break through, would be beheaded. Unfortunately, the elephants broke loose through the phalanx of Sankaradeva and his men. The Ahom monarch, therefore, directed to capture these men, Sankaradeva and few others could, however, escape. But Madhavaḍeva and Hari, Sankaradeva's son-in-law, were both made captives. Madhavaḍeva was later on let off as he was a Sanyasi, but Hari was beheaded. For this unfortunate incident Sankaradeva left the Ahom kingdom for Kamarupa, then under the Hindu king of Cooch Behar. He journeyed to Barpeta (1546 A. D.), a place in the present district of Kamrup, and at Pat-bausi, near Barpeta, Sankaradeva established a satra with Namghar and dwelling huts for his followers. For the rest of his life, he remained at this place in comparative peace. Here he used to hold regular religious discourses, recitations of the sacred texts, congregational prayers and dramatic performances. It should also be noted that the major portion of his religious writings, namely the songs, dramas and kavyas were composed here. Sankaradeva here converted three Brahmana disciples, Damodaradeva, Harideva and Ananta Kandali. Damodaradeva (1488-1598) and Harideva (1493-1568), both with equal zeal, spread the teachings of Sankara and converted the Brahmanas to this new faith. On Sankaradeva's death they set up special sects after their own names.

After a few years of stay at Barpeta, Sankaradeva set out again on a pilgrimage near about 1550 A.D. He was accompanied by one hundred and twenty devotees. During this journey, he was said to

have caught a glimpse of Chaitanya at Puri. Unfortunately, his biographies testify that he had no opportunity to talk with the great saint of Bengal. The other notable Vaisnava personality he came into contact with in this journey was the grand-daughter of Kabir.

On return from second pilgrimage, Sankaradeva resumed his customary works of prayer, meditation, and *nam-kirtan*, and gave religious instructions, and initiation to large number of people. But the Brahmana pundits of king Naranarayana's court did not like the growing popularity of Sankaradeva's activities, which they considered *mleccha ācāras* or non-Vedic. King Naranarayana (1540 - 1584) summoned Sankaradeva to his court and the saint by his scholarship and erudition defeated the Brahmana pundits in a contest. Sankaradeva then expounded before the king the main principles of the *bhakti-dharma* with relevant citations from the *Bhagavata-Purana* and other Vaisnava texts. The king was convinced about the superiority of Sankaradeva's creed and was deeply moved by his majestic personality. He honoured the saint with valuable presents and assured royal patronage towards propagation of the bhakti movement in his kingdom. The king even expressed his desire to become his disciple but Sankaradeva declined to give him initiation, as he thought that it would not be possible for kings to observe the religious and ethical code of his religion. Sankaradeva came back to Barpeta, but both the king and his brother Cilarai invited him on several occasions to Cooch Behar for holding religious discussions. Cilarai built for him a satra, near the capital, which was known as Bheladanga satra. Here, the great saint who gave to Assam a new way of thinking about God and man, passed away in 1569 A.D. Before his death, Sankaradeva nominated his

devout disciple Madhavadeva (1442-15 96) to the apostolic seat, disregarding the claims of his son, who was also a devout Vaisnava. From Madhavadeva's time, the Ekasaranadharmā came to be known as Mahapurushiya as Madhavadeva was looked upon by the disciples as the Mahapurusha, the great spiritual leader who led the way in devotion to the faith of Sankara.





CHAPTER II

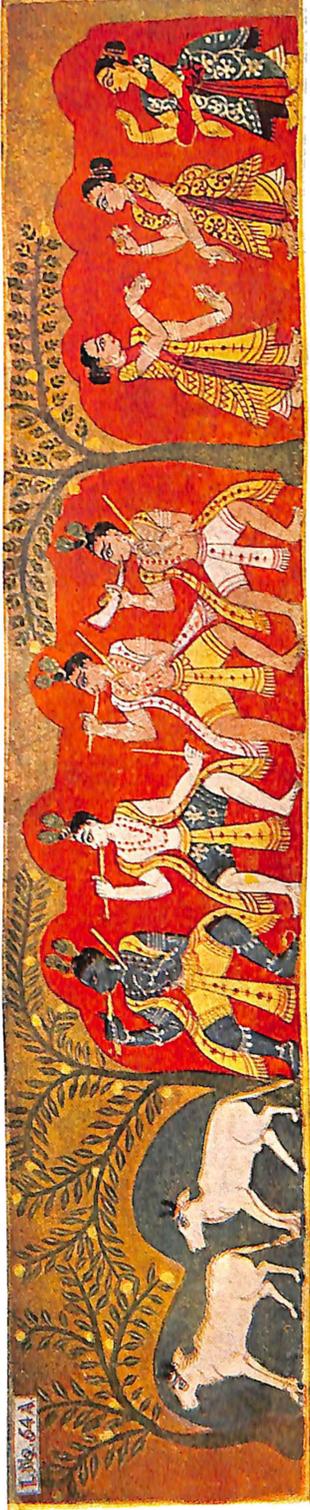
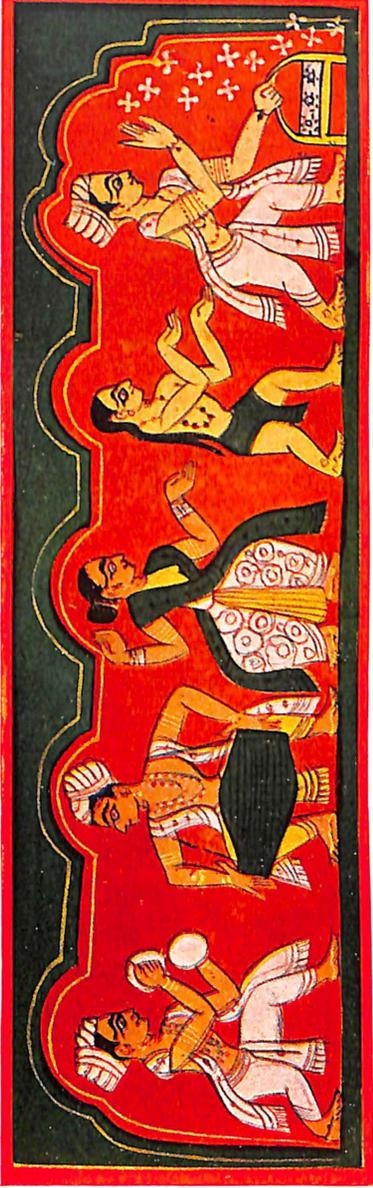
LITERATURE

SECTION I

Poetry

Besides producing far reaching religious and social effects, the Sankarite movement gave a great impetus to the development of learning and literature in Assam. Sankaradeva, though a remarkable Sanskrit scholar, wrote mainly in Assamese, the living language of the people, with the aim of making the Sanskrit lore accessible to the uneducated masses. He himself composed a large number of texts, consisting of translations, commentaries, and original works to expound his creed. These writings had also their practical utility. They were constantly required for regulation of daily duties. This, therefore, greatly encouraged literacy and learning.

Sankaradeva drew inspiration chiefly from the *Bhagavata* which was described as the Sun amidst the Puranas, comprising as it does the essence of Vedanta philosophy (*Purana surya maha Bhagavata Vedantaro ito paramatattva*). An early attempt was, therefore, made to translate the book into Assamese. It was really a very bold and extraordinary undertaking to render into a provincial language a venerable text written in the grand style of a classical tongue. In this connection it is interesting to note that Sankaradeva was accused before the Koch king Naranarayana by the



A 16TH CENTURY ILLUSTRATED ASSAMESE MANUSCRIPT
(From Chitra Bhagavata)

(By courtesy of Shri Minindra Narayan Dutta Barooah)

Brahmanas as he read, taught and translated the *Bhagavata*.

The translation of the entire text was not a light job for one man ; so Sankaradeva allotted different sections for translation to his different disciples. He himself undertook the rendering of the major portion, namely, Books I, II, III, VII, VIII, IX, X and the Book XII.

The rendering of the *Bhagavata* marks an era of renaissance in Assamese poetry ; its literary influence on Sankarite literature was manifold and immense and proved a shaping force upon Sankara's writings. Sankaradeva was not only indebted to the *Bhagavata* for its Krishna legends but also for literary forms, expressions and traditions. Sankara translated the *Bhagavata* not only into Assamese words, but into Assamese idioms. For example, take the following verses from the original :

*Evaṃ sa bhagavān Kṛṣṇo vṛndāvanacaraḥ kvacit
Yayau Rāmamṛte rājan kālindiṃ sakhibhivṛtaḥ
Atha gāvāsca gopāsca nidāghatāpapīḍitaḥ
Duṣṭaṃ jalaṃ papustasyāstrṣārttā viṣadūṣitam*

and compare them with Sankara's translation :

<i>Dineka Govindadeva</i>	<i>Baloka lagata nalai</i>
<i>āpuni melilā save gāi</i>	
<i>Gopa siśu sava same</i>	<i>Jamunāra tīre tīre</i>
<i>dhenugaṇa phuraṇta carāi</i>	
<i>Jeṣṭha māsara ghora</i>	<i>raudre piḍileka ati</i>
<i>eko āra tṛṣāta najāni</i>	
<i>kālira hradata nāmi</i>	<i>nirantare garu gopa</i>
<i>pāraimāne pile viṣapāni</i>	

To make the passage more clear and homely, the poet redered the expressions *sakhibhivritah* and *nida-*

ghatapapiditah respectively as *gopa sisusava same* and *jestha māsara ghora raudre pidileka ati*. For in Assam. *Jaistha* is particularly significant as a month of extremely hot days when pools and rivulets dry up and grasses in the field are scorched by the hot sun.

Sankaradeva's translations in this way are of an interpretative character. The poet had access to and utilised other Puranas or commentaries in making the Assamese version. For instance, we may refer to the Kadamba tree on the bank of the Kaliya lake having been touched by the feet of Garuda where the bird rested while carrying nectar. This incident, small though it is, is not in the *Bhagavata*; our author probably introduced it from other sources. In this way, his translation endeavours to elaborate, and to illustrate, the different ideas and episodes of the original Sanskrit texts perfectly in homely and direct Assamese style 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.

Although intended for the common people, his translation was admired by scholars also. Regarding its popularity Sankaradeva's biographer Bhushana Dvija records an illuminating incident. Kanthabhushana, an Assamese Brahmana, went to Banaras to study Vedanta philosophy under a Sanyasi named Brahmananda. Brahmananda one day read out to his students some slokas from the *Bhagavata Purana*, but the students not understanding a single verse of it remained silent. Brahmananda, however, was surprised to find that his Assamese student explained the slokas without any aid from the teacher. Being interrogated, Kanthabhushana, replied that he was already acquainted with the

Assamese version of the text made by Sankaradeva which was written in so simple, expressive and convincing a style that even a woman or a Sudra could understand it.

Of all the books of the *Bhagavata*, the *Adi Dasama*, the first part of Book X, is very popular. This Book describes the incidents of Krishna's early life, such as child Krishna's killing of different demons, his playing at games and tending of cattle with his friends in the fields and woods, his stealing of butter, milk and curd, and quarrel with the milk-maids, and the various chastisements he had from his foster-mother Yasoda. Though permeated with religious emotion, the *Dasama* gives an intensely human and realistic picture of a child life, a mother's love and grief for her little son, response to Nature, and other poetic embellishments that eternally move the human heart. It should however be noted that unlike the Vaisnavite literature of other provinces Radha does not appear in these scenes and further she is not even a character in Sankarite literature.

The *Bhagavata* was an inexhaustible source from which Sankaradeva drew again and again. Besides the translation, he composed a large number of other books with material from this Purana. His *Nimi Nava Sidha Samvada* is a doctrinal treatise based on Book XI of the *Bhagavata* (*Nava siddha kathā ito ekādasa skandha*). Narada here recounts before Vasudeva the discussions which took place between king Nimi and the nine sages, Kavi, Havi, Antariksa, Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avihorta, Dravida, Camasa and Karabhajana on nine different doctrinal points. Each sage expounds one of these problems put to him by the king, namely, the nature of the *Bhagavata* religion, Bhakti, Maya, way

of escape from Maya, Brahmayoga and Karmayoga demerits of an uninitiated (*abhakta*), and nature of Avatara. Here some of the abstruse metaphysical problems are expounded in the Assamese language. From its very nature, the work does not strive to reach any high level of poetry, though some of his verses bear marks of literary accomplishments. The merits of bhakti are expressed in splendid and popular similes :

*Bhaje Mādhavaka nāma smare sarvakṣaṇa
Ekebāre sije tāra tini prayojana
Prathame opaje prema lakṣaṇa bhakati
Gṛha śarīrate pāche mile birakati
Premara āspada Kṛṣṇa mūrti spūrti haya
Eke kāle mile āsi sampada tritaya
Atiśaya kṣudhāta bhunjanta yena mate
Sije tini prayojana pratyeka grāsate
Hove tuṣṭa deha puṣṭa kṣudhā guci yāya
Prema bhakatira rājā śunā abhiprāya
Alpa bhakatita hove prema ati puṣṭa
Kiñcita bhojane yena kichumāna tuṣṭa*

“He who takes to the name of Madhava
and meditates on it
finds all his three needs fulfilled at the same time.
First, he finds a seizing of love,
the sign of devotion,
then an indifference to his household
and his body,
an appreciation grows of the image of Krishna
the object of love.
These three assets come to one at a time,
as if one finds food when one is extremely
hungry,
and finds a fulfilment of one’s three needs
at each morsel :

one is pleased, one's body is restored,
 and hunger itself disappears.
 Listen, O king, to the nature of love and
 devotion ;
 even a little of devotion sustains love well,
 just as little food satisfies some."

More homely and attractive are the following couplets :

*Yena pitṛ śiśuka lāḍu lobha diyaya
 Tāka pāibo buli śiśu auśadha pivaya
 Pāche khaṇḍa lāḍuve garbharo roga hare
 Sehi mate ajñānī vedara śikṣā dhare
 Pāche Vede bole era isava kāmanā
 Niṣkāme karibā eka Kṛṣṇata arpaṇā*

"Just as the father tempts the child with a sweet-ball and the child in expectation of it swallows the medicine, later a fragment of the sweet-ball cures it of all its ailments, so the ignorant takes to the love of the *Vedas* ; later the *Vedas* say, Leave these desires ; without attachment do you dedicate yourself to Krishna."

His *Bhakti Pradīpa* also analyses the various elements that constitute *bhakti*. Though the work is said to have been compiled from the *Garuda Purana*, in fact its contents tally more with the materials of Book XI of the *Bhagavata*. Here Arjuna puts to Krishna the following questions :

*Hena śuni Dhanañjaya sudhilā dunāi
 Bhakatisi bhailā yeve mokṣara upāya
 Kimate bhakati kare kimate lakṣaṇa
 Kahiyoka hauka more janma-nivāraṇa
 Kona vidhi karibeka bhakati tomāta
 Kenabā prayāsa āche kahiyo āmāta
 Yito jane kare āna devatā bhakati
 Tāra kene gati hove kahiyo samprati*

“Hearing this Dhananjaya asks once again :
 If then devotion alone is the means of salvation,
 How does one make devotion ?
 What are its characteristics ?
 Tell me that I may be relieved of birth.
 How should one devote oneself to you ?
 What means is there do tell me.
 One who devotes oneself to other gods :
 Tell me, how fares such a person ?”

Among the nine means of developing the attitude of bhakti (*navavidhā bhakti*), the author here greatly emphasizes on *sravana* and *kirtana* i.e., listening to and chanting of God’s names. Sankaradeva preached a religion of supreme surrender to the One and, in his *Ekasarana-dharma*, the worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. This has been made clear by Krishna in the *Bhakti Pradīpa* :

*Eka citte tumi moka mātra karā sevā
 Pariharā dūrate yateka āna devā
 Huyoka śaraṇāpannā eka mote mātra
 Moke bhajā huibā teve mukutira pātra
 Nāma nuśunibā tumi āna devatāra
 Yena mate nuhibe bhakati vyabhicāra*

“Devote yourself to me with a single mind,
 Forsake from a distance all other gods.
 Surrender yourself to me alone.
 Devote to me, then will you be fit for salvation.
 Never listen to names of other gods—
 that your devotion may remain unsullied.”

His *Anadi Patana* is mainly an adaptation from Book III of *Bhagavata*, though a few episodes are introduced from the *Vamana Purana*. The book deals with

cosmological matters and is devoid of literary merit. *Gunamala* (Garland of praises) is one of the last works of Sankaradeva composed at the request of the Koch king Naranarayana. In essence, *Gunamala* is a little hand-book based on Books X and XI of the *Bhagavata*. It is a *stotra* or *stuti* type of poem with six small sections containing hymns of praise to Vishnu and Krishna. The author within the compass of a single laudatory verse recounts many incidents from Krishna's life making them easy to remember. In fact, there is not a Vaisnavite disciple who cannot recite from memory *Gunamala* from beginning to end. Superabundance of alliteration with jingling rhymes make the poem suitable for recitation. By way of example, the following verses may be quoted :

<i>Kālika damilā</i>	<i>Pūtanā śuṣilā</i>
<i>Devaka tuṣilā</i>	<i>vrajaka bhūṣilā</i>
<i>Keṣi vatsavaka</i>	<i>samasta daityaka</i>
<i>Lagāilā camaka</i>	<i>ḍakāilā yamaka</i>
<i>Tumi bārambāra</i>	<i>huyā avatāra</i>
<i>Prthivira bhāra</i>	<i>khaṇḍilā apāra</i>
<i>Indraka damilā</i>	<i>Brahmāyo namilā</i>
<i>Vanata bhramilā</i>	<i>gopika kriḍilā</i>
<i>Paśi rangāśāla</i>	<i>yata mahāmāla</i>
<i>karilā āsphāla</i>	<i>vadhilā gopāla</i>

“You subjugated the serpent Kali and squeezed out the Raksasi Putana. You delighted the gods and adorned Vraja. You terrified all demons like Kesi, and Vatsavaka. Again and again you incarnate yourself and lessen the burden of the earth. You subjugated Indra in the forests and played with Gopis. You came on the stage, stormed and slew all the terrible forces.”

The next outstanding literary production of Sankaradeva is the *Kirtana* which even to-day exercises

unique influence upon the mind and thought of the Assamese people. It is looked upon with the same religious feeling and reverence as *Ramacaritamansa* of Tulasidasa in Northern India. There is no Assamese Hindu home which does not possess a copy of *Kirtana* either in manuscript written on sanchi-leaves or in print, no house which does not recite some of its verses on religious occasions and during illness.

The date of composition of the *Kirtana* is not known. Some biographers say that Sankaradeva did not write the book during one particular period, and that the composition was spread over several years. From the methodical arrangement of the chapters, it may be said that though the book was written at different periods, the entire work however was planned and it was certainly not a work of his early years. Furthermore, the *Kirtana* is not a single poem but a selective collection of twenty-six poems comprising about 2261 couplets in diverse metres. Most of the poems are, however, adaptations from the *Bhagavata Purana*. Two of its poems Sahasra Nama Vrittanta and Ghunuca were contributions by other writers. They were written respectively by two of his disciples Ananta Kandali and Sridhara Kandali and were incorporated in the anthology at the desire of the authors. Each poem included in the *Kirtana* is of the nature of an independent *kavya* modelled after Sanskrit prototypes and illuminative of many didactic doctrinal points. The very name *Kirtana* is suggestive of the fact that the poems were recited in religious congregations and services. Each poem bears a *ghosha*, a refrain. These poems are recited by the leader of the religious gathering. After reading a couplet, the leader repeats the *ghosha* or refrain and the party takes it up along with the clapping of hands.

The first poem of the *Kirtana*, Caturvimsati Avatara (Twenty-four incarnations) describes briefly the twentyfour incarnations of God, making particular references to the divine personality of the Krishna avatara and to his activities towards liberation of mankind. The subject-matter of the second poem Nama-paradha is said to have been taken from the Svargakhanda of the *Padmapurana*. The poem is in the form of a dialogue between Narada and the four Siddhas, sons of Brahma who dwelt at length on the various ways of emancipation in the Kali Age. Pasandamarddana, the next poem, is so named as it refers to the subjugation of the evil mind (*Pasanda mati*). The poem draws its materials from the *Bhagavata*, *Visnudharmottara*, *Brihat Naradiya Purana*, *Padma Purana*, and *Suta Samhita*. It recommends constant recitations of the name of God to be the best medicine in this world of sufferings. Sankara realised that the Brahmanical pretensions had raised a barrier between man and God, and so both by pen and from pulpit, he endeavoured to break down all prejudices of caste, creed and rank. In many passages, Sankara emphatically laid down that to obtain final release or to come to the presence of God one need neither be a Brahmana, nor a sage, nor should one know all the scriptures (*Nelage deva dviija risi huibei nelage samasta sastra janibe*). The poem is important as it makes clear that the Vaisnavism preached by Sankaradeva was democratic in spirit, principle and organisation and all people could embrace it. For the very same reasons Mohammedans and others including tribal people were converted to his creed.

The Dhyana Varnana (Description of meditation) is a small poem of twentyeight stanzas. The poem

holds a magnificent picture of Vaikuntha, the celestial abode of Vishnu, where all devotees aspire to go after death.

*Vaikunṭha nāme āche mahā thāna
 Śārī śārī rañje vimānacaya
 Vaiduryaya hirā marakatamaya
 Candra sūrjya yena prakāśe āti
 Najāni yāta paśi dina rāti
 Cāru sarovara nirmmala jala
 Sugandha padma śobhe utapala
 Āche rājahaṃsa samuhe rañji
 Lilāye mṛṇāla bhuñje ubhañji
 Pāve pārijāta malayā vāva
 Caṭake tyaje sulalita rāva
 Bhramara gaṇe gāve hari gīta
 Vaiṣṇava jaṇe śuni ānandita*

“There is the rare place named Vaikuntha,
 There are row upon row of palaces,
 studded with sapphires and diamonds.
 The Moon and the Sun shine dazzling there.
 It is difficult to know
 whether is is day or night.
 There are lovely lakes with clear water,
 Fragrant lotuses and lilies bloom there,
 All are beautified by geese,
 Pleasurably they feed on the roots of the lotus.
 There is the Parijata flower
 and the Malaya breeze,
 The Catakas cry sweetly,
 The bees hum hymns to Hari,
 Listening which the Vaisnavas are pleased.”

The Ajamilopakhyana (story of Ajamila) taken from the *Bhagavata* narrates the story of a Brahmana

who lived in open sin with a Sudra harlot and broke all laws sacred to his caste in maintaining his mistress and the ten children begotten on this woman. At the time of his death, the sinful Ajamila called his youngest son Narayana to him and because he happened to utter the name of Narayana (which was also a name of God) at the time of death, the soul of the Brahmana was taken to the abode of Vishnu and not to the city of Yama. The poem emphasizes on the merits of chanting God's name : even an unconscious recital of the name of God brings salvation to hard sinners just as abdominal disease is cured by even unconscious swallowing of a powerful medicine (*yena mahausadhi najani bhunjile taro garbha roga hare*).

The merit of devotion is propounded through the well-known story of Prahlada in the poem Prahlada Carita. The same doctrine is made explicit in Gajendropakhyana, a small poem of thirty stanzas from Book VIII of the *Bhagavata*. It describes a furious battle scene between Graha (crocodile) and Gajendra (elephant). Gajendra was overpowered by Graha and he was counting the hour of death. Suddenly, it flashed into his mind that devotion to Hari might save him from this predicament. So he prayed to Vishnu with devotion by holding a lotus with his trunk :—

*Ehi buli maraṇata nabhaila vikala
 Suṇḍe merāi dharilanta suvarṇa kamala
 Parama ānande mādhavata diyā citta
 Gajendre karilā stuti ati viparīta*

“Thus thought he, and cast away all fear of death ; with his trunk he caught hold of a golden lotus ; with great joy and faith in Madhava, Gajendra began to worship Him intensely.”

Vishnu came and rescued his distressed devotee in time. Many of the verses of this poem are distinguished by great poetic beauty, particularly the description of the Trikuta mountain and its adjacent lake, the dwelling place of Graha.

In Haramohana (adapted from Book VIII of the *Bhagavata*) by enumerating feminine charms in detail the poet creates an image of *Divya-kanya* (celestial nymph). Siva entreated Vishnu to show him his feminine form. Vishnu, therefore, transformed himself into the form of Mohini (Enchantress); at her sight violent emotions of love suddenly let themselves loose in Siva's mind and Siva losing self-control and all sense of decorum and decency ran after Mohini like an infatuated man. In portraying Mohini, the poet selected feminine physical charms that have a direct erotic appeal. The description of the *Divya-kanya* becomes in the following verses pictorial and at the same time full of delicate voluptuousness :

Tapta suvarṇara sama jvale dehā nirupama
lalita valita hātā pāva
Cakṣu kamalara pāsi mukhe manohara hāsi
saghane daraśāi kāma bhāva
Urddhaka kṣepanta bhantā karanta kaṭākṣa chaṭā
lilā gati dekhāi phure pāka
Solake uchala khopā khase pārijāta thopā
bāma hāte samvaranta tāka
Karṇata kuṇḍala dole tana halaphāla kare
gale ratnamālā jhiki pāre
Suvarṇa kaṅkaṇa dhvani kare runu jhunu śuni
prakāse hṛdaye hema hāre
Kāṅthe lare sātāsari layalāse kāḍhe bhari
āgabāḍhi pāche guci yānta
Pindhi śāḍi khontā jāli yena mairāya kare cāli
Haraka kaṭākṣa kari cānta

Daraśānta kāṣa pithi kṣaṇo hāse sama dṛṣṭi
cāhi lāje cānta cakṣu mudi
Bhramanta aneka bhāve uruvāve vastra vāve
ucca kuca kumbha have udi
Kaṅkāle kiṅkiṇi bāje caraṇa kamala māje
ratnara nūpura runa jhuna
Hāle ati madhyadeśa Saṃsāra mohinī veśa
eko aṅge nāhi khati khuṇa

“Like burnt gold her body shines unparalleled,
 graceful and developed are her hands and feet,
 her eyes, the petals of the lotus,
 a ravishing smile on her lips,
 repeatedly does she reveal a coquettish manner.
 She plays with a ball, scatters flashes from her eyes,
 she sways this way and that at ease,
 her high chignon loosens, drops her cluster of
parijata,

she manages that with her left hand.
 On her ears hang eardrops, her breasts shake,
 On her neck a gold wreath shines.
 One listens to the tinkling
 that her gold bangles make,
 her breast is beautified by a gold necklace.
 On her neck shakes the seven-rolled chain,
 she sets her steps with grace and ease,
 seeming to step forward she moves backwards,
 putting on her *sari* with some air,
 as if a peacock spreads its fan,
 she casts her glance sideways at Hara.
 She reveals her sides, her back,
 her look as if she would smile,
 looking in bashfulness she shuts her eyes.
 She roams about in various ways.

she makes her clothes float in the breeze
 and the high pitchers of her breast are bared.
 On her waist a girdle jingles.
 sound *run-jhun* jewelled *nupura*,
 between her lotus feet.
 Her middle bends,
 she is in the garb of the world-enchantress,
 not a blemish is on any of her limbs.”

By way of warning there is a sermon on the plight
 of men who are entangled in the web of women. The
 irresistible temptation of women is emphasized in the
 following couplets :

Ghora nārīmāyā sarva māyāte kutsita
Mahā siddha muniro kaṭākṣe hare cita
Darśane kare tapa japa yoga bhāṅga
Jāni jñānīgaṇe kāmīnīra ere saṅga

“Of all the terrible apparitions of the world woman’s
 is the ugliest. A slight side glance of hers captivates
 even the hearts of celebrated sages. Her sight destroys
 prayer, penance and meditation. Knowing this the wise
 keeps away from the company of women.”

It should however, be noted that this was not the
 attitude of Sankaradeva towards women in general ;
 elsewhere he revealed a more appreciative attitude and
 took into account diverse delicate qualities of female
 characer. For example :

Karma samayata toka mantrī hena lekhi
Raṅgara belāta yena tai prāṅga-sakhī
Snehara prastāve tai māṭṭ hena thāna
Sayana belāta tai dāsīra samāna

[*Hariścandra Upākhyāna*]

“In time of work, you offer counsel like a minister. In
 sports you are my dearest mate. In respect of showing

affection you resemble my mother. At bed-time you serve me as a faithful maid."

In the poem Sisulila the various activities of child Krishna and his god-like powers are depicted in sweet and sonorous language. Thus we have a pretty picture of the naughty Krishna as a child :

*Thiyadaṅgā diyā pāche tumi dāmodara
Anartha kariyā phurā govālira ghara
Ānandate samasta govāliṅga āsi
Kṛṣṇara akīrtti Yaśodāta denta hāsi
Ki bhaila tomāra iṭo tanaya durjjana
Kṛṣṇara nimitte āra narahe jīvana
Gāi natu dohante dāmuri mele gai
Grha paśi curi kari khānta dugdha dai
Vānarako khuvāve Govinda kino cāṅḍa
Vānare nakhāi yebe kobāi bhāṅge bhāṅḍa
Dhuki yeve napāve manata nāi tuṣṭi
Śikiyāra parā āne urālata uṭhi*

"Then, after learning walking, O Damodara,
You began making mischief in the houses of
the milkmaids.

The amused milkmaids also came to Yasoda
and lodged laughingly their complaint
against Krishna.

What a wicked son have you given birth to
Because of Krishna, life has become intolerable.
He sets free the calves before the cows are milked.
He would also steal into the house
and consume all the milk and curd.
Govinda is so wicked that he feeds
even monkeys with these.
And when monkeys refuse to eat more,
he destroys the pails.

Putting the pails beyond his reach
on a hanging rope is no safety ;
For he fetches them from the lift
by getting up on the wodden threshing block.”

The poem Rasakrida taken from Book X of the *Bhagavata*, relates to Krishna's Rasa dance with *gopis* in the Arcadian grove on the bank of the Yamuna on a silvery autumnal full-moon night. The poem devotes a large number of verses to scenes from Nature where nature appears to be pulsating with life. In the midst of the Rasa dance Krishna suddenly disappeared and the *gopis* approached the trees and the shrubs on the bank of the Yamuna and entreated them to tell the whereabouts of their beloved. Feelingly does the poet describe scenes from Nature :

Ucca vṛkṣa dekhi sodhe sādari
Ṣuniyo aśvattha vaṭa pākaḍi
Yāhānte dekhiyā Nanda kumāra
Nenta curi kari citta āmāra
He kuruvaka aśoka campā
*Kahiyo kathā karā anukampā****
Ovā tulasi samidhāna diyā
*Tumi Govindara caraṇa priyā****
He jāti yuthi sakhi mālatī
*Kṛṣṇa paraśe ki labhilā gati****
He āma jāma bela bakula
Nāi upakāri tomāra tula
Kṛṣṇara virahe dekho āndhāra
Kovā kaika gaila prāṇa āmāra

“Seeing a tall tree, the beautiful damsel asked :
Hear me, O you banyan tree,
Nanda's son saw me from here,
And stole away my soul.
O you *Kurubaka*, *Asoka* and *Campa* trees,
speak you to me and show compassion.

O you *Tulasi* tree, give me a reply,
 you are the beloved of Govinda's feet.
 O *Jati*, *Yuthi*, and friendly *Malati* creepers,
 Did you attain the supreme way at Krishna's
 touch ?

O *Ama*, *Jama*, *Bela* and *Bakula* trees,
 benefactors like you none else are.
 At Krishna's absence I see darkness all round ;
 Say where has the soul of my life gone ?”

The commotion of the milkmaids of Gokula caused
 by the note of Krishna's flute is very graphically
 described :

Su-svara madhura kari Hari gāilā gīta
Suni kāme utrāvala huyā gopigane
Dileka lavaḍa gīta dhvani nirikṣaṇe
Karṇata kuṇḍala ḍole begate hānṭhite
Cittata dharile Kṛṣṇe cale alakṣite
Kato gopī jāya gāi dohanaka eḍi
Ākhāte thākila dugdha caru saite paḍi
Piyante āchila śīṣu tāhāko nagaṇi
Pati śuśruṣāko eḍi jāya katojanī
Kato gopī āchila svāmīra paraśante
Ādhā bhuñjā huyā kato jāya lavaḍante

“Hari made his sweet voice more melodious still,
 and sang a song.
 Hearing his song, the Gopis were troubled by love.
 And in their unrest they ran in the direction
 of the music.

Earrings swayed from their ears as they ran.
 Krishna captured their souls by stealth and wile.
 Many Gopis left their cows un milked.
 Other left their pails of milk on ovens uncared for.
 Some even forgot their babies on their breasts.

Mucukunda at the contrivance of Krishna. Mucukunda Stuti is a hymn of adoration.

In Naradar Krishna Darsana, (from Book X of the *Bhagavata*) the author wanted to illustrate that Krishna is omniscient. One day Narada went to the female apartments of Krishna's palace at Dvaraka, and found in one room Krishna enjoying the company of his principal wife Rukmini. He then proceeded to the next room where he found Krishna with Laksmi. The sage went to all the 16,008 rooms of the palace and found Krishna in every one of them enjoying separately the company of his 16,008 wives. Vipraputra Anayana (Bringing back of the Brahmana's children) relates that while Krishna was the ruler of Dvaraka, there came one day to his palace a Brahmana with a dead child in his arms. He cried out that in kingdom where Brahmanas had to weep in sorrow the king was not a ksatriya but a mere dancer (*Jahara rajyata soke kande dvijagana, Nuhike ksatriya sito natara laksana*). The Brahmana had nine children, he said, all of whom had died in infancy. Arjuna, who was sitting with Krishna, hurriedly approached the Brahmana and tried to console him. Arjuna promised to the Brahmana that he would see that his next child would not die and swore that if he could not protect the next child of the Brahmana he would burn himself to death. But the tenth child of the Brahmana also died immediately after birth. The Brahmana went to Arjuna and rebuked him for promising to do a thing that he could not perform. Arjuna, however, left the Brahmana and immediately went to Yamapuri, the abode of the dead, in search of the child. He could not find the child there; then in vain he went to different regions. Unsuccessful, he came back to Dvaraka and arranged to burn himself

Another semi-dramatic poem, consisting chiefly of conversation is Damodara Viprakhyana, adapted from Book X of the *Bhagavata*. Damodara, a poor but devout Brahmana could hardly maintain himself and his wife. His wife one day asked Damodara to visit Krishna, who was one of Damodar's friends in school. Damodara hesitated to see his friend who was then in an affluent condition ; but at last he had to yield to the importunity of his wife and started to his friend's house with a little packet of presents of fried rice. Krishna was delighted to see his old school companion and enjoyed heartily the small presents brought by Damodara. The poet here wanted to show how God is pleased even with small offerings given in sincere devotion. In the centre of this small narrative poem, presented in a simple popular tone, stands prominently the character of a poor Brahmana. The poem in beautiful words speaks of a friend's affection and duties.

Lilamala recounts mostly the incidents of Krishna's early life and Vaikuntha Prayana describes the final departure of Krishna. Both are adapted from Book X of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Vaikuntha Prayana or Krishnar Vaikuntha Prayana is the largest poem of *Kirtana* comprising 254 stanzas divided into nineteen sections. It describes the migration of the families of Yadu from Dvaraka to Prabhasa, their indulgences in liquor and merry-making, quarrel and destruction of the Yadus, the passing away of Krishna shot by an arrow of a hunter named Jara and Krishna's message to Arjuna who carried the remaining members of the Yadus to Indraprastha. The poem opens with a discussion between Krishna and Uddhava who was informed by the former of the impending destruction of the Yadu race. Krishna instructed

Uddhava on Bhakti and directed him to set out on a pilgrimage. The last section of the poem ends with a scene where Uddhava gave to Vidura the news of the Yadu-race and Krishna's passing away. The entire poem is dominated by a sad note. Naturally, one would expect *Kirtana* to end with the poem Vaikuntha Prayana, but Sankaradeva incorporated in it Uresavarnana, a poem mainly on the temple of Jagannatha. Materials of the poem are taken from *Brahma Purana*, and it relates to the setting up of the Jagannatha *ksetra* and erection of sacred temples in Orissa by king Indradyumna, in much detail.

Kirtana was the mature products of Sankaradeva's mind; as we have already observed a number of episodes from the *Bhagavata* are presented in it with the definite intention of telling the people in a clear and straightforward style the rudiments of the doctrine of Bhakti, the ethics and moral code for a *bhakta* (devotee). Here we find, a number of stories, first of its kind in our literature charmingly told, combining sermons and prayers couched in a feeling language. But to a modern reader the merits of *Kirtana* do not depend so much upon didactic doctrines, moral sermons or theology but upon splendid expressions, grand descriptive passages, originality of treatment and marvellous rhythmic felicities that run throughout all the poems of the book. As for the secret of its popularity, Sri Jnananath Bora rightly says, "All the sentiments—pleasure and pain, love and separation, anger and forgiveness, are equally blended in *Kirtana*. It affords pleasure to all classes of readers. To children it gives stories and songs for amusement, it delights the young with true poetic beauty and the elderly people find here religious instructions and wisdom."

Kirtana stands as a book of grand verse not only for its religious outlook but also for elevated and noble thoughts that transcend all religions. We find such striking passages of universal appeal as :—

*Manuṣyara āyu śata variṣa saṁkhyāta
Arddheka niṣphala jāya jānibā nidrāta
Viṁśati variṣa āra jāya omolante
Neya daśa variṣa dhanaka upārjjante
Vṛddhakāle jāya śeṣa variṣa viṁśati
Ekó kārya sādhibāka nāhike śakati
Śarāraḱo pīde vyādhi cakṣuye nākale
Āśā pāśe bāndhiyā gṛhata thāki gale*

[Prahlāda Caritra]

“Of the years which are taken to make the span of life, half are wasted in sleep. Twenty years man spends in play, and ten years in accumulating riches. Old age takes his last twenty years, when he is incapable of doing anything. His body is then tormented by disease, his eyes stop functioning, and hope being his last resort, he breaks up, keeping himself to his house.”

Such familiar ideas as :—

*Viṣaya cintāya parama pramatta
phuro mahā mana darpe
Tumi apramatta hele mārā tāka
induraka yena sarpe*

[Mucukunda Stuti]

“Insensible and arrogant

I wander about with thoughts of the world.
You being devoid of arrogance destroy me easily,
just as a serpent kills a rat.”

Such pithy expressions of philosophical import as :—

*Śarāraḱa mai bolo buddhi bhāila hata
Hiyāta harāilā tumi khojo bāhirata*

[Siśulilā]

“My intellect has been clouded
as I call my body ‘I’,
You are within me, and in vain
I search you outside.”

and such noble things as :—

*Brāhmaṇara caṇḍālara nibicāri kula
Dātāta corata yena dr̥ṣṭi eka tula
Nīcata sād̥huta yāra bhaila eka jñāna
Tāhākese paṇḍita bolaya sarvajana*

[Sri Kṛṣṇara Vaikuṇṭha Prayāṇa]

“Him indeed all call a wise man who does not distinguish between the caste of a Brahmana and that of a Candala ; who looks at a donor and a thief with an eye of equality, and who does not differentiate between a debased man and an honest person.”

Also :

*Kukura caṇḍāla garddabharo ātmā Rāma
Jāniyā savāko paḍi karibā praṇāma*

“God is the soul of the dogs, the donkeys and of the outcastes. Knowing this, pay reverence to all living creatures.”

Limitation of space precludes further quoting.

Of his other Kavyas *Harischandra Upakhyana* was composed while Sankara was a student at Mahendra Kandali's school. The materials of the poem were collected mainly from *Markandeya Purana* (*Markandeya puranara kathata pradhana, payare racibo Hariscandra upakhyana*). All through the poem the author has extolled the merits of bhakti.

Another kavya of his younger age is *Rukmini Harana* (Abuduction of Rukmini). *Rukmini Harana* is a charming idyll, the materials of which are said to have been taken from the *Bhagavata*

and *Harivamsa*. In the opening verses, the poet states that he has composed the *kavya* from materials collected from both these texts to make it more palatable just as one mixes milk with honey to make it a sweeter drink. To give the poem a touch of realism, the author adds to the original tale scenes of common domestic experience which transforms the Puranic story into a narrative of popular experience. Rukmini, daughter of Bhisimaka, king of Vidarbha, chooses Krishna for her husband. Her parents also agreed to give her in marriage to Krishna. Rukma, her brother stood in the way and arranged her marriage with Sisupala. Rukmini, in despair, sent messages to Krishna through Vedanidhi, an old boastful, tall-talker Brahmana, to rescue her from Sisupala. Vedanidhi plays in the poem the part of a friend and confidant. Vedanidhi hastened to Dwaraka to fetch Krishna. Krishna accompanied by the Brahmana immediately started for Kundina. Krishna's chariot rolled on with the speed of the wind, swift as a *naraca* arrow, and with uproarious movements like the thunder of destruction. Feeling like losing his senses the poor Brahmana in fear covered his eyes with his palms. His head reeled and reeled and Vedanidhi dropped down senseless on the floor of the chariot. Krishna slowed down, attended to the Brahmana and restored him to his senses. On the eve of the wedding day Krishna arrived at Kundina and as arranged before eloped with Rukmini while she was on her way to the temple of Bhavani. Rukma, and other princes who assembled at the marriage, pursued them in vain. Krishna carried Rukmini to Dwaraka and celebrated the marriage with all pomp and merry-making. This wide theme offers the poet full scope to exercise his powers of realistic descriptions. Domestic discus-

sions about Rukmini's marriage, Krishna's arrival, war with the rival suitors, marriage rites, etc. are elaborately portrayed by the poet. Even the medieval Assamese personal ornaments and costumes are presented in all their artistic designs and colourfulness. Here Sankara described the wedding, doubtless from the models of existing domestic ceremonies, with abundance of popular pictures. The marriage scene has touches both of pleasant humour and pathos. To the wedding came all the gods and the denizens from the three worlds and each of them brought valuable presents befitting his own social dignity and prestige. Siva was, however, put into an amusing situation, as he had nothing to offer. Even his wearing apparels were of tiger-skin, in his hands were only *sula and dambaru*, a bull was all his possession ; his forehead carried the crescent moon ; serpents adorned his body as ornaments, skulls as necklaces and his wallet contained nothing but ashes :

*Save devagaṇe ucargi āche
 Mane mane Hara guṇanta pāche
 Ki dive āve karo kona karmma
 Gāvara vastra siyo vāgha carmma
 Hāte laiṃyā āchaya śūla dambaru
 Ghara bāhire eka guṭi garu
 Sarpara kiṅkinī sarpara hāra
 Sakala gāve sarpa alamkāra
 Śirata āche arddha candrakalā
 Manuṣyara muṇḍe gāthicho mālā
 Bokanḍita āche bhasmara dhūli
 Āka dile haibo laghū samūli*

So, reflecting that a present of any of these articles would only make him an object of ridicule, Siva cleverly disappeared from the assembly.

There are rare flashes of description, realistic characterisation, and unforgettable phrases. We recall such a description of the city of Kundina :

<i>Kuṇḍina nagara</i>	<i>ati manohara</i>	<i>dekhilā śrī Gopāla</i>
<i>Nānā vidha gḥara</i>	<i>ati uccatara</i>	<i>parama cāru caucāla</i>
<i>Kato gḥa āche</i>	<i>sāji śuddha kāce</i>	<i>upare ratnara kāma</i>
<i>Yena śukla giri</i>	<i>āche śarī śārī</i>	<i>dekhibāka anupāma</i>
<i>Vicitra kaṣaṭi</i>	<i>kāṭi śilākuṭi</i>	<i>gḥara bāndhilā kāṇṭhi</i>
<i>Tāte nānā paṭa</i>	<i>ghaṭa naṭa bhaṭa</i>	<i>prakaṭi gaḍhilā hāṭhi</i>
<i>Bāgha ghoṅga siṅgha</i>	<i>nānāvihanṅama</i>	<i>śārī śārī sāji yāche</i>
<i>Aneka putali</i>	<i>āche hāta tuli</i>	<i>aṅgi bhaṅgi kari nāce</i>
<i>Darpaṇa ākāra</i>	<i>sāji dilā bāra</i>	<i>kuṇḍrākṣa dilanta tāta</i>
<i>Suvārṇara ghaṭa</i>	<i>kare phaṭa phaṭa</i>	<i>nīseṣa gḥa upare</i>
<i>Vajrasama drḍha</i>	<i>caupāsara gaḍa</i>	<i>devara durgama ḍare</i>
<i>Āgara candana</i>	<i>vāse sarvakṣaṇa</i>	<i>āmōda karaya gandhe***</i>
<i>Hāta bāta beri</i>	<i>kare nānā kheḍi</i>	<i>nāgarī yata cavāla</i>
<i>Aneka ramaṇī</i>	<i>pindhe kini kini</i>	<i>mukutā hīrā pravāla</i>
<i>Asaṅkhya pukhurī</i>	<i>capa capa kari</i>	<i>cāru jale āche bhari</i>
<i>Cārio kāṣare</i>	<i>bāndhiche bākhare</i>	<i>ghāṭe ghāṭe khāṭa khāri</i>

“Then Gopala sees Kundina, a very lovely city,
 Various houses, so high, extremely well-roofed ;
 Many houses are there looking neat,
 on them decoration of jewels,
 Like white hills row on row, so lovely to the eye ;
 sculptures made of the best of granite are there ;
 On them they carved various designs
 and figures of the elephant,
 they made tigers, lions, various birds, all in rows.
 Many figures are there with raised hands
 and dancing.
 The walls were made like glasses, with windows.
 On all the houses shine golden pitchers.
 All around the city are well-built ramparts.
 The merchants sell wonderful jewels there.
 The atmosphere is redolent of *agar* and sandal.

The children of the city play about
 at the markets and on the roads.
 Many of the women are decked in pearls
 and diamonds.
 There are innumerable tanks full to the brim
 with pleasant water.
 The banks of the tanks are paved with jewels.”

No *kavya* is complete without a description of battle scenes. Our poet fulfilled this requirement also by giving an animated description of the battle between Krishna and other disappointed suitor-kings of Rukmini. The battle scene abounds in heroic sentiments. Bhismaka tells his son Rukma when the latter was defeated by Krishna :

*Uṣha uṣha putra tai era ito marma
 Lāja apamāna kṣatriyara kona dharmā
 Hāriyā jinaya keho jiniyā hārāya
 Sarvakāle saṃsārata kāro nāhi jaya*

“Arise, arise, O son, leave you this humour. A Ksatriya is never swayed by blame or praise. Victors lose, and losers win,—none in this world is ever victorious.”

Balabhadra consoled Rukmini on the defeat of her brother with the following words :—

*Erā mana kaṣṭa śoka nakaribā sakhi
 Kṣetri jāti bhaile hōve hena vyavahārā
 Vivāda lāgile bhāi bhāi cinte mārā
 Dāruṇa kṣartiya jāti henase abodha
 Saṅgrāma lāgile pitāputra kare yuddha*

“O friend, give up sorrow. A Ksatriya always fares like this. In fight a brother may oppose a brother. Ksatriyas are so foolish that in a fight even a son battles against his father.”

Throughout the poem scattered in profusion are the familiar phrases and colloquial compounds gathered from the lips of the people. These idioms which may be said to be 'like real language of men' gave additional freshness to the *kavya* and place it far above conventional compositions. Further, the poet transformed many a commonplace idea into neat and witty maxims that are even to-day quoted as proverbial expressions. We get such familiar maxims as :—

Jokara mukhata dile cuṇa
The leech collects back before lime.
Kāke bharacile apavitra hove daula
Does the temple get desecrated
when the crow commits nuisance over it ?

Candrara āgata najvalaya tārā
A star appears dim before the moon.
Mitraka viṣāda dili śatru pāile lāi
When one falls out with one's friend
one's enemy gets emboldened.

Yateka kukure kāmora mārāya saveo āṭhura nāma
The dogs always bite below the knee.

Balichalan (Deception of Bali) was written while Sankara was at Patbausi. This is in main an adaptation of the well-known episodes of Bali from Book VIII of the *Bhagavata Purana*. The poem is permeated all through with the conception of the doctrine of *Bhakti*, particularly of the *dasya* type, i.e. man's attitude towards God as that of a faithful servant. There is a series of significant sayings which are of great importance as bearing on merits of gifts, hindrances of wealth and riches towards spiritual progress (*Sri pāile pāva tāka parama āpade*), evils of desire, and the merit

of contentment arising out of the control of the senses :—

*Tinio lokata yata āche dhānya dhana
 Yata divya nāri āche sundarī pradhāna
 Yata divya gharabāri vastra alaṅkāra
 Saveo nupūre mana eka lubhiyāra
 Pṛthu Gaya ādi kari rājā aparyyanta
 Arthara tṛṣṇāra keho napāileka anta
 Saptadvīpā pṛthivī karilā adhikāra
 Tathāpi tṛṣṇāra keho napāileka pāra
 Indriyaka dami yīṭo nakare ākrośa
 Si si mahā sukhī yito alpate santoṣa
 Asantuṣṭa prānīra nakhaṅḍe mana dukha
 Trailokyara lakṣmī pāile nāhi tāra sukha
 Yehi pāve tāte mahā tuṣṭa hove mana
 Tevese viprara teja bādhe anukṣaṇa
 Asantoṣe samaste tejake kare ṭhāya
 Yena jala pari agni nirvvaṇaka pāya*

“All the grains and wealth
 that are in the three worlds,
 all the women of beauty,
 all the beautiful houses, clothes and jewels,
 all these do not satiate even one greedy person.
 Kings innumerable like Prithu and Gaya
 could not find the limit to their desire for wealth.
 They conquered the seven-islands of the earth,
 even then they could not cross the barrier of desire,
 The one who controls one’s senses
 and has no craving
 is the one who is really happy
 and contended with a little.
 The unsatisfied person has no end to worries ;
 the riches of the three worlds
 cannot make him happy.

The Brahmana who is satisfied
 with whatever he gets
 finds himself increasing in spiritual power.
 Dissatisfaction sucks all his power
 like water falling on fire and quenching it.”

Sankaradeva did not confine himself to Krishnite materials alone but wrote also on themes from the *Ramayana*. He rendered into Assamese the Uttara Kanda (last canto) of the *Ramayana*. Madhava Kandali's Assamese version of the *Ramayana* existed only in five cantos without the first and the last¹. The Uttara Kanda may, however, be called an independent *Ramayana* as most of the incidents of the epic are narrated in this canto through songs sung by Lava and Kusha in the court of Rama. Unlike, however, his translation of the *Bhagavata*, where the original was faithfully followed as it was considered to be a sacred text, in the Uttara Kanda, the fidelity to the original whether in respect of ideal, character or incident, was not the main aim of the translator. Even the central figure of Rama of Valmiki's epic is not an epic hero but an incarnation of Vishnu.

For in one of the *bhanitas* Sankara says of Rama thus :

Tumi tribhubaṇa pati tumi jagatara gati
Tumisi acintya guṇa ananta śakati
Prakṛtita antara parama tumi tattva
Ādi anta nājāniya tomāra mahattva
Tumi bhāra harā bāre bāre avatari
Duṣṭaka daṇḍiyā mahantaka rakṣā kari
Tumisi Īśvara surāsure kare seva
Antata tumisi thākā nathākaya keva

¹ Madhava Kandali (1400 A.D.) was the earliest translator of the *Ramayana* into Assamese.

“Thou art the Lord of the three worlds,
 and the way of the Universe.
 Thou art the unthinkable virtue, unlimited power.
 Beyond *Prakṛiti* thou art the supreme secret.
 One does not know the beginning
 or the end of Thy glory.
 Thou relievest the burden of the world,
 incarnating repeatedly,
 chastizing the wicked and protecting the good.
 Thou art Isvara, whom gods and demons reverence.
 At the last also thou alone stayest and none else.”

It is evident that Sankaradeva undertook its rendering to serve the fixed purpose of propagating the Bhakti cult. To give it a Vaishnavite appearance *bhanitas* are inserted in each section with passionate religious fervour. Thus, one section concludes with the following sermons :—

<i>Śunā sabhāsada</i>	<i>Rāmāyaṇa pada</i>
<i>pātakara dhūmaketu</i>	
<i>Apāra saṃsāra</i>	<i>sukhe hove pāra</i>
<i>Rāma nāma bāndhi setu</i>	
<i>Duṣṭa kāla sarpe</i>	<i>savāko daṃśile</i>
<i>bhaila śruti hata budhi</i>	
<i>Rāma nāma iṭo</i>	<i>amṛta bināi</i>
<i>nāi nāi mahauṣadhi</i>	
<i>Yateka pātaka</i>	<i>saṃhāribe pāre</i>
<i>Rāmara nāme samprati</i>	
<i>Tateka pāteka</i>	<i>karibe pāpīra</i>
<i>Bāpara nāhike śakati</i>	
<i>Aganika yena</i>	<i>tṛṇe novārāya</i>
<i>pāpara tenaya nāma</i>	
<i>Isi dharma nija</i>	<i>mukuti vānijya</i>
<i>Ḍāki bolā Rāma Rāma</i>	

"Listen, O members of the assembly,
 to the verses of the *Ramayana*.
 These are a terror to sin.
 One crosses the boundless samsara (world)
 with ease,
 if one only makes a bridge of the name of Rama.
 The wicked snake Time has bitten everyone,
 one has lost one's wits,
 Apart from this nectar named Rama
 no medicine is there now.
 So many sins can be destroyed
 by the name of Rama,
 as are beyond the means
 even of the hardest sinner to commit.
 As grass cannot control fire,
 so is the case with sin.
 This is one's own faith, the trade of salvation,
 Cry aloud, Rama, Rama."

Besides, each incident of the epic serves as a convenient peg to hang Vaisnavite sermons upon. For example in the concluding section of *Laksmāna Visarjana* (Desertion of *Laksmāna*) we have the following verses :—

*Śunā sabhāsada save Rāmāyaṇa kathā
 Rāma Lakṣmaṇara hena milila avasthā
 Ito gṛhavāsa sāmānyara kona lekhā
 Svapanara sama nidhi dhana jana dekhā
 Durghora mṛtyuka kiya nākaliya kāche
 Hena jānā antake keśata dhari āche
 Āura aruvanta nāhi kālara hātara
 Parama bāndhava eke Mādhavata para
 Hena jāni diyā Rāma caranata citta
 Karā pāna Rāmanāma parama amṛta
 Viṣaya vilāse nilā ihena janmaka
 Chāira arthe pore yena jāti candanaka*

*Mahāratna maṇi yena sama nāi mūle
 Tāka salāi āni kācamaṇi pindhe gale
 Eke kākamāṃsa siyo āhāra kukurara
 Ati alpe siyò dekhā nuhike vistara
 Tāka mahā pravandha kariyā napāi lāga
 Yadi pāvai āsi tāko āne khòje bhāga
 Sehimate vibhava viṣaya yata sukha
 Tāke ḷāgi hovā kene Kṛṣṇata vimukha*

“Listen, members of the assemblage,
 to the story of the *Ramayana*.
 Even Rama and Lakshmana fell into situation,
 What need to mention the life of ordinary people ?
 Consider as dream all this men and wealth.
 Do not call Death near,
 for know you that he has caught you by the hair.
 No other rescue is there from the clutch of Time,
 no other great friend than the only Madhava.
 Therefore, do you meditate on the feet of Rama,
 Drink the name of Rama, the supreme nectar,
 You will find this to be the conclusion
of the *Vedas*.

It is Rama’s name which gives one salvation.
 Matter and luxury have spoiled this life,
 as one burns white sandal for ashes.
 In value there is no equal to the great jewel :
 but the foolish one changes it for glass beads
 and puts them on his neck.
 The flesh of the crow which is food of the dog,
 Little it is, not large in quantity,
 Even then it is difficult to obtain,
 and if the dog comes upon it others claim a share.
 So ugly and mean are the pleasures of the world,
 Because of them why do you ignore Krishna ?”

As the *Ramayana* is a *kavya* and not a *sastra*, Sankaradeva allowed greater latitude to embellish the poem with free use of invented materials and he availed himself of the innumerable opportunities for descriptions which the story offers. The abiding interest of the poem lies in abundance of folk elements which at places produce comic effect by exaggerations. The dinner scene where the angry sage Durvasa with his hungry disciples were entertained by Rama, though full of domestic realism, is yet humorous through overstatement :

· *Rṣira ākrośa dekhi saṁkita Rāghave*
Annapāna āpuni sājiyā sabāndhave
Āgata jogāila āni aneka yatane
Dekhi Durvāsāra mahā tuṣṭa bhaila mane
Kari paripati pāche śiṣye same ṛṣi
Bhūñjibe lāgilā anna parama hariṣi
Ghana kṣira kṣirisā khāilanta lāge māne
Nadharaya peṭa piṭhāpanā paramāne
Dadhi dugdha ghrta ghole bhailū gaṇḍagola
Ophandīla udara dekhiya yena dhola
Lobhata bhūñjanta tathāpito jāṅṭi jāṅṭi
Novāranta rākhibe mātante āse bānti
Napānte uśāsa ati olamila ghāra
Moi moi peṭa kato tolanta ugāra
Tana tana peṭa kato dhilānta kaṭiṇa
Dui hātata vai dravya dekhi lāge ghiṇa
Khāibe kato napāri karanta hāi phui
Namātanta yācante thākanta thiva hui
Dadhi dugdha pañcāmṛte basāileka gāṅg
Ehi mate ṛṣira bhojana bhaila sāṅg

“At the sage’s greed Raghava became terrified ;
 Himself preparing food and drink
 he laid them before the sage.
 At this Durvasa became much delighted.

Condensed milk and butter
 he ate as much as he could,
 the pastry and rice pudding
 were beyond the capacity of his belly,
 curd, milk, ghee and whey caused a tumult
 and his belly became inflated like a drum.
 Even then did he ate out of greed,
 he could not keep down what he ate,
 it came out as he spoke ;
 he could not breathe, his shoulders hang down,
 repeatedly did he belch,
 his belly became so tight
 that he had to loosen his cloth,
 the eatables stuck to both his hand
 so as to look disgusting ;
 being unable to eat further he became restless,
 he did not respond when more was offered.
 A river of curd, milk and the five-nectars flow ;
 thus did the feast of the sage came to a close.”

The heroes here have lost their original elevated character and been reduced to the status of common men and women of the day. As an instance, Sita is described in her parting scene as a rustic woman. She reproaches Rama in an unrestrained language which at places borders on the vulgar. Sankaradeva had some fondness for elaboration and even in pathetic scenes such as Sita's final departure he seems to have unnecessarily lingered. Sita indulges in profuse weeping, flings a sermon on brotherly affection at her sons Lava and Kusha, hugging them to her neck, and utters a long farewell homage to her husband Rama. As soon as Sita is carried away in a golden chair Rama becomes unconscious and suddenly slips down from the throne.

The entire assembly bursts into tearful lamentations. The scene, on the whole, has taken on a distinct local colour :

<i>Deva ṛṣi save</i>	<i>santāpe kāndanta</i>
<i>dharite citta napāri</i>	
<i>Bhāluka vānara</i>	<i>kānde nirantara</i>
<i>māṭita pari lotāri</i>	
<i>Bharata Lakṣmaṇa</i>	<i>vīra Śatrughna</i>
<i>bhūmita parilā kāndi</i>	
<i>Kausalyā pramukhye</i>	<i>muṭhi hānai hiye</i>
<i>Sitā buli rāva bāndhi</i>	
<i>Sevakinī yata</i>	<i>Sitāra śokata</i>
<i>kānde pari lotāpuṭi</i>	
<i>Pāila svarga kolā</i>	<i>krandanara siṭo</i>
<i>tumbula rolaka uṭi</i>	

“The gods and the sages could not restrain themselves and began to weep out of grief.

The bears and the monkeys wept everywhere rolling on the ground.

Bharata, Laksmana, the hero Satrughna fell to the ground weeping.

Kausalya and others struck their breasts and cried out : Sita, Sita.

All the maids in grief for Sita rolled on the ground and cried.

The uproar of grief and lamentation reached the sky.”

By such descriptions the poet held up before his listeners a pure domestic tragedy full of sorrow, sadness and unrestricted pathos which had an intense appeal to the popular mind. In these descriptions we do not get that calm dignity, intense yet restrained feeling, which pervade the original epic.

Sankaradeva’s literature was, however, meant chiefly to serve practical purposes in the Vaisnavite

movement, and therefore his literature in tone, colour and form, appears predominantly to be religious and, consequently, suffers from certain limitations. Nevertheless, there are magnificent and inspired utterances that have a universal appeal and touch every human heart. In many of such passages philosophy, morals, rules of conduct are given not only to his age but for all ages.

We have already noticed that Nature too has some place in Sankaradeva's writings. In fact, the brilliant descriptions of Nature were largely instrumental in rendering many of his religious verses real gems of lyrical poetry. The poet took rapturous delight in lingering over the description of the beauties of rivers, oceans, groves, forests and mountain scenery. He portrayed them as they presented themselves to his eyes, and did not project his own feelings and sentiments into them. Although not attempting to discover any spiritual message he saw in her glory and manifestation of the creator. Take his famous passages from Divya Upavana in the Haramohana or the Citrakuta in Gajendra Upakhyana. Each one of them exhibits the author's delicate observation of Nature and unfolds a colourful landscape.

Sankaradeva was an erudite scholar in Sanskrit and he drank deep into the Sanskrit literature. Besides, borrowing materials for his kavyas and plays from the *Vedas*, the *Upanisadas*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the various *Puranas* and the *Tantra*-texts, Sankaradeva composed *slokas* and *stotras* even in Sanskrit. Further, he compiled an anthology of Sanskrit verses on Vaisnavite faith and philosophy. The title of the text is *Bhakti Ratnakara*; and it contains near about forty sections relating to diverse topics

on Vaisnavism. The verses of the book were collected from such works as the *Bhagavata Purana*, *Prabodha Candrodaya Nataka*, *Santi Sataka* of the Kasmir poet Sihlana, *Vaisnavananda Lahari* and *Yogasara*.

In literary conventions, modes, figures of speech also Sankaradeva closely adhered to the canons of the Sanskrit poetics and followed the classical traditions. Most of the imageries, expressions, ideas used in his poetry were drawn from the inexhaustible source of Sanskrit poetry ; as for instance the comparison of the loveliness of a body to the flash of lightning (*vijuli reha*) or burnt gold (*tapta suvarna*), the thighs to trunks of an elephant (*kari-kara*), or stems of plantain, the neck to a conch (*kambukantha*), the arms to rounded body of a serpent (*valita bhujanga*), the forearms to lotus stalk (*mrinala danda*), fingers to the petals of *campaka papari*, or sticks of gold (*kanaka salakha*), an eye to a new lotus petal or a *cakovā* bird, the eyebrows to Cupid's bow, the side long glance to Cupid's arrow, face to moon, nose to a sesamum flower, redness of the lips to a *banduli* flower or a ripen *bimba* fruit, the well formed teeth to rows of pearls or seeds of a pomegranate, breasts to *badari* fruits or ample jars, movements to swan's (*Rajahamsa*), elephant's (*gajagati*) or to lion's (*mrigaraja*), voice to cuckoo and hundreds of such stereotyped comparisons. Among various figures of speech alliteration which goes to create impression with different sounds and marvellous melody is seen all through his poetry.

In the following verses, to illustrate how strong is the desire for pleasures of the senses, several forceful illustrations are set down :

Viṣayara duḥkha jāni *tathāpito eko prāṇi*
neḍe dunāi tāke bhuñji mare

Galata bāndhiyā pāghe kātibāka nenta chāge
yena nīlarjjatā āti kare
Aneka bhatsani pāi ucchiṣṭa bhūñjibe yāi
yena ati kukura nirgate

“Worldliness is unhappiness.
 Creatures known this.
 Yet none forsakes it, rather all run after it again.
 Like a goat which behaves disgracefully
 Even when led to the altar for sacrifice,
 roped by the neck
 Or like a shameless dog though uninvited
 and vehemently chid
 come to partake of the remains of a feast.”

Of the figures of sense, similes of various types are a very favourable device and are frequently employed to elaborate an idea. Sometimes series of similes run through a stanza to impress one and the same fact again and again. To suggest Sisupala’s undeserving desire to marry Rukmini, no less than a dozen similes are piled up together :

Moka vihā karibāka āila Śiśupāla
Mora māne teveto jīvana bhaila bhāla
Tāhāra ki mukhe moka vihāibāka pāre
Siṃhara bhāryāka yena śrgāla āhāre
Hāta mele candraka chavāla yena raṅge
Amṛtaka icchā kare cukare kona beṅge
Sehimate āśā Śiśupālara āmāka
Yena jañja bhāgaka bhūñjibe cāve kāka
Māhādāna khoje yena patita brāhmaṇa
Viśiṣṭa svargaka vāñcai brahmavadhi jana
Sehimate āśā Śiśupāla nṛpatira
Tārā mukhe svāmī huibe pāibe Rukmiṇira
Trailokyara nātha mādhavaka eri yāi
Kone Śiśupālaka varibe cakṣu khāi
Siṃha eri śukaraka khoje kona prāñi
Dugdha eri kona jane piye mācho pāni

“(Rukmini says) This Sisupala comes to marry me : my life has taken a better turn indeed ! With what cheek has he come to marry me ? As a fox would feed on the female of the lion, as a baby would snatch at the moon, as the frog from the corner would desire for nectar, so would Sisupala desire me. As the crow would feed on the offerings made at a *yajna*, as the degraded Brahmana would covet great gifts, as the Brahmana-slayer would desire for the high heaven, so would king Sisupala desire me. He talks of being husband to Rukmini. But setting aside Madhava, the Lord of the three worlds, who would shut one’s eyes and choose Sisupala ? What man would ignore the lion and ask for the pig ? Who would ignore milk and drink fish-washing water ?”

He is also rich in other *alamkaras* such as *rupaka*, *utpreksa*, *vyajastuti*, *arthantaranyasa*, *svabhavokti*, etc. Another literary skill which made Sankaradeva’s writings acceptable to the popular mind is the use of proverbs in surprising numbers. These pithy sayings, racy of the soil, are used to illustrate facts of ordinary life, moral precepts and the wisdom of the common man.





SECTION II

HYMNS

In two other branches of Assamese literature Sankaradeva was a pioneer and left his distinctive mark, namely in *Bargit*, devotional song, and *Ankiya-nat*, one-act play. Both were new literary types in Assamese. The popularity of the *Bargits*, the prayer-songs grew rapidly as the Vaisnava code had laid down the singing of prayers as an obligatory daily duty and it was considered an essential part of liturgy. Further, the singing of hymns became a medium of preaching and propaganda. Sankaradeva, therefore, created a system of devotional services, both congregational and private, known as *Prasanga* and *Nama Kirtana*, and also established institutions to train singers (*Gāyan* and *Bāyan*). In the Vaisnava church of Assam, singing is universal even today. These compositions were however, not couched in homely Assamese as the poems of *Kirtana* or the *kavyas*. These were written in an artificial speech called Brajabuli, a mixed Maithili-Assamese language. Such a literary medium was in vogue among the medieval Vaisnavite poets of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It is noteworthy that Sankaradeva composed his first *Bargit* not in Assam but at Vadarikasrama during his first pilgrimage (C 1481 A.D.). We quote below the entire song not only for its historical importance, but

also for its deeper message and authentic sense of form :

Rāga : Dhanaśrī

*Mana meri Rāma caraṇahi lāgu
 Tai dekha nā antaka āgu
 Mana āyu kṣaṇe kṣaṇe tuṭe
 Dekha prāṇa kona dina chuṭe
 Mana kāla ajagare gile
 Jāna tileke maraṇa mile
 Mana niścaya patana kāyā
 Tai Rāma bhaja teji māyā
 Re mana isava viṣaya dhāndhā
 Kene dekhi nadekhasa āndhā
 Mana sukhe pāra kaice ninda
 Tai cetiyā cinta Govinda
 Mana jāniyā Śaṅkare kahe
 Dekha Rāma vine gati nahe*

“Rest my mind, rest on the feet of Rama ;
 Seest thou not the great end approaching ?
 My mind, every moment life is fleeting,
 Beware, any moment it might flee away.
 My mind, the serpent of time is swallowing :
 Knowest thou, how death by inches is advancing ?
 My mind, surely this body would wither away.
 So break through illusion and resort to Rama.
 O mind, thou art blind ;
 This vanity of things : thou seest ;
 Yet nought thou seest.
 Why art thou, slumbering at ease.
 O mind, awake and think of Govinda.
 O mind, Sankara knows it and says,
 Except through Rama, there is no hope.”

It should be noted that Brajabuli, as a language had lesser uses of compound consonants, a preponde-

rance of vowels and alliterative expressions and these phonetic traits may be said to make it a more suitable medium for lyric compositions. In addition to this flexibility, some element of sacredness was associated with this artificial language, as it was traditionally considered to be the language of Vraja (Vrindavana) in which Krishna and the Gopis spoke. This archaic language bearing vocables of fuller feeling-tones was employed to "meet requirements which do not arise in ordinary speech" and it immensely succeeded in interpreting the Vaisnavite atmosphere. Sankradeva was our first great poet to use this artificial language and superb was the use he made of it in his *Baragits* and *Ankiya nats*.

The *Baragits* are far more poetical than the *kavyas*, and more passionate even than the *akhyanas* of *Kirtana*. The growing popularity of music and the requirements of congregational prayers and devotional services made Sankaradeva compose a large number of *Baragits*, the most beautiful prayer-songs in our literature even to-day.

Sankaradeva's *Baragits* are woven with strands of religious experiences, philosophical reflections, secular and ethical broodings, poignant introspection of the self, agony of spirit and saintly humility. Some of them are speculative. They speak of the nature of God, His relation with men, His infinite compassion and grace, the burden of human existence, the way of liberation and so forth. Others are exhortatory, urging man to 'chant the name of Hari', to 'think of Govinda', 'to rest on the feet of Rama', 'to leave the illusory pleasures of the world', etc. Each one of the *Baragits* invariably concludes with a passionate prayer for shelter at the feet of Govinda, and deliverance from this suffering

world. The following hymn in praise of God is an illustrative example :

“Life of the life on earth, self-created,
 Janardana, crusher of Danuja, reliever of suffering,
 source of joy to the virtuous, joy of joys,
 delight to Nanda, roamer in the wilds.
 Distinguished in sports and loveliness,
 outshining the autumnal moon.
 Sleeper on the serpent Sesa,
 auspicious, destroyer of Kesi.
 Clad in golden robes, indestructible,
 Friend to the world, prop of the Universe,
 Madhava, foe to Madhu, sweet to the sight,
 destroyer of Mura.
 The lotus feet of Kesava
 This is desired by Thy servant Sankara.”

Deeply distressed by the fever and fret of life Sankara in some of the psalms expresses a sense of utter weariness in the world of change and sorrow. Thus he bewails :

Rāga : Suhāi

*Śrī Rāma mai ati pāpī pāmara teri bhāvanā nāi
 Janama ciṅṭāmaṇi kahe gayo yaice kāchaka lāi
 Divase viṣaya biyākula niśi śayane goṅṅai
 Mane dhana khuji vimohita teri ārati nāi
 Hṛdaya kamale Hari baiṭhaha cinto caraṇa nā teri
 Karala garala yaca bhojana hāmu amiyā heri
 Parama murukha hāmu Mādhava eko bhakati najānā
 Dāsa dāsa buli tārahu ehu Śaṅkara bhāṇā*

“A dire sinner to Sri Rama,
 Think I not of Him.
 In pursuit of things glasslike,
 My precious life I fritter away.

During the day I pursue worldly pleasures,
 Night I pass fruitlessly in sleep.
 With agitated mind I search for wealth,
 No devotion I feel for Thee.
 Within my lotus-heart resides Hari,
 Yet I meditate not His feet.
 Casting away nectar I take poison.
 Fool as I am, I know no devotion to Madhava.
 Save Thy slave, O Lord,
 Entreats thus Sankara.”

Also in the following prayer :

Rāga : Kedāra

*Pāve pari Hari karoho kātari prāṇa rākhabi mora
 Viṣays viṣadhara viṣe jarājara jīvana nārahe thora
 Athira dhana janā jīvana yauvan
 athira ehū saṃsārā
 Putra parivāra savaṇi asāra
 karabo kāheri sāra
 Kamala-dala-jala citta cañcala
 thira nahe tila eka
 Nāhi bhayo bhava bhoge Hari Hari
 parama pada parateka
 Kahatu Śaṅkara e dukha sāgara
 pāra karā Hṛṣikeśa
 Tuhu gati mati dehu Śrīpati
 tattva pantha upadeśa*

“Falling prostrate at Thy feet, O Lord,
 I make entreaties that thou may preserve my soul.
 My life is poisoned with the venom
 of the serpent of worldliness.
 It cannot stand any more.
 Wealth and family are illusory,
 So are life, youth, and this our world.
 Wife and children are all insubstantial.

Upon whom shall I rely ?
 My soul is as fickle
 As water on floating lotus leaves,
 And never at rest for a moment.
 Drowned in the enjoyment of worldly pleasures,
 I could not touch Thy supreme feet.
 Sankara prays : O Hrisikesa,
 Steer me safe across this sea of sorrows,
 O Sripati, Thou art my mind and destiny.
 Give me the doctrine and the way,
 In the path of spiritual progress.”

Senses are great obstacles in the path of God-realisation and Sankara wants to transcend them through Grace and so he prays :

*Nārāyaṇa carāṇe karaḥo gohāri
 Viṣaya-vilāsa pāśa chāḍi
 Indriya mohi ohi vātovāri
 Nāsā gandha madhura rasa rasanā
 Śravaṇa vividha dhvani dhāya
 Nayanā rūpa paraśa tvaca cāhe
 Kāhe bhajoho pahu pāya
 Kāma krodha mada māna moha meri
 Aisava vairi viśāla
 Śankara kaha pahu tuhu vine nāhi āna
 Sevakapāla Gopāla*

“O Narayana, this prayer do I make at Thy feet :
 Free me from the shackles of earthly pleasures,
 and annihilate my senses.
 My nostrils crave for fragrance,
 and the tongue pines for delicious taste,
 And eyes look for forms and the touch for flesh.
 As such, how can I worship the feet of the Lord ?
 Lust, anger, vanity, pride and passion—
 They are mighty foes.

Sankara says : O Lord, except Gopala
There is none to protect Thy servant
from these foes.”

In this world of illusion, faith, adoration, and devotion to Krishna or Rama can only release human beings from death, destruction, and utter ruin. The following hymns describe Sankara's conception of devotion, spirit of humility and self-surrender :

Rāga : Dhanaśrī

*Pāmaru mana Rāma caraṇe citta dehu
Athira jīvana Rāma Mādhavakeri nāma
maraṇaka sambala lehu
Rajaṇī divasa dūra āvi yāvata
āvata antaka garajī
Kathi tanupāta milata matimāni
Rāma bhajahu sava varajī
Āśā pāśa paraśi mānasapaśu
Paḍali bandī beri beri
Bhava kārāgāra tāraka nāhi āra
vine bhakati-rati teri
Avaniśi sevahū Rāma parama pahu
Rahu hṛdi paṅkaje merā
Kṛṣṇa kiṅkara bhāṇa Rāma parama dhana
maraṇahi saṅga na chorā*

“O sinful mind, cling to the feet of Rama.
Life is unstable.
As weapon against death,
Take the name of Rama-Madhava.
Days, nights and life pass away,
And death approaches with thundering sound.
Think of the body's decay
Forsake everything and seek shelter under Rama.
O animal in man's dress,
in the snare of cravings,

You are a prisoner now.
 From this prison-world none can rescue you,
 Save your own devotion to the Lord.
 Devoutly I serve the great lord Rama ;
 Let Him reside in my heart.
 Rama is my most precious treasure.
 O Lord, leave me not in the grip of death,
 Prays the servant of Krishna.”

The same note of self-surrender has become dominant in the following prayer-offering also :

“Oh you wicked mind of mine,
 Devote yourself to the feet of Rama.
 Life is fickle.
 Let the Name of Madhava
 Be your main stay
 Wherewith to face death.
 The eternal course of night and day
 Brings you nearer to death.
 Anywhere you may be overtaken.
 Knowing this,
 Dedicate yourself to Rama’s name,
 And leave the rest.
 Oh you beast of a mind,
 You are entangled again and again
 In the web of desire.
 Nothing can free you from the prison of earth,
 Save devotion to Hari.
 Worship, then, day and night,
 Rama the supreme Lord.
 Let Rama be enthroned in the lotus of the soul.
 Says the servant of Krishna :
 Rama is my Supreme wealth
 Let me not lose it till death.”

The incomprehensibility of the ways of God and the attitude of humility (*saranapatti*) of a devotee is well illustrated in the following lyric :

“How can we know the Infinite ways of the Lord ?
 Even great devotees like Sanaka and Sanatana,
 Have contemplated on the Creator,
 And got confused.
 Countless worlds come and go
 Through the mere pores of the Lord.
 By incarnating Himself as the Divine Boar,
 And as Narasimha,
 He destroys the burden of the world.
 Sons, daughters, wealth, wife,
 All that we have and behold—
 Are all but illusion.
 Even so, creatures are a part
 Of the Blessed One.
 Why, then, this snare of delusion ?
 Sayeth Sankara,
 Oh Lord, I crave your feet, nothing else.
 Grant me this prayer : That I may cherish Thy
 Feet in heart,
 And chant Thy Hallowed Name.”

The intellect and wisdom cannot qualify one to obtain release from this world unless he possesses true devotion. Sankara, therefore says—

*Soi soi thākura moi yo Hari parakāsā
 Nāma dharata rūpa smarata tākeri hāmu dāsā
 Paṇḍite paḍhe śāstra mātra sāra bhakate liye
 Antara jala phuṭaya kamala madhu madhukare piye
 Yāhe bhakati tāhe mukuti bhakate e tattva jānā
 Yaice vaṇika cintāmaṇika jāniyā guṇa bakhānā
 Kṛṣṇa kiṃkara Śaṅkara kaha bhaja Govindaka pāya
 Sohi paṇḍita sohi maṇḍita yo Hariḡuṇa gāya.*

“He is my Master through whom light of the Lord manifests itself.

I am His servant who recites His name and cherishes his image in heart.

Like the bee that sucks honey from the lotus that blossoms in the bosom of a lake,

The devotee drinks nectar (of the Holy name), while the *pundit* parrots scriptures.

Devotion alone leads to salvation, a devotee should remember this.

As an experienced jeweller

appraises the merits of the peerless jewel,

So Sankara, the servant of Krishna says,

Fall thou down and pray at the feet of Govinda.

He who chants the praises of Hari

Is the real *pundit* and the glorious man.”

The variety of learning and pompous rites and rituals cannot lead to salvation :

The scholar does not see the straightest path,

Nor does the performer of a million sacrifices attain Hari.

Both fall down to earth ever and anon.

All rites and rituals,

All pilgrimages to Gaya and Kasi

Made round the years,

All *yogas* done and rhetoric learnt,

Only cloud the vision.

There is no salvation without Bhakti.

The name of Rama is

The blessedest thing on earth.

That is the highest knowledge.

In the age of Kali,

Hari's name is the Supreme religion.

Even to think of my lot,
 I burn within.
 Avarice and illusion,
 the two tigers are following me.
 Save me, O Thou Infinitely Good !
 I see not the way of escape !
 And what a pity. The more am I entangled,
 The more I lose discrimination.
 Sankara takes refuge at Thy feet
 and entreats Thee !
 Free him from the fetters of *maya*.”

In some of the hymns, we have reference to the episodes of the Indian epics explaining divine grace and glory. In the following *Bargit*, Ravana is depicted as the Supreme Evil of earth of whom men are in constant dread and fear :

Hark, Oh you arch enemy of the gods,
 You, root-cause of destruction

Of the *Raksasas* :

Legions of monkeys in battle array,
 Are marching forward.
 The earth trembles under their feet.
 They have crossed over the ocean.
 Dangerous rocks in hand,
 They rush again and again for battle.
 All Lanka is surrounded.
 Its streets and squares are invaded by them.
 And loud and piercing
 are the battle cries they raise,
 The cries come thick.
 They frighten the inmost soul.
 Oh Raghava, you are majestic and mighty.

You are the Lord.
 Ravana jumps audaciously on you,
 When gods, men, giants, reptiles, hills and all
 Tremble in fear.
 The ten-headed Ravana was a fool
 To have abducted Janaki.
 Sayeth Sankara :
 Oh Ravana, creature of night,
 Fall flat at the foot of Raghupati,
 That is the only salvation for you.

In some *Bargits*, we come across descriptions of child Krishna, his setting out in the morning to tend cattle with the cowboy, companions his repartees in the forest glens to his friends, and return in the evening fatigued, with sleep-ridden eyes. This group of *Bargits* is full of pastoral settings resembling the idyllic scenes of rural Assam. The lovely atmosphere is electrified with notes of humanism, particularly in the idle worries of the mother, Yasoda for the safe return of her son Krishna and with the notes of profound love in the intense desire of the Gopis for reunion with Krishna—notes which touch the spheres.

The following *Bargit* which describes sorrows and lamentations of the Gopis when Krishna departed from Mathura, is cited as an illustration :

Rāga : Kalyāna

Uddhava Vandho! Madhupuri rahala murāru
Kāhe rahaba nāheri ava jivana
vana bhayo bhavana hāmāru
Yāhe viyoga āgi *aṅga tāvaya*
tila eku rahaye nā pāri
Sohi Vraja sūra *dūra gayo Govinda*
dīśa daśa divase āndhāri

*Ghana ghana hānaya madana pañca vāṇa
 Kokila kuhu kuhu lahu meri prāṇa
 Pamkayapāta ahita himabāri
 Madhukara nikara karaya mahāmāri
 Aicana samaye Madhupuri piu prāṇa
 Kṛṣṇa kiṃkara rasa Saṅkara bhāṇa.*

“Benumbed are our senses at separation
 from Madhava.
 Life will soon part with the body’s company.
 The moon, sandal-paste and the breeze of Malaya,
 rain poison on us.
 For we are bereft of our beloved Kesava.
 Time and again Madana shoots his five arrows,
 And the cuckoo kills us with its exciting
 and mellifluous notes.
 Lotus-leaves and cold water turn harmful,
 Bees come in cluster heaping great destruction
 upon us.
 Alas ! even at such a time our beloved,
 our very life, stays at Madhupuri.
 Sankara, the servant of Krishna.
 Knows the depth of such sentiments.”

In the *Bargits* we find Sankaradeva in his exalted moments. Here he exhibited his power of fusing philosophical thought with lyrical fervour. He blended in these song-poems lofty thoughts with splendid rhythmic felicities and artistic sublimities. Numerous are the similes, metaphors, alliterations and other figures of speech which make them delightful and appealing.

Other types of songs are known as *Bhatima*, *Capaya* and *Catiha*. *Bhatimas* are long poems of eulogistic and descriptive character. They mention divine qualities, glorify divine deeds and speak of God’s grace. Later

on *Bhatimas* addressed to Sankaradeva known as *Guru Bhatimas* were also composed. During his pilgrimage at Banaras, Sankaradeva met some disciples of Kabir and was charmed with Kabir's *Cautisa* verses. The *Cautisa* is an exposition of the religious significance of the consonants of the alphabet. Just as in Chaucer's "A.B.C." the verses begin with successive letters of the Latin alphabet, the lines in this form of composition begin with the successive letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. Their reproduction in Assamese resulted in the *Catihās*.





CHAPTER III

ANKIYA NAT AND BHAWANA

[*Drama and Stage*]

The genius of Sankaradeva finds the most natural expression in the sphere of drama. A much-travelled man, he must have been familiar with such dramatic entertainments as Ramlila, Rashlila, Yatra, Kathaka, Yaksagana, Bhagavatam and Bhawai, popular at that time in other parts of India. On the other hand, there were such rudiments of dramatic entertainments in Assam as Deodhani-nac, Putala-nac, and Oja-pali performances. Among these, Oja-pali was extremely popular and it continues till today as a very common entertainment in the rural Assam. The Oja-pali party usually consists of four to five singers, and is divided into two groups, each singing in chorus. The leader is called Oja, and his companions are called Palis. One of the Pali is called Daina-pali, the right hand companion. The leader extemporises or unfolds the story, recites the refrain, and the Palis repeat the refrain by playing on cymbals and keeping with the movements of their feet. In interpreting the verse-narrative, the Oja uses dramatic gestures, expressions, and movements. Occasionally, in the middle of the performance, the Oja pauses and converses with Daina-pali by way of expounding the story in order to give the entertainment the appearance of a dramatic dialogue. Many of the kavyas of Sankaradeva were used in this pre-Vaisnavite medium of dance-recitals. Sankaradeva realized that the appeal of his kavyas are oracular rather

than visual. So with a master-stroke he transformed and elevated this rudimentary play into a kind of drama built on classical concept and grandeur. In doing so, Sankaradeva must have harnessed to full the reminiscences of dramatic entertainments he witnessed during his pilgrimage. His knowledge of Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy has also left its tremendous impact on this new genre of Assamese literature.

Thus Sankaradeva organized a dramatic performance styled as *Cihna-Yatra*, which literally stands for a 'pageant in painted scenes'.¹ From the detailed descriptions available in the biographies, it appears that *Cihna-Yatra* was probably a pantomimic show with a scenic background to emphasise the effect. The use of painted scenery so early as in the fifteenth century is a fact of definite significance for it is like a signpost for the question to what extent drama was developed. This pageant show was developed later into regular plays with music, dance and dialogue styled as Ankiya-Nat. Thus what was merely a slender stream developed into a broad river ; and the Vaisnava saint of Assam was responsible for the greatest turning-point in the history of Assamese drama and stage.

Though this new genre is popularly known as Ankiya Nat, it bears no resemblance to the anka type of Rupakas of Sanskrit. Ankiya Nat is a generic term in Assamese and means dramatic compositions in a single act depicting the articles of Vaisnava faith. It should be borne in mind that Sankaradeva himself called these dramatic compositions *nāt* and *nātaka* after the Sanskrit terminology. Other titles used by the Vaisnava poets for this type of plays are *yātra*, *nrita* and *anka*.

¹ *Cihna* may mean *mudras* gestures.

In technique, these Ankiya Nats follow to a certain extent the texts on Sanskrit dramatic theory, particularly with reference to the use of Sanskrit verses and *nandi* introduction of the role of the Sutradhara, and performance of the preliminaries (*Purba-ranga*). Unlike in Sanskrit plays, the Sutradhara is an integral part of an Ankiya Nat. In Sanskrit dramas, the Sutradhara disappears altogether after the invocation. But it is different with the Assamese plays. Here, the Sutradhara remains all along on the stage. Further, the Sutradhara in an Ankiya drama combines the functions of the producer and a running commentator. He dances with the orchestra, opens the play by reciting the *nandi* verse, introduces the characters, gives them directions, announces their exit and entrance on the stage, fills up lacunae in the action of the play by song, dance and speech, delivers brief discourses on the ethical and spiritual points of the plot. Further, there are no acts or scenes in an Ankiya play, and changes of scenes are either announced by the Sutradhara in his dialogue or by orchestral singing. The Ankiya Nats needed the services of the Sutradhara to perform all these roles to heighten and popularise the effect of the *bhawana*, or performance, as the audience consisted mainly of unlettered villagers who at every stage of the progress of the play required explanations. The role of the Sutradhara is, therefore, very important in an Assamese *bhawana*, and even to-day, he is necessarily a man of no mean talents. He is an actor, a trained musician, and an accomplished dancer. Wherever possible, the most artistic-minded man of the village is chosen as the Sutradhara to guide and conduct the play. He is trained from his childhood in music, dancing and dramatic technique, \

The other noteworthy characteristic of an Ankiya Nat is its essential lyrical nature. In these plays through a plethora of songs and verses the playwrights underline the message of the play with more of passion than of logic. Many situations and incidents are suggested by mere machinery of descriptive verses uttered by the Sutradhara instead of being represented through action and character. Minor incidents, feelings and sentiments are at places given expression to by songs. The dialogue which is introduced mainly to elaborate the lyrical sentiments in prose is very thin, though extremely musical. In these plays, the writer appears more as a poet and composer than a dramatist. Moreover, his play is not a drama in the real sense, but a 'lyrico-dramatic spectacle.'

The songs and verses of the plays bear special characteristics, and they are called *Ankar-git* and *Bhatima*. In some plays, *Bargits*, are also included. Each *Ankiya git* or dramatic song contains a *dhuwa* or refrain, as it bears particular *raga* or melody, *tala* or time measure and *mana* or rhythm. The various melodies used in the plays are : *Ahira*, *Asowari*, *Belowar*, *Bhupali*, *Dhanasri*, *Gauri*, *Gandhara*, *Deva Gandhara*, *Kau*, *Kalyana*, *Kanada*, *Kamoda*, *Kedara*, *Lalita Mallada*, *Maura* or *Mahura*, *Mahura-Dhanasiri*, *Nata*, *Nata-Mallada*, *Puravi*, *Ramagiri*, *Syama*, *Syamagada*, *Sri*, *Sri Gauri*, *Sri Gandhara*, *Sindhura*, *Suhai*, *Tuda*, *Tuda-Bhathiyali* *Tuda-Vasanta*, *Varari* and *Vasanta*. The *Bhatimas* of the plays serve mainly as epilogues and prologues. Some of them are, however, of a panegyric nature.

Like the Sanskrit drama most of the Ankiya plays open with preliminaries prescribed in the orthodox *Natyasastra*, namely, *nandi*, *prarocana* and *prastavana*.

In earlier Assamese plays, there are usually two *nandi* verses with 8 or 12 feet of verse or *carana*; one of this is of benedictory nature and the other suggests the subject-matter of the play. Some of the later plays totally discarded the *nandi* verse in Sanskrit and in its place introduced a benedictory poem in Assamese. In Sanskrit drama, the *nandi* reciter cannot be distinctly known for the general stage direction *nandyante sutradhara* brings the Sutradhara after the *nandi*, from which it is implied that the *nandi* was not recited by the Sutradhara. But in the Ankiya plays, the *nandi* recital is specific function of the Sutradhara.

The *nandi* being over, the Sutradhara announces the subject-matter of the play in a Sanskrit verse. This is invariably accompanied by a long poem in Assamese called *Bhatima*. Then follows the *Prastavana*. The Sutradhara hears a celestial sound. On this point a discussion arises, and as it progresses, the Sutradhara announces the names of the approaching personages. At the end of this discussion the companion or *sangi* retires from the stage.

The Sutradhara apart, there appear two other additional characters in an Assamese play, namely the *duta* and *bahuwa*. They are, however, outside the category of dramatic personnel and they are introduced in actual performances of the play to serve as a herald and to provide comic relief. The *duta* and *bahuwa* appear on the stage to explain the reasons for eventual interruptions in the progress of the play. They also announce the change of scene and the entrance of new characters on the stage. The *bahuwa* has other duties too; besides filling up all the gaps in the narration he is to relieve the monotony and amuse the audience as best as

he can by his skits and jokes which he himself invents, of course, in rigid conformity and traditional practices. He is however, never allowed to interfere with the organic part of the play.

Just as the play begins with a characteristic benediction so it ends with a prayer in Assamese called *mukti-mangal bhatima*, where, the Sutradhara begs forgiveness of God for any omission or commission in the management of the drama. Lastly, he emphasises upon the moral effect of the play, and desires his audience to follow the path of righteousness.

The subject-matter of the Ankiya plays is mostly taken from the *Bhagavata Purana*. The *Ramayana* also provides material for one of Sankaradeva's dramas, namely, *Rama-vijaya*. Although the main stories of the plays were borrowed from the Puranas and epics, and no change was admitted in developing the major incidents and in delineating the principal characters, yet the authors had a free hand in minor details. The playwright was very considerate in his selection of the materials, the incidents, and in the manner of presenting them for creating the desired effect on his audience. Besides, the play being a short one-act one, he had to concentrate his whole attention upon the most important situations, and display them to the best advantage. In a small compass, he had little opportunity to develop situations or depict characters on many aspects; yet he was well aware that mere incidents and narrations, without the essential features of a drama, the characterisation, do not constitute a real name. There were such limitations no doubt, but the dramatist must make the best use of them if he were to succeed. Thus, brevity became the main feature of his play, and with the fewest master-strokes he created

his characters, and flashed them before the audience like figures on the screen.

In Sanskrit dramas, there are some prohibitions regarding portrayal of certain incidents on the stage. According to the canons of Sanskrit dramaturgy it is improper to portray such events as deaths and diseases, the dethronement of a king, the siege of a town, and a battle. It is equally forbidden to depict a marriage or other religious rites or such domestic details as eating, sleeping, bathing, or anointing the body, amorous dalliance, scratching with nails or teeth or such ill-omened things as curses. These directions are, however, not observed in the Ankiya plays. On the contrary, scenes on marriage rites, battle, killing and amorous dalliances are elaborately represented on the stage. The dramatic devices such as *svagatam* or aside, and *apavritam* or whisper are also not known in an Assamese play. The other conventions of unity of time, place and action are however more or less observed after the classical ideal. No dramatic character is allowed to change his inherent nature in an Ankiya Nat.

The characters of these plays are not numerous ; they are confined to a principal few. In portraying the characters, much emphasis is laid on the principal hero and heroine. Other minor characters are drawn in bare outline. Krishna appears to be the principal hero of these plays, and his life is depicted in some plays as a youngman and in the others as a child. The leading female characters of the various plays are Rukmini, Satyabhama, Yasoda and Sita, and they are all treated in the traditional way.

These plays were written to further the cause of Vaisnavism and they therefore mainly aimed at creating

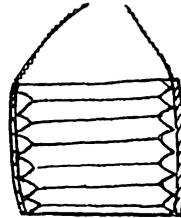
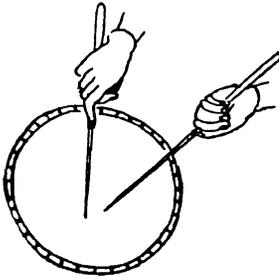
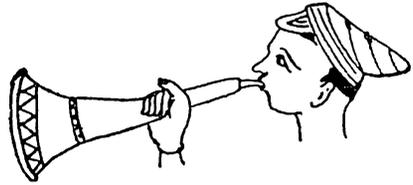
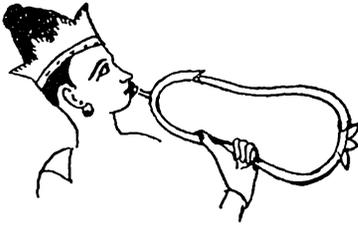
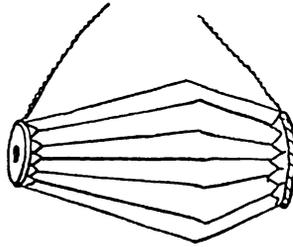
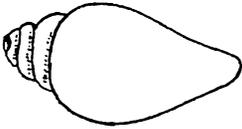
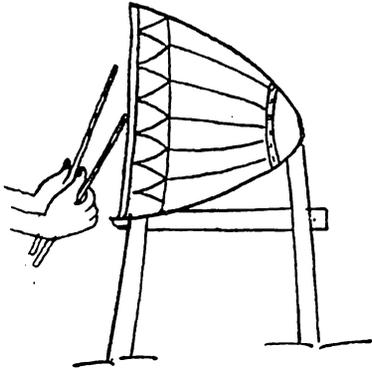
devotional sentiments in the hearts of the audience. A complete effect is attained in arousing a sense of devotion not only by narration and characterisation but also through song, dance and dialogue. In keeping this ideal in view, the dramatists had employed in their plays sentiments which have direct bearings on devotion. The dominant sentiments of Sankaradeva's plays are love, heroic and filial. There is an undercurrent of minor sentiments which have been skilfully displayed to produce one single result.

The prose of Sankaradeva's dramas and of those of the succeeding Vaisnava dramatists is an artificial diction ; it is mixed with Maithili. It is difficult to guess why Sankaradeva should have chosen this mixed language as a medium for his dramas. He was very well-versed in Sanskrit and wrote books in that language and had no doubt previously come across the classical Sanskrit drama. In spirit, he was a classicist ; all his plays are cast in the mould of the ancient classical dramas. Before setting out on his second pilgrimage, Sankaradeva had written books in Assamese in melodious verse. His sudden departure into this mixed language is almost an enigma. Is it because he thought it was more easily understood than Sanskrit ? Assamese would have served his purpose better. Or was it because it had in it both the elements of dignity and general intelligibility ? Here also he was influenced by the classical tradition. In Sanskrit plays, it was customary for the chief actors to speak in Sanskrit, and the minor and female characters in Prakrit. Sankaradeva did a great thing, he followed the middle course ; the whole of his drama was given in a mixed language—Maithili-mixed Assamese, whereby the dignity of his characters was preserved.

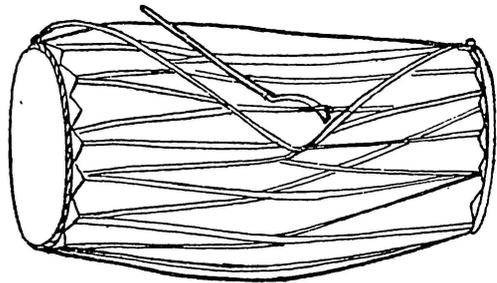
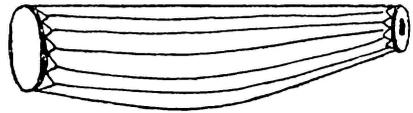
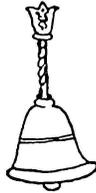
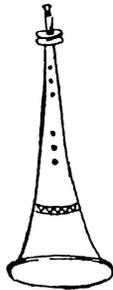
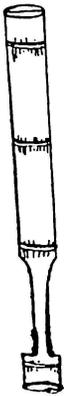
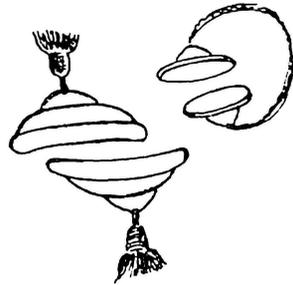
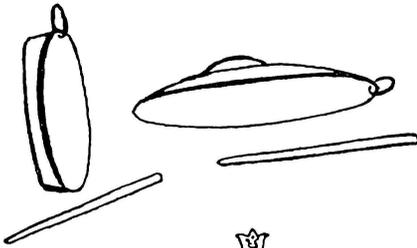
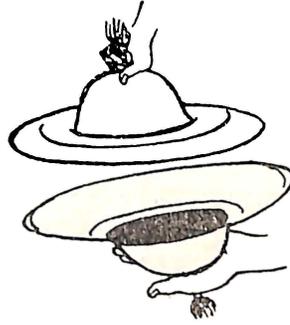
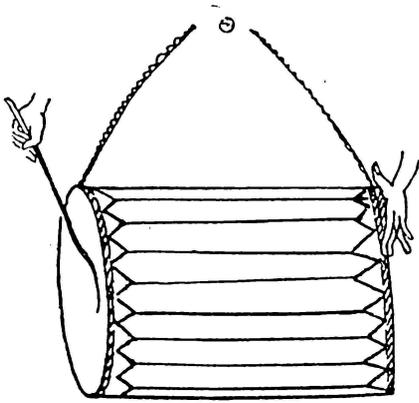
During the mediaeval time, a common language was formed at Mithila, the great centre of this neo-Vaisnavism. Maithili, the language of Mithila soon became the language of a definite literature. Through his emotional and lyrical songs, Vidyapati became the foremost of these Vaisnava poets, and a true exponent of the cult, made the language an eminently suitable and exclusive vehicle of expression for the Vaisnava poets of his time. Soon after a host of eminent poets, scholars, preachers from different parts of India thronged round him. They came from Nepal and from far-off Tibet; Kamarupa was not behind. Enough literary and historical evidences remain to show that scholars from Kamarupa also visited Mithila or Bihar and learnt the language. In a sense, the whole spirit of the new revival became embodied in Vidyapati. Back home, these scholars began to compose songs in imitation of Vidyapati and in their mother-tongue, but it was profusely mixed up with the Maithili vocabularies. The process led to the growth of a new dialect, namely the *Brajabuli*, the speech of Vraja, commonly used in the writings of the Vaisnava poets of Assam and Bengal. Sankaradeva was possibly influenced and his witnessing some of the plays of the Maithili poets, for instance, the *Parijat Haran* of Umapati, when he was in Bihar in the heyday of Vidyapati's fame.

The plays of Sankaradeva are interspersed with beautiful Sanskrit verses composed in diverse metres. Each sloka introduces in an effective style a particular scene or unfolds the subject-matter of an incident of the play. These slokas are remarkable for their sweetness and charm and they may be regarded as the cream of the play.

The most striking feature in an Assamese *bhawana*



MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS.



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lies in the co-ordination and harmony of the four elements,—song, rhythmic representation by dance, melody emanating from appropriate instruments, and dialogue. We have already referred to the lyrical nature of the Ankiya Nat, which abounds in songs and verses of varied forms. In an Assamese play, *bhawana*, all the characters move rhythmically from beginning to end, in the form of dancing with appropriate steps, gestures and *abhinaya* postures. In short, the whole narration of the story progresses through dances, and dancing is considered one of the best arts for awakening feeling. It may be said that the Assamese dramatic performance is mostly a play consisting mainly of the movements of the limbs, rhythm forming an essential part.

In this dance-drama, the Sutradhara plays the *role* of the main dancer. After the recitation of the *nandi*, the Sutradhara interprets the story and sentiments embodied in the sloka by proper dance. This is done by the Sutradhara all through the play. The major three dance-forms of an Ankiya *bhawana* are *Sutradhara-nac* (dance form of Sutradhara), *Krishna-nac* (dance form of Krishna) and *Gopi-nac* (dance form of the milk maids). Other forms of dances are *Rasa-nac*, *Natuwa* or *Cali-nac*; all are more or less adopted from classical texts on dancing.

Before the recital of the *nandi* verse, an Assamese *bhawana* displays a prolonged series of dances by the *Gayan-Bayan* party with the Sutradhara as its leader. This is called *dhemali* or *ranga*. It consists of singing and dancing of invocative and devotional nature by the orchestra or *Gayan-Bayan* with accompaniment, mainly of *khol* (drum) and *tala* (cymbal). The essential aim of these preliminary dances known as *sarudhemali*, *bara-*

dhemali, *deva-dhemali*, *ghosha-dhemali*, is to secure the favour of God for the play to be presented. Sometimes, these preliminaries continue unceasingly for several hours before the actual performance of the play.

The *dhemali* or musical prelude very much resembles the *purvaranga*, the preliminaries mentioned in the *Natyasastra* and like the Sanskrit plays it does not form a part of the drama proper. According to Bharata, the *purvaranga* has twenty different constituent elements of which nine are performed behind the curtain and the rest on the stage. In later dramatic practice, this elaborate procedure was much curtailed. This so happened in the Assamese performances also as known from the occurrence of an expression *alam ativistarena* in Ankiya Nat, after the recitation of the *nandi*. At the end of the performance, the instrumental music and dance are repeated. The end of an incident in the play is also marked by the playing of the orchestral music, and dance of the Sutradhara, that serve as a welcome relief.

As the Ankiya Nats were written more with a religious motive than for secular enjoyment, they were staged in the village Namghar, the prayer-hall on occasions like *Janmastami*, *Nandotsava*, *Dol-yatra*, *Rasapurnima* and on saints' days. Later on, they came to be staged on festive occasions, as on full-moon nights, during seed time and harvest; in fact whenever the villagers were free from agricultural work. Sometimes special houses and temporary sheds or *rabhas* are constructed for such kind of dramatic performance. Madhavadeva is said to have set up at Barpeta a big hall called *barghara* or *Rangiyal-ghara* to stage his plays *Bhojana-vihara* and *Dadhi-mathana*.

The Namghar is a two-roofed thatched structure generally measuring more than fifty in length and is

rectangular in shape (like the *vikrista* type of play-house mentioned in the *Natyasastra*). Close to it, on one end is built a small house called the *manikut*, (*garbhagriha* of a Hindu temple) where an image or a copy of religious scripture is kept upon a *singhasana* or a wooden throne. Except the privileged few others are not allowed inside the *manikut*. The Namghar consists of two wings. The side near the *manikut* is reserved for the Adhikar, the pontiff, who usually presides over the performance, and for the Brahmans and the other for the actors. The side close to the entrance, forms the general auditorium (*ranga mandapa*) where audience sit on mats or on bare ground. Of the two rows of pillars, in the middle of the hall, seats near some are reserved for distinguished visitors. About two thirds of the space between the rows of pillars make the stage or *rangabhumi*, and it has no raised platform. The orchestra and the actors sit surrounding the space meant for the stage. There is no other special arrangement for the stage than an *ar-kapor* (*Pati* or *Apati* of Sanskrit play), a white curtain which is used when the principal actors come out from the *Cho-ghara* (Skt. *Chadma griha*), or green room, situated near the Namghar. All the actors do not appear on the stage at the same time ; they wait in the *Cho-ghara* till their presence on the stage is announced by the Sutradhara. Sometimes after playing their parts in a particular scene they do not leave the stage but sit with the orchestra awaiting their next appearance.

The general term for actors in Assamese is *bhawariya* (from Skt. *bhavata*), i.e. one who produces *bhava* or emotion in the mind of the audience. Those who play the dance-role are called *narataka*, *natuwa* or *nata* (as they represent the action of others). Those

who supply the orchestra are called *Gayan* or singers and *Bayan* or instrumental musicians.

At that time, as now, there were no professional actors; they were recruited from the villagers. Assamese acting is thus the work of amateurs. The roles of the principal characters of Krishna and Rama and their consorts are played by some handsome youngmen specially of the higher castes, as they in their dramatic role have to receive obeisance of the other actors and of the audience. These actors are supposed to keep a fast before the *bhawana* is presented. Female roles are performed generally by teen-aged youths having a feminine appearance.

Unlike, however, the earlier Sanskrit theatre, the reputation of actors of an Assamese *bhawana* was never low nor dishonourable. Even men of erudition, great artistic attainments and of high social, religious, and political status play roles in an Assamese *bhawana* without loss of prestige and honour.

The actors have special sets of dresses. These are preserved in the house of the village *Khanikar*, a painter and maker of wooden and earthen images by profession. His service are indispensable to the actors. He makes the image of God for worship, prepares the *cho* (effigies) and *mukha* (masks), makes arrangement for necessary costumes required in different performances, constructs the weapons of battle, such as sword, shield, bow and arrow, discus, club, etc., helps in the general make-up of the actors in the green-room and has to provide *ariya* and *mata*, that is, the torches, when the performance takes place at night. The *khanikar* or the maker of the masks is a man of many attainments, and his services are used mainly on the pre-requisites outside the stage. He has derived his inspira-

tion and perfected his skill in the arts from an accumulated fund of hereditary knowledge. He has not only imagination and ability required to make life-size grotesque and fantastic masks, but has also to execute them properly, a faithful knowledge of the science of human physiognomy, the nature of the animal world, and above all a full acquaintance with the dramatic requirements.

Besides masks, the dress and appearance of the characters are very carefully made both as regards to design and colour. The Sutradhara wears a *ghuri* or flowing skirt with broad lace-button and flowing to the ankle ; a *phatau* or a vest with or without sleeves and a colourful *karadhani* or waist-band. He ties a particular type of turban, *pag*, on his head. The *Gayan-Bayan* troupe have their costume like the Sutradhara but of simple designs and homely materials. The other male characters put on *dhuti* coming down to the knee and a waist-coat. These may be colourful and embroidered according to the rank of the roles who wear them. The costumes for women roles are carefully chosen although their main dress consists of *mekhela*, *riha* and *chadar*. They wear ornaments in profusion, of course, of a tinsel nature.

The actors use paints for their make-up, befitting their roles. The conspicuous paints are generally prepared by mixing *hengul*, cinnabar, and *haital*, yellow-orpiment. The different colours whether used singly or in combination have traditional significance, for example, Krishna, with his long head-dress called *kiriti* is painted in *syama*, blue-black, a Brahman or mendicant in white, a violent and brutal man in red, the devils in black.

Effigies and masks were probably in use in Assam,



MASK

specially in popular dancing, prior to the introduction of the dramas by Sankaradeva. We have a reference to that effect in the first show namely, *Cihnayatra*, produced by Sankaradeva and his companions, where mask was worn by Garuda, the vehicle of Visnu. The variety of masks that are used in Assamese *bhawana*, may be classified into three types, (i) those representing grotesque forms or hideous persons, such as Ravana, the king of the *Raksasas*; Kumbhakarna, his brother; Yama, the god of death; Hanuman, the lord of the monkeys; (ii) secondly, the different animals *Garuda*, *Kaliya*-serpent, boar, monkeys, *Jatayu*-bird and such actors; (iii) lastly, the comic forms of the buffoons and the jesters.

Masks that cover the head and the face are generally in use. But in many performances, elaborate life-size effigies are indispensable, particularly in *Ravana-badh*, *Kaliya-daman*, and in *Syamanta-haran*. In *Ravana-badh bhawana*, a life-size mask with ten heads and as many as hundred hands is worn by Ravana; Kumbhakarna and Hanumana have also respective life-size masks. In *Kaliya-daman* and in *Syamanta-haran* life-size masks are worn by Kaliya serpent and by Jambubanta, the bear, with whom Krishna fought to rescue the gem *syamanta*.

To make them light in weight and make movements easy with them on, life-size or huge masks are made out of bamboo splinter-bars and cloth. The buffoons wear small masks prepared from clay, cloth, rough paper and bark of trees; bark of plaintain tree is also used to serve temporary purpose. Head-dress and upper masks, i.e. masks for head and face, are carved out of wood and of hard bark-sheet.

In most cases, the time of performance of *bhawana*

is in the evening and it continues all through night. Sometime, it starts in the afternoon and then goes on till late at night. The presentation of smaller plays such as Madhavadeva's *Cordhara*, *Pimpara Gucuwa* take shorter duration and ends before nightfall. No play is, however, presented in early hours of the morning. Further, *bhawanas* are mostly presented during the winter months beginning from *Magha* (mid-January) to *Vaisakha* (mid-April), i.e. after the harvesting and before the commencement of ploughing season, a period when the villagers are practically free from work in the fields. On occasions, several villages assemble together and present different plays both day and night continuously, for several days. They are called *Bara-kheliya bhawanas*, i.e. *bhawanas* performed by several *khels* or guilds.

The emancipation of drama from its exclusive religious purpose had begun at a latter stage. But the process was gradual. When the plays were performed on festive occasions, much of their former religious austerity was gone from the performance. Their main purpose was then recreative rather than religious. Nevertheless, the element of religious sentiment was not altogether erased out. At the hands of the Ahom rulers the dramatic art received a great impetus; from the Namghars the performances were taken out to the royal court, to serve the purpose of courtly enjoyment. In the royal court, dramas were performed on the occasion of a reception of a foreign king, celebration of victory or royal marriage. Thus in the palace it had come to be looked upon as a state function.

The *Buranjis*, the chronicles of the period, contain many episodes referring to *bhawanas* or dramatic performances, that were held on distinguished occasions in the royal palace. Thus *Ravana-badh bhawana* was

held on the occasion of the visit of the Rajas of Cachar and Manipur to the Ahom court, during the time of king Rajeswar Singha (1751—69 A.D.), where the son of Kirti Chandra Barbarua served as master of the revels with a party of 700 actors and musicians ; *Padmavati-haran bhawana* performed before Gaurinath Singha (1780-95 A.D.) by the son of Na-gosain ; *Rukmini-haran Bhawana* before Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1810 A.D.) on the lines of the Ankiya drama, accompanied by the exhibition of the image of a black serpent, a bear and a pair of elephants ; *Akruragaman bhawana* before the same king, where no comic interludes were provided and the parts were not properly acted.

It has been seen that the Sankaradeva's Bhakti movement greatly contributed to the growth and development of art and literature in Assam. *Bhawana*, the religious spectacle, was one of its main off-shoots, and it grew up in the wake of the spritual tradition, and the particular sentiment and temperament of the Assamese people. Unlike the Sanskrit play which demanded a cultivated, critical and experienced audience, and which did not admit the ignorant men, heretics, and those belonging to the lower strata of society, the Assamese *bhawana* is a type by itself, and entirely a popular representation that breaks all social barriers and not only provides enjoyment to the village community with occasional recreation and diversion, but also acquaints them with the episodes from the epics and the *Puranas*. Thus in an age, when literacy was confined to the privileged, and learning was essentially aristocratic, the *bhawana* served as a most powerful agency for disseminating religious and ethical ideas to the masses as it is in itself the greatest achievement of Sankardeva's dramatic representation.

In conclusion, it may be said that Sankaradeva's writings have been for the last five centuries a source of delight, inspiration, consolation and wisdom to the Assamese people. Sankaradeva's thoughts and expressions have so pervaded our national life and literature that it is impossible, so long we speak the Assamese language, to escape his influence. In his own age Sankaradeva was acclaimed as a master poet, and his compositions became the touchstone and criterion of poetic excellence during the succeeding generations. We honour him for greatly developing the resources of the Assamese language, for widening the imaginative range of Assamese literature and for raising it to classical elegance and richness by imparting into it what is good and beautiful in Sanskrit. In the significant expression of Madhavadeva, we may say that "formerly the stream of love-nectar flowed only within the confines of Heaven, until Sankara came and breached the embankments; and lo now it flows tumultuous through all the world."

Despite a change of outlook, shifting of ideals and birth of new literary forms, Sankaradeva's literature has come to stay with us as a standard and measure of great poetry. Even today his Ankiya Nats are acted, Bargits are sung and kavyas are read with more enthusiasm. We treasure them as a part of our national, culture and spiritual heritage.





CHAPTER IV PHILOSOPHY

Sankaradeva was not a philosopher, nor did he endeavour to evolve a new philosophy. Nevertheless, his literary works are pointers to the fact that he was steeped in the lore of Hindu philosophy. His mind was drunken deep in the text of the *Bhagavata Purana* as well as the commentary rendered by Sridhara Swami. Being familiar with the systems of philosophy, he gave admirable expressions of his convictions in terms of art. When we withdraw our attention from the artistic qualities of his works, we observe the bare bones of thought consistent to the last degree. The philosophical basis of his religion, historically speaking, is the culmination of the Bhakti movement of Northern India augmented by Ramananda, and of Southern India. Like Ramanuja, Sankaradeva also holds that God is the central Reality of soul and matter and neither can exist without Him. They exist in Him and are inseparable. In *Kirtan-Ghosha*, he writes :

*Tumi Paramātmā jagatara Īśa ek
Eko bastu nāhike tomata byatirek*

Thou art the Supreme self,
the only Lord of the Universe,
There is no other thing except Thee.
and,

*Kṛiṣṇara caraṇa cintiveka hṛdayata
Āsanta Īśvara Hari samasta bhutata*

Think of Krishna's feet in thine heart,
Knowest thou that God is in the hearts of all.

On the metaphysical plane, Sankaradeva holds a non-dualistic standpoint, unlike many of his Vaisnava counter-parts in the rest of India. This explains the absence of dual-images in his religion such as Radha-Krishna of Caitanya, Gopi-Krishna of Vallabhacharyya, Rukmini-Krishna of Namadeva and Sita-Ram of Ramananda. He gives an unambiguous expression of this faith :

*Prakṛti Puruṣa duiro niyantā Mādhava
Samastare ātmā Hari parama bāndhava*

Madhava is the guide of both Prakriti (Matter)
and Purusha (Mind) ;
Hari is the most faithful friend of all.

Sankaradeva accepts as ultimate three kinds of substance, matter (*acit*), soul (*cit*) and God (*Isvara*). According to him, the subtle *jivas* and the subtle material powers of the universe emanate from Paramatman, from whom both the conscious and the unconscious parts of the universe sprung forth. So he describes the noumenal self in this :

“Atman is immutable and immortal ; it was neither born in the past nor in the present. Birth and death are the characteristic feature of the body and out of the body a fresh body emerges. Though associated with the body, Atman is yet distinct from the body as fire from the fuel it burns. Just as the sky limited within a jar merges with the unlimited sky with the breakage of the jar, the embodied self in a similar way merges with unlimited Brahman after the destruction of the body. Manas (Mind) which determines the quality

and activity of the body is a product of maya and owing to ignorance created by the latter the embodied self associates itself with the activities of the body. A lamp is supposed to give light so long there is contact between the wick, oil and fire ; similarly the noumenal self goes by the name Jiva and suffers pain and miseries of the world so long as it is associated with the body, mind and senses. But know it for certain that the wordly existence really concerns the body and the mind and not the self. Though the fire of the lamp apparently vanishes with the cessation of its contact with the wick and oil, yet it cannot be said that fire so long visible is altogether perished. Fire in the shape of great effulgence (*Mayajyoti*) can never perish, though it may not be apparently visible. Do not in any way doubt the teaching : Though associated with the body yet I am identical or the same with it : I am verily Paramatma. I am Brahman and Brahman is I."

In the cosmic pattern of Sankaradeva, though Jivatma emanates from Paramatma, both are not conceived as identical and co-extensive. They have their independent entities. This subtle difference between the two is explained thus :

"He is the Lord (Isa), under whose control is maya ; it is the individual Jiva that is under the suppression of maya. (The former is) ever attended with supreme bliss, (while the other is) attended with great afflictions. Isvara is in the embrace of delight giving intelligence (*hladini samvid*), is eternal, conscious and blissful (*sac-cid-ananda*) and the individual is crushed under dire nescience (*avidya*) and is the repository of mass of afflictions."

Inspite of their independent existence, Jivatma and Paramatma are interrelated. In the process of

unfolding the Brahman, maya shrouds the happiness and joy that are inherent in the real nature of jivatma. Therefore, the longing of Jiva for Brahman is often shifted through the agency of maya. Sankaradeva prescribes a mode by which jivatma can purify itself. This mode is constant meditation of the name of God. He says :

“He who takes to the name of Madhava and meditates on it finds all his three needs fulfilled at the same time. First he finds a seizing love, the sign of devotion, then an indifference to his household and his body, an appreciation grows of the image of Krishna, the object of love. These three assets come to one at a time, as if one finds food when one is extremely hungry, and finds a fulfilment of one’s three needs at each morsel : one is pleased, one’s body is restored, and hunger itself disappears.”

This naturally leads to the concept of ideal meditation, which has been expressed by Sankaradeva in terms of a symbol throughout his works. Uddhava, the attendant-disciple of Krishna is the symbol of jivatma with its longing to merge in the resplendent glory of Paramatma. According to Sankaradeva, through the constant meditation after the pattern of Uddhava, jiva can be assured of its liberation from the bondage of birth. However, here Sankaradeva seems to stumble over the slippery ground of abstruse philosophy. It seems he had an opaque notion of mukti. At some places, he maintains that self identifies itself with the supreme soul and at some other places he maintains that self retains a distinct entity of its own, which is not consistent with his total view of the universe and God.

Sankaradevā propagated his new religion at a time,

when ritualism was gaining ground with occasional intrusions of ultra-religious animism and occultism. In order to do away with the mushroom growth of gods, he was logically proceeding against the theological basis of polytheism. He emphasised the unity of essential Godhead. In the cosmology of Sankaradeva, God is the absolute reality. He is the material cause as well as the efficient cause of the universe. He is endowed with all auspicious and excellent attributes which are unsurpassable. Sankaradeva considers the Absolute Brahman as Narayana, the only object of adoration. In *Kirtana* he states—

*Prathame praṇāmo Brahmarupī sanātana
Sarva avatārar kāraṇa Nārāyaṇa.*

“At the outset, I bow down to Narayana, the Eternal One, in the form of Brahma, the cause of all incarnations.”

God is infinite and indeterminate. He is the primus of the universe, the universe has its being in Him, and returns unto Him. He is the cause and final solace of the universe. He is without a beginning, all purity, all knowledge, all delight and everlasting. In *Kalidaman*, Sankaradeva says :—

“Salutation to the Narayana of the immeasurable power : thou art cause of the causes, yet no cause at all. Thou hast no beginning, end or interruption. All blissful God, I bow down to Thee. Salutation to Thee God ; whose magnanimity is unknowable. Spreading over the world Thou art upholding it. Thou art watching and protecting all living beings. From thee creation, preservation and destruction.”

Sankaradeva has thus maintained that God is the

first and the final cause of creation. The change of the body from subtle to gross state does not affect the nature of God, because it is His body that undergoes modification, while as the soul of the cosmic body He remains unchanged. Thus the self determining Isvara is the Absolute of Sankaradeva. The following may be taken to indicate Sankaradeva's conception of Godhead—

“I bow down to Thee, Oh Madhava, Thou art the lawgiver to him who creates the laws. Thou art the parent of the world. Thou art the mind of the world. Thou art the destiny of the world.

Thou art the creator, Thou art the cause, static and dynamic, Thou art all, like as gold is unto ornaments of gold.

Thou art plants and trees, Thou art birds and beasts, Thou art gods and non-gods.

The ignorant think of Thee as different for want of (illumination).

Infatuated every moment with Thy illusion, none knowest Thee for the soul. Thou residest in the heart of all beings : but people search Thee without, not understanding Thee.

Thou art the only truth, all else is false. The wise know this and contemplate Thee in their hearts.

I crave not for enjoyment of beauty, I long not for salvation, only let there be devotion at Thy feet.”

Sankaradeva preached a religion of supreme surrender to One, Vasudeva Krishna, also known as Vishnu, Narayana, Rama, Hari and therefore, his creed is known as *Ekasaraniya nama dharma*. He upheld the philosophy of oneness in all. He comprehended one God, Krishna, one service, the service of Krishna, the supreme Brahma. The worship of other gods and

goddesses is strictly prohibited. This has been made clear by Krishna in the *Bhakti-pradīpa* :

*Eka citte tumi moka mātra karā sevā,
Pariharā durate yateka āna devā.
Huyoka śaraṇāpanna eka mote mātra,
Moke bhajā huibā teve mukutira pātra.
Nāma nuṣunibā tumi āna devatāra,
Yena mate nuhibe bhakati vyabhicāra.*

“Devote yourself to me with a single mind,
Forsake from a distance all other gods.
Surrender yourself to me alone,
Devote to me, then will you be fit for salvation.
Never listen to names of other gods,
that your devotion may remain unsullied.”

Sankaradeva admitted the conception of Krishna, the Parabrahma, based on the Dasama of the *Bhagavata* :

*Styavritaṃ Satyaparaṃ trisatyasya yōniṃ nihitaṇṇa satya
Satyasya satyamta satyanetraṃ satyātmakaṃ tvāṃ saraṇam
prapanna.*

Sankaradeva believed in incarnations (*avataras*) of Godhead because his unmanifested and unqualified God may be brought to show manifestations by virtue of devotion. Elsewhere he says :—

*Nāhi janma tomār tathāpi janma dharā
Sehi janme jivar janama dūr karā.*

“Thou hast no birth, yet Thou doest adopt them ;
and thereby, Thou removeth the birth of creature.”

In the *Nama-ghosha*, his beloved disciple Madhava-deva speaks of the following ten *avataras* :

*Matsya Kūrma Narasimha
Vāmana Paraśurāma*

*Halirāma Varōha Śrīrāma
Buddha Kalki nāme daśa
Ākṛiti dharicā Kṛṣṇa
Taju pāve karaho praṇāma*

Krishna was regarded by Sankaradeva as the highest, best and the most ideal divinity. His appearance in the form of Vishnu-Narayana in the celestial Vaikuntha with His liberated devotees and attendants is the supreme manifestation.

This picture of God with his liberated devotees leads to his concept of *moksa*. It is the goal which every pious soul pines for. Since bondage is due to the attachment of worldly objects, liberation is possible through the realization of God. This is produced in various ways, viz., : experience of the sorrows of worldly existence, renunciation of all desires of enjoyment of pleasures, whether in this world or in some heavenly world, self-control and self-discipline, association of good teacher, respectful attachment to God, love for one's equals, complete resignation to God, etc.

Sankaradeva is of the view that liberation can be attained even while alive, which is called *Jivan-mukti*. True knowledge destroys all merit and demerit, and so in the *Jivan-mukti* man holds his body only through the will of God. The effect of obligatory duties is not destroyed, except in so far as it produces meritorious results and helps the rise of true knowledge ; when the true knowledge dawns it does not further show itself. That is why it is regarded as the best means. In *Kirtan* he says :

“He who sees Vishnu in the entire world gets salvation forthwith even while alive. Of all the means by far the best is to deem all creatures as one's own self.”

Sankaradeva regards bhakti as superior to mukti. Bhakti is also described as being itself the emancipation (mukti). In *Bhakti-ratnakara*, he says :—

“Though the state of liberation is all happiness, yet Bhakti is superior to mukti, inasmuch as, the latter is devoid of joy inherent in the service to the Lord, while the bliss of Mukti is inherent in the former (*bhakti*). Therefore, according to him, liberation is inherent in bhakti and comes automatically taking its own course.

Bhakti consists in the firm and overwhelming affection for God with a full sense of His greatness ; through this alone can there be emancipation. Though bhakti is the *sadhana* and *moksa* is the goal, yet it is the *sadhana* stage that is the best. Those who enter into the bliss of Brahman have the experience of that bliss in their selves ; but those devotees who do not enter into this state nor into the state of Jivan-mukti, are better than the Jivanmuktas. Thus supreme devotion is superior to jnana, karma and yoga. In *Bhagavata* Sankaradeva says :—

“If acts are done with sinful motive, no virtue results. In this dire Iron age evil intentioned people have no competence for any act whatsoever. Just as neither earth nor plenty of water can purify gold but only repeated heating of it on the fire can do purifying ; so by practicing penance, mutterings, sacrifices and yogic exercises trouble is counted in vain. Since the knot of action is severed unless God is enshrined in the heart. Let me tell you this truth : the heart cannot be purified by worshipping gods, by practicing yoga, by taking ablutions in all sacred waters, nor by donation, fasting and penance. I cite you, O Parikshit, this essence of the scriptures : In Iron Age no rescue is

there like purifying the mind but harbouring the God of the world in the heart.”

Sankaradeva maintained that Bhaktimarga is the one and the only way to realise God. In this bhakta sees the Lord in everything in the world and finds Him revealing Himself in the form of Love. It is easier to picture God as Love than to conceive of the Absolute as Truth. Above all, it is suited to all irrespective of caste, creed or colour. It may be remembered here that a real bhakta will not seek salvation and his constant wish is to remain in a state of perpetual enjoyment of bhakti. That is why he prays to God thus :

Thou physician of the soul,
 Thou hast not seen the easiest remedy.
 Thou hast done a thousand works,
 still Thou has not attained to the Lord
 and comest to the world again and once again.
 Thou spendest Thy years in meditation
 and penance, in pilgrimage,
 in dwelling in Gaya and Kasi,
 Thou knowest the arguments of Yoga
 but the minded is clouded.
 Thou know this : except through supreme
 devotion, there is no liberation.
 Entire virtue remains hidden within the name
 of Rama ;

This is the final message of all the *sastras*.
 The name of the Lord devoutly taken
 is the sole religion of the Kali era.
 We know of it but grasp not the essence,
 Says Sankara, transient is this body ;
 Never again wilt thou gain this ;
 Cast off all pride of action

and think of the feet of Hari
With the sole devotion of Thy heart.

Sankaradeva has prescribed certain qualifications necessary for a real bhakta. He must possess the qualities of sympathy, beneficence, forgiveness, softness of heart and complete mastery over his passions. He seems to have laid more emphasis on the control of senses. This has been clearly explained in his *Balichalan*.

Above all, Sankaradeva propagated *nama-dharma* as practical method to bhakti. Nama Dharma consists in chanting the name of the supreme self with undeviating devotion, being pure in heart, thought and action. The advantage of reciting the name of Hari is that everybody can do it, irrespective of age, caste, stage of life, time or place. In *Bhaktiratnakara*, he says :—

*Aponāra nāmar sanga nacārata Hari
Yeyi nāma seyi Hari jānā niṣṭa kari.*

“Hari never shuns the company of His name. It is absolutely certain that *nama* is Hari Himself.”

Sankaradeva explains the merits of the chanting the name of Hari in Ajamilopakhyaṇa (story of Ajamila). This story taking from the *Bhagavata* narrates the story of a Brahmana who lived in open sin with a Sudra harlot and broke all laws sacred to his caste in maintaining his mistress and the ten children begotten on this woman. At the time of his death the sinful Ajamila called his youngest son Narayana to him and because he happened to utter the name of Narayana (which is also a name of God) at the time of death, the soul of the Brahmana was taken to the abode of Vishnu and not to the city of Yama. Thus it clearly shows that even an

unconscious recital of the name of God brings salvation to hard sinners just as abdominal disease is cured by even unconscious swallowing of a powerful medicine.

The merit of the devotion is also propounded through the well-known story of Prahlada in the poem Prahlada-carita. The same doctrine is made explicit in Gajendropakhyana. It describes a furious battle scene between Graha (crocodile) and Gajendra (elephant). Gajendra was overpowered by Graha and he was counting the hour of death. Suddenly, it flashed to his mind that devotion to Hari might save him from this predicament. So he prayed to Vishnu with devotion by holding a lotus with his trunk :

*Ehi buli maraṇato nabhaila vikala
Sunde merāi dharilanta suvarṇa Kamala
Parama ānande Mādhavata diyā citta
Gajendre karilā stuti āti viparita*

“Thus thought he, and cast away all fears of death ; with his trunk he caught hold of a golden lotus ; with great joy and faith in Madhava, Gajendra began to worship Him intensely.”

Vishnu came and rescued his distressed devotee in time. Since the devotional acts are bound to bring good results, Sankaradeva asserts that it is the supreme religion :

“All religions take shelter under the name of Krishna. All religious rites become completely accomplished by meditating Nama.”

The natural and inalienable attachment of the mind of the devotee to God is called Prema-bhakti ; it is five fold : santa (peaceful love), dasya (servant of God), sakhya (friendship with God), vatsalya (filial attitude towards God), and madhurya (sweet love, or love of God

as one's lover). Sankaradeva advocated the *dasya* type of bhakti. In fact, servanthood of devotee and God as master is the keynote of Sankarite works. As a matter of fact all the writers of Sankaradeva's school style themselves 'servants unto the Lord' at the end of each section of their books. In *Dasama*, Sankaradeva says :

"Lord of the world, You can prove the minds of all : I dedicate my body to You. Snap the chain of my foolishness. Henceforward, I am your bond slave ; Have mercy on me, O pivot of the world."

Thus Sankaradeva laid much emphasis on the doctrine of bhakti, particularly of the *dasya* type.

Again, as a practical Sadhana, Sankaradeva adopted *Sravana* (listening) and *Kirtana* (chanting). *Sravana-kirtana* is necessary for the purification of the mind which in turn leads to supreme devotion. In *Bhakti-pradipa* he says :

"O friend, rely upon my words, I do my deeds in the shape of *sravana kirtana* disregarding all other deva dharmas ; certainly you will attain salvation with ease."

Further he says :

"At the beginning Prajapati brought the four *Vedas* and searched them thrice turning the pages. The creator at last found this truth in the *Vedas* that Harikirtan is the only essence and the way by which people attain salvaion out of this troublesome world. Specially in this age of Kali, this is the only great religion. So give up all other religions and follow this."

Sankaradeva preached a religion of supreme surrender to One and the worship of other gods and

goddesses is strictly prohibited. According to him, if Vishnu is worshipped all other gods are worshipped :

“As the branches, leaves and foliage of a tree are nourished by pouring water only at the root of the tree, as limbs of the body are nourished by putting food only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated only by the worship of Krishna.”

In short, there is only one God, one mode of worship and there is none else but one. This religion knew no caste, and universal spirit is the main principle of this faith. Mahapurishiyadharma is another name for this faith, because Sankaradeva's object of worship, the all pervasive, Parama-Brahma, to whom devotee is to take shelter, is so described in the *Bhagavata*. It had universal appeal and therefore people of all castes could embrace it.

Finally, it can be said that never before in Assam, a religion was propagated by a single individual at the same time based on a system of philosophy which comprehends all the aspects of religion, in its cosmogony, cosmology and even exiology. At a time when people used to leap at tangent of anything non-material, Sankaradeva underlined the fact that human life has a *spiritual fringe* of its own ; and man can afford to ignore *this fringe* at his own peril. On a passage of gloom, Sankaradeva's message shone like the brilliance of a mid-day sun and here is the light which survived the corridor of five centuries and still gives hope and inspiration to the masses of Assam. His genius lies in the fact that so loftly a philosophy is expressed in a language which is in the reach of common laity.



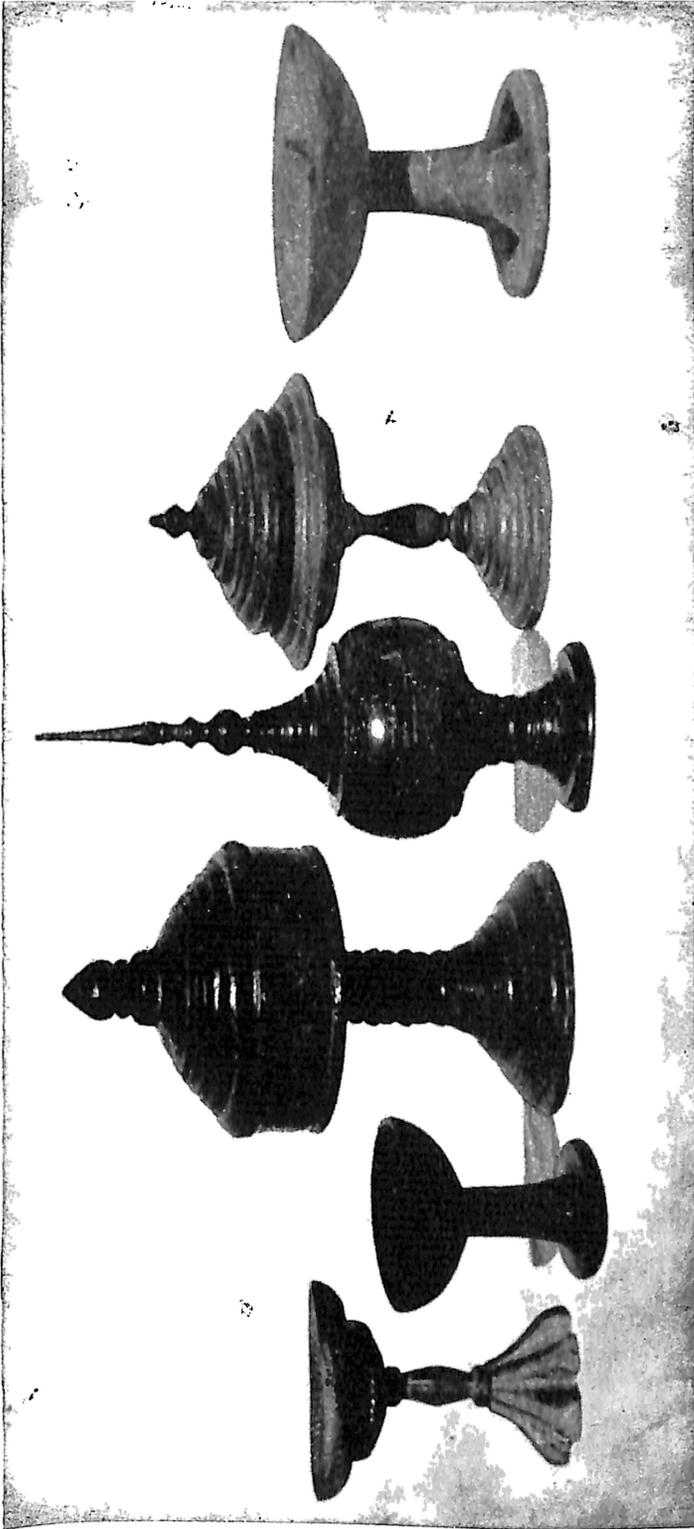
CHAPTER V INSTITUTIONS

Sankaradeva's religion has many institutional aspects, and these exercise even to-day a tremendous influence on the cultural, social and community life of the Assamese people. As an institution, it may be considered mainly in two major aspects : the Satras and Namghars.

The satras are like mediaeval monasteries or *maths*. They were originally established at places away from the hum-drum of life ; and the first satra was set up by Sankaradeva near his ancestral village at Bardowa. Later on satras grew up at places where Sankaradeva stayed during his movements from Bardowa to Barpeta. But more satras came into existence when difference of opinion arose amongst the followers after Sankaradeva's death, particularly between his Brahmana and Sudra followers. The first Brahmana seceders who established independent satras were Damodaradeva and Harideva. Later on the Brahmana preachers founded four important satras in Upper Assam, namely Garamur, Kuruabahi, Auniati and Dakhinpat. After Madhava-deva's death the schism in the Sankarite sect widened and consequently several sub-sects or Samhatis grew up. Some of the major sub-sects are Brahma-samhati, Kala-samhati, Nika-samhati and Purusha samhati. As the disciples of these sub-sects spread their activities, their missionary outposts became

branch satras, and the original centres became the headquarters. The branch satras founded by the Brahmana preachers usually follow the pattern of the Bamuniya satras, like the Auniati or Dakhinpat, the other follow the set-up of Bardowa or Barpeta and derived inspiration from them.

Whether original or branch, the satras have huge establishments, departments and a great number of structures. The main buildings of a satra consists of Karapat, Namghar or Kirtanghar, or Manikut, Hati and the Satradhikar's or Mahanta's residence. Each satra has usually four Karapat, gateways, and in the midst stands the Namghar or Kirtanghar, the main prayer-hall. Adjoining it, is the Manikut, a small building in which is placed the *singhasana* (a wooden throne which stands on four carved lions) or *thapana*, altar, which contains the main object of worship, usually a copy of the *Bhagavata-Purana* in manuscript. In passage of time, some satras began to lose the rigour of their injunctions against idolatry and as a consequence some satras, particularly the satras established by the Brahmana leaders, came even to place an image of Krishna. It appears, however, that the image is kept more with an eye towards decoration and to attract converts than as a necessary paraphernalia of the religious worship. Around the *thapana* are many sacred objects; earthen lamps and incense are also burnt before it. The Hatis are group of huts placed on the four quarters of the compound where the monks live in their own cell. Describing the general set-up of a satra, the District Gazetteers of the Sibsagar District, 1905 writes, "There is something singularly gracious and pleasing in the whole atmosphere of the place. Everything is fresh and neat, and well to do. The well



"SARAI" OF VARIOUS DESIGNS : RECEPTACLE FOR SACRED TEXT

groomed smiling monks are evidently at peace with themselves and with the world at large, and even the little boys who flock around them are usually clean and well behaved. These children are recruited from the neighbouring villages and trained up to be bhakats, but if at any time they find the rituals of celibacy irksome, they are at liberty to return to the outer world."

To educate the bhakats in religious learning and to train them in monastic life as well as to look after the administration of the establishments, the satras have different ecclesiastical order and a hierarchy of officers. The ecclesiastical order consists of Satradhikars or Mahantas, bhakats, sisyas, laity, both men and women. Besides, there is a class of special bhakats called kewaliyas, celibates who have forsaken the world in early life and residing in a satra devote themselves to rigorous discipline, religious life and practices.

The entire administration is run by the Satradhikar. In some satras, he is designated as Mahanta or Gosain, and he is a lifelong celibate. In some satras, however, the Satradhikars are allowed to lead a household life. It should be noted that the Satra-institutions gave rise to a new priest class appointed from the Sudras having position of spiritual power and social importance equal to Brahmanas. Along with it, the satras introduced the system of worship of saints and the veneration of relics, particularly *pada-silas*, foot-marks.

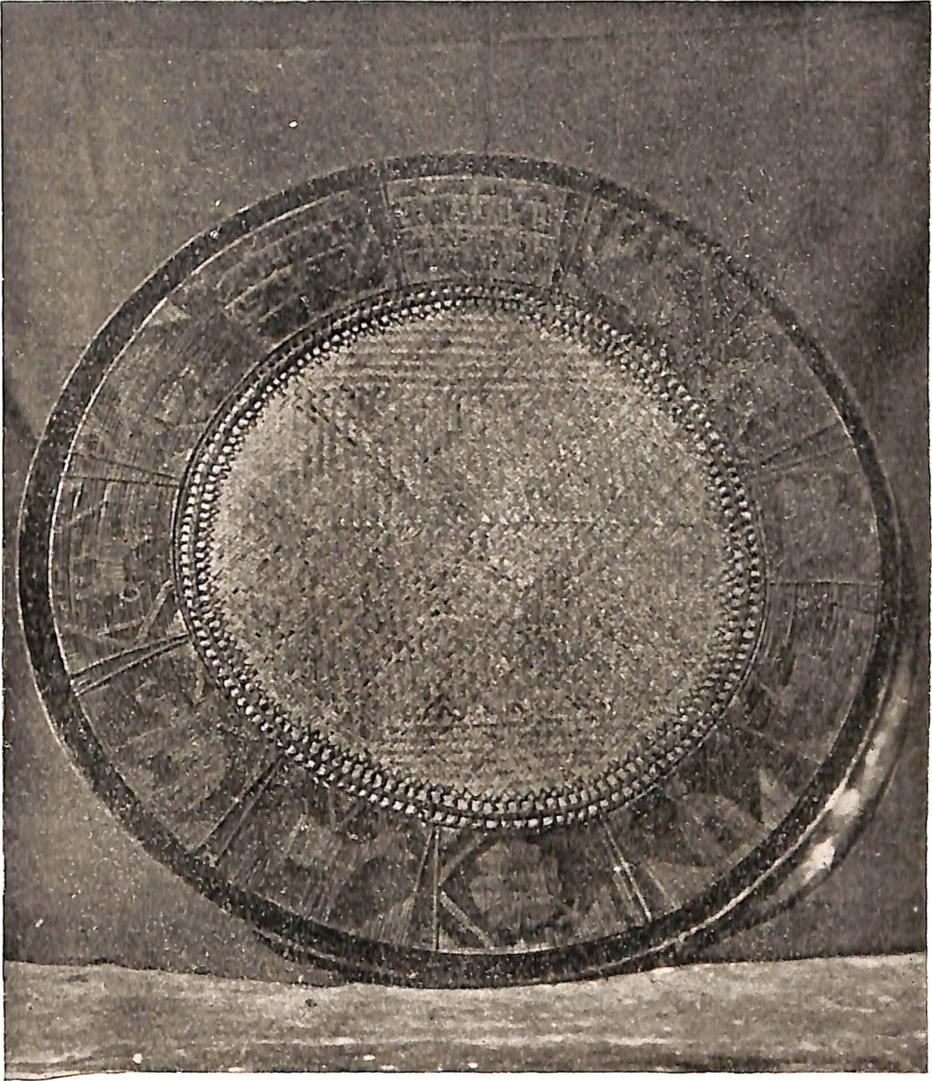
Other important functionaries are Bhagavati, the reciter and expounder of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the Pathak, the reader of the religious texts, Deuri, the distributor of *mah-prasad*, sacred offerings after congregational prayer, Bharali, store-keeper, Sravani, hearers, who are to listen daily to the recitations and expositions of the scriptures, Athpariya, who keeps

vigil over the satra and arranges lights in the Namghar, and Hatimata who summons the monks in the Hatis to prayer-services.

Functionaries are appointed to organise religious music and to enact dramatic performances. The Gayan, singers, and the Bayan, players of musical instruments are in charge of the monastical orchestra, and they arrange music in religious services, festivals and in *bhawana*, religious performances.

Besides the ecclesiastical structure, the satras developed various conventions and ideas, a fixed order of congregational worship, a systematic set of beliefs, i.e., theology and a body of sacred writings in Assamese including psalms and hymns,. It is relevant to note in this connection that the congregation sings only hymns of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and those composed by the saints of the respective satras and not by private persons.

Prasangas or devotional services where the congregation assemble at specified hour for community worship and singing are held all through the day under the leadership of the Satradhikar. According to the orthodox code fourteen prasangas are held, five in the morning, three in the afternoon and six in the evening. On religious festivals, elaborate ceremonies, featured by prasangas and nama-kirtan, musical singing of Lord's praise, are held and they are attended by the laity from different places. In these religious services, songs are sung, religious texts are chanted and recited and extracts from the biographies of the saints are read out to the gathering. At these services drums are beaten, cymbals are tinkled, earthen lamps are lighted and sacred food is offered. At the close of the services *mah-prasad* is distributed to the gathering.



MAT WITH RELIGIOUS MOTIFS

It should be noted that the satras work both as seats of religious learning and residential schools. The bhakats live here under the guardianship of the Satradhikar, who is responsible both for their temporal welfare and spiritual progress. Further, each pupil-monk when he comes to enter the monastic life is immediately placed under the charge of a senior or elderly bhakat. During the probationary period the pupil-monk serves as *aldhara* or personal attendant to the senior bhakat, who as a guide train him in monastic life, discipline, liturgy and doctrinal practices. The pupil-monks also receive education from other functionaries of the satra, particularly from Bhagavati and Pathak. They impart instructions both orally and through written tests and services. Monks are further commissioned to translate Sanskrit texts to Assamese, and compose original works either in Sanskrit or Assamese. It is a customary practice with the monks to copy and illustrate manuscript, and to compile *Carit-puthis*, biographies of Vaisnava saints and leaders of Satras to illustrate Vaisnavite ideal of individual life.

Occasionally, discussions and debates are held in the satras to which religious leaders and scholars from other places are invited. These meetings provide opportunities to the monks for solving many of their difficult problems arising out of the texts they have been studying. As Sir Richard Livingstone remarks there is much to be said for these methods of debate and discussion in the old system of education. In discussion a man finds out what he does not know; what he has overlooked, where he is mistaken, and—not less important—what he does really know and believe. where he is right; the soft strata of mere opinion are washed away by the steady spray of argument, and

the hard rock remains. In discussion too he shares new experiences, and, in commerce with stronger minds, is lifted to higher levels and discerns new landscapes in the world of being. Much of this can be had through books, but not all. They suffer from the grave disadvantage of not being able to ask or answer questions. (*Some Tasks for Education*). All these go to produce within the satra successful teachers, religious leaders as well as eminent poets, scholars and philosophers.

Besides religious education and monastic practices, the bhakats are engaged in secular learning such as cultivation of arts and crafts. Since converts are drawn mainly from the villages, they naturally bring with them the skill and technique of their village crafts. They are occupied in building and repairing the Namghars and their own dwelling huts, also decorating them. They make various useful articles of wood, bamboo, reed and ivory, and the articles required in dramatic performances. They undertake to copying and illustrating manuscripts as an act of piety and devotion.

The monks are taught music both vocal and instrumental by the Gayan and the Bayan. Sankaradeva himself was a master singer and an excellent instrumental player. The musical instrument, *khol*, is said to have been invented by Sankaradeva. We have referred to the contributions of Sankaradeva to the sphere of devotional music, Bargits and Kirtan, and also to Ankiya-nats. Many other succeeding monks enriched the Assamese literature with their beautiful musical contributions and plays.

Dancing too forms a part of education of young pupil-monks. Various forms of religious dances like Sutradhari, Cali or Natuwa, Krishna and Gopi-nac were developed under the inspiration of the satras.



ELABORATELY CARVED PADDY-POUNDING
WOODEN MORTAR

This tradition is still being kept alive by the bhakats of the Vaisnava satras.

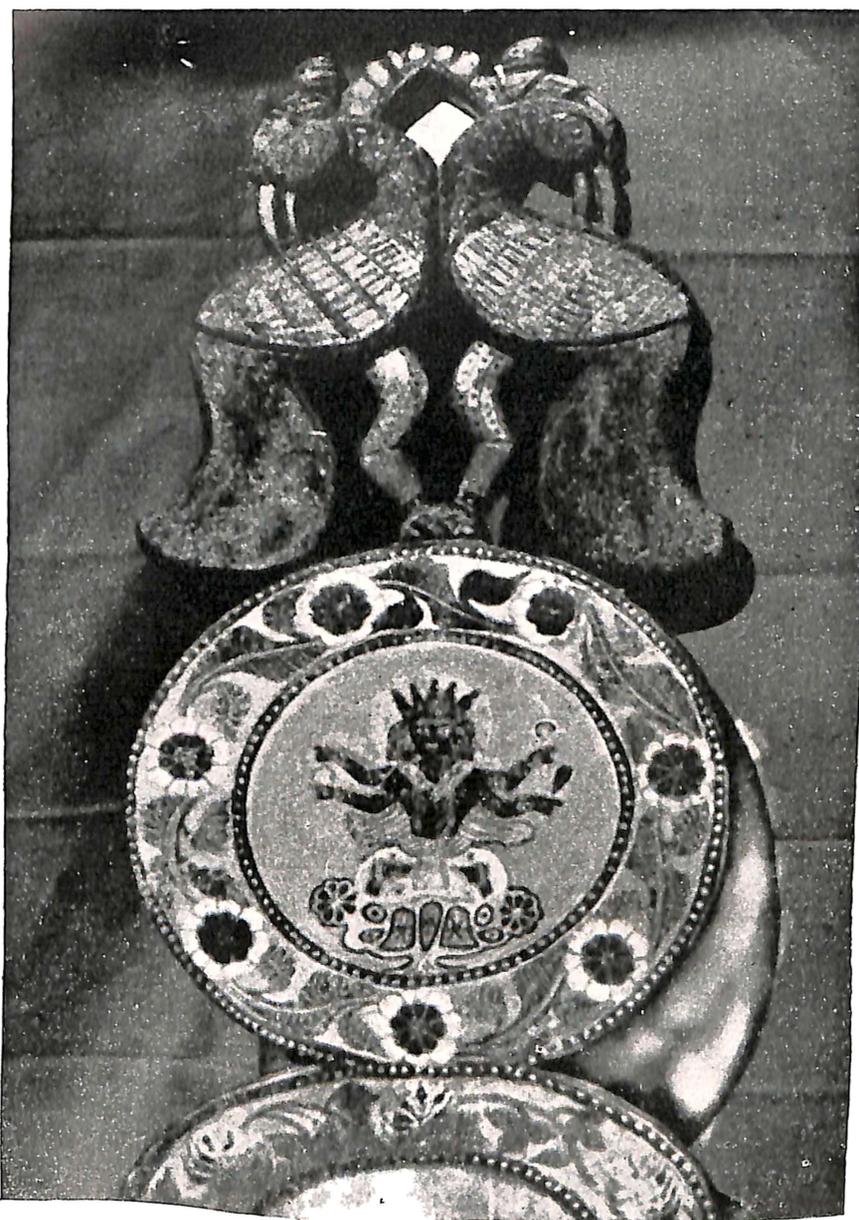
To run an institution with so many departments, naturally a large amount of money is required. Formerly, the Ahom kings and nobles contributed liberally, and large grants of revenue-free land were made by the Ahom kings, and this was subsequently confirmed by the British Government. The satras derive income from other sources also. Every *sisya*, disciple, is expected to make an annual contribution either in cash or kind (*guru kar*). Further, fees are to be paid on the occasions of any birth, marriage or death in the family of the disciples. The satras have a special set of officers known as Medhi, Rajmedhi, Sajtola and Pacani to collect fees and contributions from the lay disciples. These incomes serve to make the satras extremely prosperous and enable them to run their large organisation.

The satra institution is very much interested in the organisation of the laity in the villages, and from the beginning of the movement this was done through the village Namghars. The Namghars which were set up as central religious institutions of the village worked to a large extent towards spread of intellectual and cultural activities in the village, and in the course of time being nerve-centres of the village came to co-ordinate all the aspects of social, economical and political life of the Assamese people. Here not only sastras like the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata* are recited in a musical manner, Bargits are sung with proper melodies, nam-kirtan, singing the praises of the Lord, are held, dramatic performances are enacted, festivals are celebrated but greater problems of life, philosophy and religion are also discussed and debated. The Namghars further serve as panchayat-

hall, where villagers gather to discuss and solve many of their day-to-day problems. These community centres have been found even to play political and judicial role.

Not only through daily prasangas and nama-kirtans but through celebrations of regularly recurring festivals followed the year around, the Namghars create religious enthusiasm among all ages and sexes of the people, and become the main centre of attractions and cultural activities. In addition to the festivals, certain days in the year set aside for commemoration of saints and Satradhikars are observed with fast, prayer-services and dramatic entertainments. These religious observances naturally weave the faith into daily life of the people throughout the year.

As central authority, the satras also diffuse spiritual education, regulate and control religious life and as well as administer moral discipline on the laity through the agency of the Namghars. The satras very much encourage literacy and learning among the laity. They enforce that not only the bhakats should study but the laity also should read regularly the Vaisnava sastras and remember them by hearts. The satra-functionaries very frequently visit the outlying villages, come into close contact with the laity, make earnest efforts to familiarise them with liturgical and religious texts. They hold in the Namghars special religious discourses and recitals. In expounding the scriptures, they always bring them down to practical issues, with the idea of giving the people guidance for everyday living. They occasionally enquire into their faults and failings in religious life and recommend penance and punishment. The Satradhikars, accompanied by satra functionaries pay periodical visits to the villages, and stay either in the Namghars or *Bahars*, temporary camps. "These



AN UPPER PART OF A SINGHASANA

progresses are generally attended with considerable pomp and dignity. If the journey is made during the rainy season, the Gosains and their followers travel in stately barges, whose carved prows and slender lines distinguish them from the ordinary rough built country-boats. Most of the satras own one or more fine elephants, and these ponderous animals take a leading part in the procession that escorts the spiritual leaders of the people. The Gosains themselves are carried in litters, drums are beaten and cymbals clashed before them ; and when they alight they are not permitted to touch the ground with their bare feet."

The Satradhikars, during their periodical visits give *sarana* to new disciples, and *bhajana* to those who are already converted. The *sarana* or initiation is a simple ceremony which consists in taking refuge to four fundamental principles (*cari-vastu*) of the faith, namely, *nama*, reciting the names of God, *deva*, surrender to God, *guru*, acceptance of a preceptor, and *bhakat*, delight in the company of religious brotherhood. The *bhajan* is an elaborate religious ceremony meant for spiritually advanced disciples. They also acquaint themselves with the spiritual problems of their *sisyas* and deliver sermons to rouse pious feelings, to strengthen conviction, to warn against dangers of faith, and to prepare for pure and moral life. The Namghar, therefore, is a very useful institution which constantly brings good-conduct, ethics, morals (*sadacara*) and cleanliness and personal hygiene (*saucacara*) to bear on the daily life of the villagers.

In the main, the Namghars are public institutions and their affairs are conducted on a purely democratic basis, every houe-holder in the village having an equal voice in the management of their affairs. The villagers

with their combined labour and resources build and repair them, provide necessary articles, and look to their upkeep, and thus in diverse ways foster social solidarity and discipline.

It is relevant to note that women have also specific duty to perform in the Namghars. Women from each household by rotation are to sweep and clean the Namghars daily. They are allowed to receive initiation ; and they carry devotional chantings in the Namghars, of course, not simultaneously with the man-disciples. Although women saints are met with in other Vaisnava sects, it is only in the Sankaradeva's faith that women have been found as heads of satras. Sankaradeva's grand-daughter-in-law, Kanaklata became not only the head of a satra but she herself appointed twelve Satradhikars to set up and organise more satras.

One other notable contribution of the satras is their works towards the uplift and betterment of the backward classes and the bordering tribes of Assam. Sankaradeva, from the very beginning of his missionary career led a crusade against caste exclusiveness, untouchability, for a recognised equality of all men irrespective of caste or character in the eyes of God, and exhibited deep sympathy for the lower castes and down-trodden classes. He again and again emphasised on the *Bhagavatas* saying that even a Candala is purged of the impurity of his caste by firm devotion to God ; and sincere faith and devotion alone can uplift the soul to eternal communion with God.

Even a Candala, harnessed to sincere faith and devotion, is dearer to God than a Brahmana, sadly lacking in faith.

Even a person of low birth is liberated from bondage, if he utters the name of God only once.

This is in main the social and ethical outlook of Sankaradeva's faith and so utterly disregarding the aged-old tradition of caste, he himself gave initiation and included amongst his favourites disciples from the so called degraded castes. Among these notable disciples were Candsai and Jayantahari, both Musalmans, Govinda, a Garo, Jayantahari, a Bhutiya, Shriram, a Kaivarta, and Madhava, a potter.

Madhavadeva who became the chief apostle after Sankaradeva, deputed several of his followers to Upper Assam to spread the teachings of the creed and to bring about an intellectual awakening in the non-Hindu tribes of the Ahom kingdom. Gopaladeva of the Bhavanipur satra (1541-1611) made all efforts to introduce the message of bhakti among the Barahis, Marans, Kacharis, and Chutiyas of Upper Assam. The Dihing satra which originated from Gopaladeva, did a great lot to educate and uplift many tribes of Upper Assam, and it not only admitted converts from the non-Hindu tribes but placed them on equal footing with the disciples of the higher castes. "The Dihing Satra and the Mayamara Satra," writes Dr. S. K. Bhuyan, "were the most prominent of the six Sudra monasteries of Upper Assam, associated with Gopaladeva. As they admitted converts from the non-Aryan tribes and placed the disciples on an elevated footing, these two Satras became extremely popular. Though they had caste Hindus in their fold, such as Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalitas, their disciples consisted also of Kacharis, Ahoms; Kaivartas and Brittials; and in the case of Mayamara Satra, Chutiyas and Morans as well. The democratic basis on which the satras were run drew new converts to their fold from the influence of the caste-ridden satras specially of the Brahmanical order. In course of time

the Dihing and the Mayamara Satras grew to the strong-holds of Sudra Vaisnavism in Upper Assam as opposed to the Brahmanical monasteries." Dr. Bhuyan, further observes, "The message of the Kalasamhati Satras (of Gopaldeva) reached the very masses of the Assamese nation. Those castes which are now denominated as 'depressed' were freely admitted into the fold of these Satras, and they gradually imbibed refined and enlightened ways of living. In other parts of India, the humiliation to which these unfortunates were subjected, drove them to the bosom of other religions; in Assam, the liberal policy of the Kalasamhati Satras endowed them with a sense of self-respect and individual value. These Satras made a great appeal to the unsophisticated Assamese people and thus they commanded unprecedented popularity."

The missionaries deputed by these satras no doubt brought the cult of devotion and universal love and opened the doors of salvation to all tribes irrespective of their caste and character but they also "introduced an unwanted gentleness and fervour, and tamed the rude manly savagery of Tantric worship and animism that used to prevail in many places before."

It is also true that Sankaradeva tried to bring about a synthesis in his creed by leaving undisturbed, and where possible, by incorporating, some social and cultural traits of the tribal people, such as, the community life, congregational gathering and eating of fish, flesh, art forms, music and dance, which were most suited to the genius of the Assamese people comprised of diverse racial elements.





CHAPTER VI SAINTS AND SATRAS

Let us now proceed to give a brief account of some distinguished Vaisnava saints who received initial inspiration from Sankaradeva and exercised powerful religious and cultural influence on the people of Assam. These saints were highly proficient in classical lore and learning, but they imparted their instructions and wrote books mostly in a popular language and thus were able to capture the hearts and imagination of the people. These saint-poets moved through the length and breadth of the country, extolling the merits of bhakti and giving discourses to the people on ethics, morals and righteous living; and their own saintly life inspired the people and the teachings and discourses illuminated them. They established numerous satras all over the country for organising the socio-religious life and for the progress of spiritual, intellectual and cultural activities of the people. Further, at a period when there was no political or administrative unity in the country, these Vaisnava apostles brought about unity of religion, culture and literature.

Next to Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva was the most illustrious saint of the period. Madhavadeva was born in 1489 A.D. at Letekupkhuri, in the present Lakhimpur district. He was educated in the traditional learning and in his youth became a well-known scholar.

Madhava was at first an upholder of the Sakta faith, which dominated the religious outlook of the people of the time. Once, on the occasion of his mother's illness, he made a vow that he would sacrifice a goat before the goddess if his mother recovered. His mother did recover and Madhava asked his brother-in-law Gayapani to find a goat for the purpose. Gayapani had already been converted to the Ekasaranadharmā of Sankaradeva, and under various pretexts he evaded his commission. One day, an altercation ensued between Madhava and Gayapani regarding the merits of sacrifice, and Madhavadeva spoke slightingly of the creed propagated by Sankara. Gayapani, however, replied that Madhava might think very highly of the Sakta faith but his faith would stand no ground before Sankaradeva.

Madhava then expressed his desire to meet Gayapani's guru and to hold a discussion on the issue. The next morning Gayapani led Madhava to Sankaradeva's residence and a great controversy ensued between these two religious leaders over the respective merits of worship of various Sakta goddesses consisting of sacrifices on the one hand and the adoration of the One Supreme Being in the form of Vishnu-Krishna on the other. Madhava cited verses from various scriptures to defend his stand and the *pravriti marga*, the path of attachment to the world. Sankaradeva, on the other hand, quoted *sloka* after *sloka* in support of his Ekasana-dharma, (surrender to One Supreme God) and the *nivriti marga*, the path of detachment. The disputation went on for several hours and each leader brought in evidences from scriptural sources. At the close of the day, Sankara uttered the following *sloka* from the *Bhagavata-purana* :

*Yathā taror mūla-niṣecanena
 tṛpyanti tat-skandha-bhujopaśākhāḥ
 prāṇopāhāracca yathendriyānāṃ
 tathāive sarvārharṇam acyutejyā.*

“As the branches, leaves and foliage of a tree are nourished when water is poured only at the root of the tree, as the limbs of the body are nourished when food is put only in the stomach, so all gods and goddesses are propitiated by the worship of only Krishna.”

All on a sudden, Madhava's mind was illuminated with a new meaning, and he bent down his head before Sankaradeva in reverence. Then and there he realised the purity and sublimity of the Bhakti cult and requested Sankara to accept him as disciple and to show him the path of supreme realisation. Madhava was already betrothed to a Kayastha girl, but after this illumination he broke off the engagement. For realisation of the truth and for the cause of the new faith Madhava renounced the world once for all.

From then Madhavadeva became Sankaradeva's shadow, his most accomplished and faithful follower. The religious movement gained a great impetus by his conversion, for in him were the force of intellect and the strength of character imperative for a great social reformer and bulwark of religion. Almost against the wishes of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva remained a celibate throughout his life ; and his ideal brought into being a monastic order called *Kewaliya* (the life-celibates). In fact, Madhavadeva is regarded as the real founder of the Satra institution, for he organised it on a firmer footing and introduced a very rigorous and disciplined monastic code. Further, he advocated complete allegiance to his guru Sankaradeva, the vow of chastity and poverty. In *Nama-ghosha*, Madhava-

deva writes about his guru. "Having cut asunder the doubts and penetrating to the essential principle of scriptures, has Sankara preached devotion to Krishna. I do not understand how people leave him aside and call others guru. Oh, how very foolish and deluded people are.

Know it for certain that there is no other way of repaying the debt of the great and magnanimous guru who leads the devotee to safety across the painful world, imparting him instruction about devotion to the feet of Hari, than by venerating him with folded hands.

As Hari is very gracious so is the preceptor who is also a devotee. Both are one, different in body only. The hearts of both are content with sweetness of grace, both always think of the good of the world, devoid of pride, pleased with others out of their own virtue."¹

A master of traditional learning, Madhavadeva was also a mellifluous singer. His musical talent and devout nature found expression in devotional songs, full of deep feelings. In many of his hymns, known *Bargits*, there breathes a deep note of contrition and humility in the knowledge of sin, and a spirit of extreme self-surrender. Many of his *Bargits* contain idyllic description of Vrindaban with Child Krishna as the central figure. Madhavadeva also composed a few *Ankiya nats*, all presenting incidents of Krishna's child life. In these writings Madhavadeva emphasised on *Vatsalya-bhakti*, love of God as one's son. At the direction of his guru, Madhavadeva rendered into Assamese verse the *Bhakti-Ratnavali* of Vishnu-

¹ Haramohan Das' translation.

puri Sanyasi. With the creation of these works the genius of Madhavadeva came of age and he produced from the simplest and sweetest works of poetry to most difficult writings on abtruse metaphysical subjects. He marshalled all his varied powers born out of his penetrative intellect, comprehensive knowledge and deep erudition to establish Sankaradeva's system on a firm and secure foundation. Viewed from this point Madhavadeva's *magnum opus*, the supreme achievement of Assamese Vaisnavite hymnic rapture, the *Nama-ghosha* known also as *Hajari-ghosha* (a book of thousand couplets) occupies an unique place in the philosophical literature of Assam, nay of India. It is not only widely read but memorised and freely quoted as scriptural text and thus, no doubt, is an enduring prop of Assamese Vaisnavism. The philosophy of Madhavadeva as revealed in *Nama-ghosha* divides itself in different sections, namely *Maya*, its nature and effects : cosmology of the Universe : the Brahman ; means of self-realisation : psychology of the *Jiva* : the goal of human life.

Nama-ghosha contains a large number of hymns on repentance and entreaty, self-discipline and self-reproach. In each of the hymns the lyric cry is predominant and ecstatic. The last few sections of the book serve as a litany consisting of eulogistic names of Lord Krishna. *Nama-ghosha* bears an universal appeal and is in perfect accord with the same class of sublime literature as the *Upanishads* and *Gita*. Profundity of thought, unity of outlook, and music of expression mark *Nama-ghosha* as a foremost work of art and a fitting monument to Madhavadeva's poetic genius.

Madhavadeva outlived Sankaradeva by twenty-eight years and during this period he mostly stayed at Ganakkuchi and Sundaridiya satras close to the principal satra, Barpeta, which remains to the present day the source of attraction and inspiration to the Vaisnavas. Here, Madhavadeva came into conflict with Raghudeva, king of the Eastern Koch Kingdom. It was reported to the king that the saint was preaching against the worship of Kamakhya, the guardian deity of the Koch kings. So Raghudeva had him brought to his court at Vijayanagara, Kamrup, as a prisoner. The allegations, however, proved false and the preceptor was released with due respect. Madhavadeva, thereafter, stayed for some time at Hajo, near the present Hayagriva Madhava temple. But here also he could not live in peace owing to the hostile activities of both the king and the Brahmanas, and therefore left for Cooch Behar, the capital of the Western Koch Kingdom ruled then by Laksminarayan, son of Naranarayan.

King Laksminarayan received him with due honour and got him and his disciples settled at Bheladuar, a village near the capital. In course of time, with the king's munificence a satra was established at Bheladuar and it is recorded that some principal members of the king's family embraced the Vaisnava faith from Madhavadeva. Madhavadeva passed three peaceful years in this satra and gave the final shape to his magnum opus, *Nama-ghosha*. He passed away at Bheladuar Satra, Cooch Bihar, in the year 1596 A.D.

Damodaradeva (1488-1598) another outstanding disciple of Sankaradeva was a Brahman of a village near Bardowa, near Nowgong. After Sankaradeva had left for Kamrup in 1546 A.D. Damodara with his

family also migrated to Kamrup and settled at Barpeta. Here he came into close contact with Sankaradeva and moved by the reverence for the saint, he accepted the Ekasarana-dharma. Damodaradeva played an important role in the spread of Sankarite religion, particularly in converting the Brahmanas to the faith. With the conversion of the learned Brahmanas, the movement gained a status and superiority over other faiths and came to command the admiration and reverence of kings and nobles. This indeed was no mean achievement towards the growth and popularity of the faith.

After Sankaradeva's death dissension arose between him and Madhavadeva and as a result Damodara seceded from the main creed. He founded a new sect of Vaisnavism which came to be known after his own name (*Damodariya*). Damodara is said to have introduced worship of minor gods and observances of Vedic and Brahmanical rites. In social intercourse, however, there is no distinction between a Mahapurusiya and a Damodariya. They join in all religious ceremonies connected with the satras and the Namghars, only while the Mahapursiyas are stern against idol worship and the worship of other gods, the Damodariyas may perform the ceremonies.²

Damodaradeva was persecuted by the contemporary king for upholding a creed propounded by a Sudra saint. In later years, for this reason, he had to leave his native place and migrate to Cooch Behar where he passed away in 1598 A.D. Damodaradeva had several illustrious disciples who carried his doctrines into the eastern part of Assam.

Vamshigopal (1548-1668) was one of these dis-

² From Dr. B. Kakati.

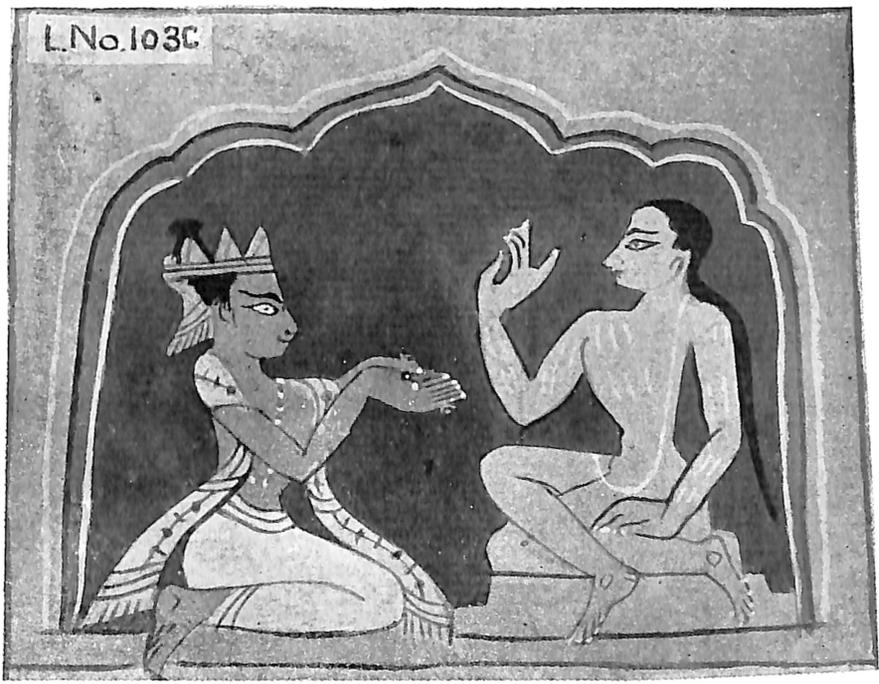
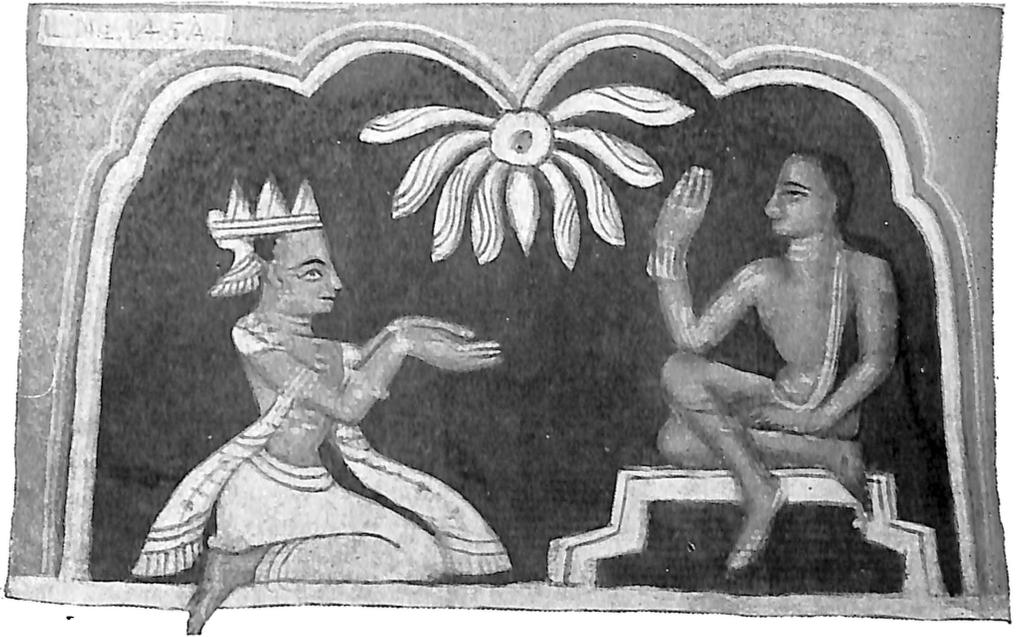
ciples. Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva both deputed Vamshigopal to Upper Assam for spreading the message of bhakti. Vamshigopal like his gurus was constantly on the move, and accompanied by disciples and devotees he came into close contact with the people to whom he delivered the messages of bhakti. Vamshigopal was a saint of a practical temperament and had superb organisational abilities. He himself established several satras and inspired his disciples also to set up satras in Upper Assam. The major satra set up by Vamshigopal was Kuruabahi at the mouth of the Dhansiri river, in the district of Sibsagar.

Niranjanadeva, a distinguished disciple of Vamshigopal, founded the Auniati Satra in the Majuli island of the Brahmaputra. Niranjanadeva's purity of character and devotion to God drew admiration even from the Ahom King Jayadhvaja Singha (1648-1663) who himself became the saint's disciple and endowed the satra with suitable land grants for the maintenance of the monks and the monastery.

Dakshinpat is another well-known satra in the Majuli island established by Vanamalideva, another disciple of Vamshigopal. Vanamalideva was very strong in faith and devotion. He was honoured and treated with much respect by the reigning Ahom King Jayadhvaja Singha who made liberal gifts to the satra.

Lakshminarayana, another saint of the Damodariya sect and a passionate devotee, established the Garamur Satra in the Majuli island during the reign of Jayadhvaja Singha. It should be noted that under the patronage of the Ahom kings, the Majuli satras became famous centres of the Vaisnava faith, cultural activities and piety of the monks.

Kuruabahi, Auniati, Dakshinpat and Garamur are



TEACHER IMPARTING INSTRUCTION
(From Chitra Bhagavata)

(By courtesy of Shri Munindra Narayan Dutta Barooah)

the four principal Brahmanical satras. Except Kurua-bahi, the Satradhikars of the other monasteries are strictly celibates. The Satradhikars for these satras are elected from other satras where married life is allowed. The chosen young man is brought into the satra during his teen age and trained up in Vaisnava religion, philosophy and life. During the period of training this young devotee is called Dekha-Adhikar, the young pontiff.

Besides Bardowa and Barpeta, these four satras exercise tremendous influence on the life of the Assamese people. They are even to-day the glorious religious institutions of Assam, and are not only the seat of religion, learning and education, but the very centre of traditional cultural activities like dance, drama, music and religious recitals. Judged by such external standards as landed estates, number of *sisyas* and *bhakats*, these satras still claim to be the biggest religious institutions. In the hey-day of their glory, the income of these satras went mainly to the welfare of the people by way of the promotion of learning, development of cultural activities and help to the needy.

Harideva (1493-1568) was another Brahmana follower of Sankaradeva who attained a high spiritual eminence. After the death of Sankaradeva he set up an independent sect of Vaisnavism with leaning more towards Damodaradeva's teachings. Harideva set up three satras, namely Maneri in Kamrup, Narayanpur in Lakshimpur, and Haripur in Cooch Behar.

Gopal Ata of Bhawanipur Satra (1541-1611), Kamrup, was originally a man from Upper Assam. Being inspired by the teachings of Sankaradeva, he came to Barpeta and received initiation from

Madhavadeva. Gopaladeva was a foremost dialectician and was known as *Kathar-Sagar*. He was a liberal thinker and to him caste and creed were no hindrance to God-realization, *bhakti* and good life alone counting. He is said to have founded the Kalasamhati sect of Assam Vaisnavism with catholicity of outlook. Gopaladeva at the direction of his guru Madhavadeva went to Upper Assam to spread the message of *bhakti* among the Ahoms, Marans, Kacharis and Chutiyas in addition to Brahmanas and Sudras.

Twelve major satras were established in Upper Assam by disciples deputed by Gopaladeva : six of them were headed by Brahmana Adhikars and six by Sudra Mahantas. Among the Brahmana satras Ahatguri and Karatipar founded by Shriram Ata and Charaibahi by Murari are very prosperous and have many thousands of devotees and disciples. Shriram Ata is famous as the author of a large number of hymns which have a firm hold on the devotees.

Two major satras founded in Upper Assam by the Sudra disciples of Gopaladeva were Dihing and Mayamara. The Dihing Satra owed its origin to the distinguished saint-poet Bar Yadumani. It received land-grants from the Ahom kings Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769) and Lakshmasingha (1769-1780). Many high officials of the Ahom Court were devoted to the satra and they gave liberal patronage to it. Bar Yadumani left many songs of great devotional appeal, musical excellence and literary grace.

The Mayamara satra was established by Aniruddha Bhuyan (1553-1626). The Dihing and the Mayamara satras were the most prominent of the six Sudra monasteries of Upper Assam, associated with Gopaladeva. As they admitted converts from the non-

Aryan tribes and placed the disciples on an elevated footing, these two satras became extremely successful. Though they had caste Hindus in their fold, such as Brahmanas, Kayasthas and Kalitas, their disciples consisted also of Kacharis, Ahoms, Kaivarttas and Brittials; and in the case of Mayamara satra, Chutiyas and Morans as well. The democratic basis on which the satras were run drew new converts to their fold from the influence of the caste-ridden satras, especially of the Brahmanical order. In course of time, the Dihing and Mayamara satras grew to be strongholds of Sudra Vaisnavism in Upper Assam as opposed to the Brahmanical monasteries. During the latter part of the eighteenth century, Mayamara satra became very powerful, it fought successfully the Ahom Kings and for a time captured even the throne.³

Kamalabari Satra in the Majuli island was set up by Padma Ata who was a Sudra. He led a very simple and saintly life and attained high spiritual eminence. In course of years, inessential rites and unrecognised observances crept into the faith which Padma Ata and Mathura Das of Barpeta Satra reformed. They set up a refined sect called Nika-samhati. Padma Ata stressed the teachings of Sankaradeva that external things such as yogic exercise, sacrifice, bathing in holy river, pilgrimage, sanyasa, fasting, do not purify a man as honest life, good company and love of all beings. On the eve of his death, Padma Ata nominated his Brahmana disciple Shriram to the Adhikarship of the Kamalabari satra. This is also an *Udasin* satra, i.e., the head of the satra is a celebate. Jarabari Satra at Tipam was established by Gopinath at the direction of

³ From Dr. S. K. Bhuyan.

Padma Ata. Jarabari Satra till to-day retains many of our traditional cultural activities in pristine perfection.

Purusottam Thakur, grandson of Sankaradeva, was not only a prominent saint, but also a great organiser. He founded the sect Purusha-samhati which emphasised on the adoration of Sankaradeva as the saviour of men through the truth which the saint exemplified in his life. He appointed six Brahmanas and six non-Brahmanas as apostles and directed them to organise satras in different parts of the country. The satras established by these twelve Acaryyas were known as *Bar Barajaniya Satras* (Senior twelve satras).

Chaturbhuj, another grandson of Sankaradeva, founded Vishnupur Satra in the Goalpara district. Like his brother he also nominated twelve Acaryyas for organising more satras. The satras set up under the auspices of Chaturbhuj were known as *Saru Barajaniya Satras* (Junior twelve satras).

Kanaklata, wife of Chaturbhuj, became the head of the satras after her husband's death. Kanaklata led a pious and religious life; she re-organised some of the old satras and established the new satra Ai-bheti near Bardowa. She also appointed twelve Acaryyas to spread the message of bhakti and to organise new satras.

More satras were established by the descendants of Purusottam Thakur and Chaturbhuj. These were known as *Nati Satras*, i.e. satras set up by the grandsons of Sankaradeva. All these satras brought about a new orientation and salutary reformation in every aspect of Assamese life.

It appears that the Sankarite movement produced in an unbroken stream a galaxy of eminent saints,

poets, preachers, philosophers and leaders. These great men made significant contributions towards the intellectual awakening, social consciousness and regeneration of the country and dissemination among the masses of the universal message, gospels, and thoughts preserved in Indian literature, religion and philosophy. In their missionary zeal these saints brought into juxtaposition different races and tribes who were in various stages of culture and thus infused newness and fullness to Assamese life and thought. The triumph of Sankaradeva's movement was really due to the influence of these saints and teachers of astounding holiness, wide learning and unimpeachable moral integrity. As such, these men will ever occupy an honoured position among the saints of India.



APPENDIX I

ORIGINAL ASSAMESE TEXTS

CHAPTER I

Page 5 : Ekaśaraṇa-dharma

Śāstrara bujiyā majjā sadāya kṛṣṇaka bhajā
hayo eka śaraṇa Kṛṣṇata.
Anyā devideva nakaribā seva
nākhāibā prasāda tāra.
mūrtiko nācāibā grho napaśibā
bhakti haiba vyabhicāra.

Daivakira putra eka Kṛṣṇa mātra deva
dharma eka mātra sei devatāra-seva.
mantra eka tāna nāme Kṛṣṇa devatāra.

sarva dharma eḍi eka śaraṇa sākṣāta
sudṛḍḍha viśvāse sakhi layoka āmāta.
mai viṇe āna eko nabhajā devaka
sei bhakti eruvāve samasta dharmaka.
sei eka śaraṇa-bhajana anupāma
nuśunaya āna eko devatāra nāma
avyabhicāriṇī āka buliya bhakati.

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CHAPTER II

Page 10 : Bhāgavata-Purāṇa

Bhāgavata śāstre śradhā kariba nitānta
 nakariba nindā āna śāstrako ekānta.
 samasta śāstrara sāra uddhāriyā āni
 dekhāila bidita kari deva Cakrapāṇi.
 yito śāstra karilanta Daivakī tanaya
 yehi mātra śāstra eka jānibā niścaya.

Page 16 : Navavidhā bhakti

śravaṇa kīrtana smaraṇa Viṣṇura
 arcaṇa pada sevana
 dāsya sakhitva vandana Viṣṇuta
 kariba deha arpaṇa.

Page 16 : Śravaṇa and Kīrtana

pujā ādi yata bhaktira madhyata
 śravaṇa kīrtana sāra
 kathā-śravaṇara nāma-kīrtanara
 samāna nāhike āra.

śravaṇa-kīrtana eḍi āna karma kare
 pāve śrama biphale kalita sito mare.
 Viṣṇu Vaiṣṇavara kathā duyo samatula
 śravaṇa-kīrtane kare pāpaka nirmūla.
 caṇḍāla paryyante kare savāke pavitra.
 mokṣa pada sādhe yāra śravaṇa kīrtane.

Page 19 : Equality in Bhakti-religion

Caṇḍālo Harināma lave mātra
 karibe ucita yajnara pātra.
 bhaktise parama śuddha nirupama
 prakati dekhā pramāṇa.
 Kirāta Kachāri Khāchi Gāro Miri
 Yavana Kanka Govāla
 Asama maluka Rajaka Turaka
 Kuraca Meca Caṇḍāla.
 āno yata nara Kṛṣṇa sevakara
 saṃgata pavitra haya

bhakati labhiyā saṃsāra tariyā
Vaikunṭhe sukhe calaya.

Page 35 : Love of all beings

Jagatara puṇya māne jānā niṣṭa kari
prāṇī upakārara alpako nuhi sari.
hena jāni prāṇīka abhaya diyā dāna
prāṇī bhaya bhīta bhaile karibe rakṣaṇa.
viśeṣata mahantara ehi vyavahāra
parajīva rākhe jīva diyā āponāra.
abhaya dānata pare dharma nāhi āna
koti aśvamedho tārā nuhike samāna:
yata dekhā bhūta prāṇi save Viṣṇu hena jāni
himśā eḍi karā upakāra.
sakalo prāṇīka dekhibeke ātmasama
upāya madhyata ito ati mukhyatama.

Page 40 : Dāsya Bhakti

aiśvaryya jañjāla nalāge āmāka
chiṇḍā mora moha-pāśa
karā prabhū dayā janme janme haibo
Romārā dāsaro dāsa.
Tomāra akāma bhṛtya āmi
Tumio niṣkāma mora Svāmī.
Tomārese aṃśa yata jīva āmi
Tumi mora nija Svāmī.
Prabhū Dāmodara eteke gocara
Tomārese bhṛtya āmi.

CHAPTER IV

Page 90 : Krishna Avatara

cāri veda caudhya śāstre Kṛṣṇake kahaya
Kṛṣṇarese aṃśa save jagata niścaya.
Kṛṣṇaka pāibāka lāgi kare jāta yāga.
tapa-japa kariyā Kṛṣṇaka pāve lāga.
jñānapathe Kṛṣṇakese seve jñānīgaṇa.
samaste śāstrara mata veda vedāntara tatva
Kṛṣṇase parama iṣṭa-deva.

CHAPTER V

Page 104 : *Cāri-vastu*—The four fundamental principles

1. *Nāma*

Nāme sādhe yāra yena mata abhiprāya
yibā mokṣa cāhe vaikunṭhata denta bāsa.
jñānīro jānibā Harināme mokṣaphala
nāhike nāmata pare parama mangala.
Nānese karibe sava manoratha siddhi
jānibāhā Harira nānese nava nidhi
nāma tapa japa jajña nāma yogo dhyāna
nāma dāna-puṇya nāma koṭi tīrtha-snāna
nāma dhana-jana bandhu nāma pitā mātā
nāma nija suhṛda nānese gatidātā.
iha para loke nāma vine āna nāi
cārio vedara ise mukhya abhiprāya.

2. *Deva*

anya devīdeva nakaribā seva
nākhāibā prasāda tāra
mūrtiko nācāibā gṛho napaśibā
bhakti haiba vyabhicāra.
eka Kṛṣṇadeva kariyoka seva
dhariyo tāhāna nāma
Kṛṣṇa dāsa huyā prasāda bhūñjiyā
haste karā tāna kāma.
Kṛṣṇara sthānaka yatne caliyoka
sancio puṇyara dāma,

3. *Guru*

yitojane bhakati jñanaka dāna kare
tānka sevā kari yito saṃsāraka tare
eteke sehise buddhimanta narottama
jagatata āna āru nāhi tāra sama.
bhakti-jñāna-dātā guru vine sevā nāi
kahiloho prati prati tomāta bujāi.
Vedara rahasya tatva sakale jānanta
Kṛṣṇako bhakati bale sākṣata karanta.

Ehente uttama guru kahilo samprati
 ihārese upadeśe śuddha hove mati.
 Kṛṣṇata bhakati hove saṁsārako tare
 nāi nāi saṁsārata guru ātapare.

4. *Satsang*

āna dharma nuhikaya satsaṁgata sari
 yoga yāga dharma tyāga tapa tīrtha-snāna
 niyama saṁyama brata japa yajña dāna
 agnihotra ādi kari āna dharma yata
 nakare simate mora baśya svarūpata.
 sādhusaṁge āmāka yimate kare baśya
 kahilo tomāta ito parama rahasya.

mokṣato adhika sakhi sādhuṛa saṁgama
 yāhāra reṇuka svarga-sukhe nohe sama.

ati alpakāla saṁga mahantasavara
 svarge mokṣe tāhāra samāna nuhikaya.

True bhakat

bolanta Mādhava śuniyo Uddhava
 santara kaho lakṣaṇa
 prānīsakalara duḥkha sahibāka
 naparāya sādhujana.

śakti anurūpe karaya sabāko
 upakāra sādhu nare
 mahā kṣamāśīla sahana śīla
 asūyā kāko nakare.

ekoye prāṇīra droha nakaraya
 parama komala cita
 nāhike vikāra nere sadācāra
 svadharmata bhaila thita.

indriyasavaka baśya karileka
 sukhe duḥkhe bhailā sama
 eko kāme citta calite napāre
 satya se bala parama,

loka ceṣṭā yata save tejileka
 alapa bhaila āhāra
 bastu parigraha nāhike santara
 kahiloho sāre sāra.

moka mātra eka karile āśraya
 bhailā ati sāvadhāna
 mānya labhibāka bāncū nakaranta
 ānaka karanta māna.

āpada kālata kṛpaṇa svabhāva
 nāhike sādhu savara
 saṃsārara chaya-urmika jinila
 śoka moha nirantara.

parama sahanaśīla sādhusava
 jñānavanta atīśaya
 mahā kāruṇika bastu lobha eḍi
 karuṇāye pravartaya.

kadācita loka bancaka nuhike
 sādhusava yata yata
 jñāna upadeśa dibāra sāmārthya
 hovaya sādhu samasta.

śunā sakhi āru Vedarupe mai
 kahi ācho dharmagaṇa
 ācarilete guṇa nācariba doṣa
 jāniya āka yijana.

bhakatita save dharma siddha haīta
 kariyā dṛḍha niścaya
 teji dharma siṭo moka bhaje yiṭo
 sehi sādhu mahāśaya.

APPENDIX II

GLOSSARY OF ASSAMESE VAISNAVA TERMS

<i>Aksaya-banti</i>	Earthen lamp kept burning in a satra perpetually. This institution still exists at Barpeta satra whose <i>aksaya banti</i> was first lighted by Madhavadeva.
<i>Ajnapar satra</i>	Satra founded under orders of preceptor ; branch satra.
<i>Aldhara</i>	Personal attendant of Satradhikar or superior monk.
<i>Ankiya Nat</i>	The type of drama initiated by Sankaradeva.
<i>Arihana</i>	Offering made at the end of a religious service or to a priest.
<i>Asaraniya</i>	Not yet initiated into the faith.
<i>Athpariya</i>	Officer who keeps vigil at satra (literally, having the eight stages of a day or night).
<i>Bahar</i>	Temporary camp for Satradhikar during his periodic visit to villages.
<i>Bahuwa</i>	Clown in popular theatrical performance.
<i>Baragit</i>	Devotional songs in classical tunes particularly composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva.
<i>Bayan</i>	Officer-in-charge of instrumental music.
<i>Bhagavati</i>	Ecclesiastical officer engaged in reading and expounding the <i>Bhagavata</i> .
<i>Bhajana</i>	Higher form of ordination.
<i>Bhakat</i>	Monk ; initiated disciple.
<i>Bhanita</i>	Last couplet of a poem bearing name of the poet.
<i>Bharali</i>	Provision-keeper of a satra.
<i>Bhatima</i>	Eulogistic religious poem.
<i>Bhawana</i>	Religious theatrical performance.
<i>Buranji</i>	Chronicle of Ahom kings.

- Cadar* Wrapper worn both by man and woman.
- Cari-vastu* Four fundamental principles of Sankarite religion : *deva* (refuge in Lord or Krishna), *nama* (glorification of the name of God), *guru* (acceptance of a preceptor), and *bhakat* (good company or *satsang*).
- Cari-hati* Four rows of living quarters of monks.
- Carit-puthi* Biography of Vaisnava saint.
- Catiha* Religious poem.
- Cho* Effigy.
- Cihna-yatra* First abhinaya arranged by Sankaradeva. This may mean an abhinaya performed by *cinhas* or *mudras*, gesturs.
- Dambaru* Small thin-waisted drum.
- Damodariya* Followers of Damodaradeva who established the Brahmana-samhati.
- Deka Adhikar* Vice-pontiff of satra.
- Deuri or Bilaniya* Distributor of sacred offerings in religious gathering.
- Dhuti* Man's lower garment ; the *dhoti*.
- Dut* Messenger ; emissary.
- Gayan* Officer-in-charge of music and singing.
- Guru* Preceptor.
- Guru-kar* Tithe ; religious tax or contribution.
- Gosain-ghar* Family prayer-hall ; chapel.
- Karadhani* Waist-band.
- Kewaliya* Celibate monk.
- Khanikar* Decorator or painter ; also maker of images.
- Kirtan-ghar* Prayer-hall ; term used mostly in Lower Assam.
- Krishna-nac* Form of dance by Krishna.
- Mahanta* Leader of satra ; usually Sudra.
- Mahapurushiya* Sankaradeva's sect.
- Mah-prasad* Sacred offerings consisting of pulse, uncooked rice and fruit.
- Manikut* Shrine ; small house attached to Nam-ghar where sacred text is placed on *thapana* or *singhasana*.
- Medhi,* Officers who periodically supervise the religious life of the disciples.
- Raj-medhi* Woman's lower garment.
- Mekhela*

<i>Nam-anjaniya</i>	Literally, illuminator of religious way ; trainer of neophytes.
<i>Nam-dhara</i>	Leader of prayer-service.
<i>Nam-ghar</i>	Prayer-hall ; used mostly in Upper Assam.
<i>Nam-katha</i>	Mystic formula given by preceptor at initiation.
<i>Nam-kirtan</i>	Community singing and praising of God,
<i>Nam-lagowa</i>	Leader of community singing.
<i>Oja Pali</i>	Popular choric dance, illustrating scriptural stories.
<i>Pacani</i>	Officer who collects tithes and contributions from disciples.
<i>Padasila</i>	Foot-prints (of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva).
<i>Padasila-ghara</i>	House where foot-marks of the two saints are preserved.
<i>Pag</i>	Head-gear ; puggree.
<i>Pathak</i>	Reciter of religious texts.
<i>Phatau</i>	Vest ; usually worn in popular theatrical performance.
<i>Prasanga</i>	Religious service ; matins.
<i>Prasad</i>	Sacred offering.
<i>Putala-naç</i>	Puppet-dance.
<i>Puthi</i>	Manuscript copy of sacred text, usually written on bark of aguru tree.
<i>Riha</i>	Woman's breast-cloth.
<i>Sabah</i>	Prayer gathering, usually of womenfolk.
<i>Saj-tola</i>	Officer who collects contributions from disciples.
<i>Sala-banti</i>	Literally, wick and light satra ; branch satra.
<i>Satra</i>	
<i>Samhati</i>	Sect. The four principal Samhatis in Sankarite Vaisnavism are : Brahma samhati, Kala samhati, Nika samhati and Purusha samhati.
<i>Sangi</i>	Attendant of Sutradhara in Ankiya bhawana.
<i>Sarai</i>	Raised tray made of wood, bell-metal or brass as receptacle of sacred offerings.
<i>Sarai</i>	
<i>agbarhowa</i>	Sacred offerings on <i>sarai</i> .
<i>Saran</i>	Initiation
<i>Satra</i>	Monastery
<i>Satradhikar</i>	Head of satra ; pontiff.

<i>Sutradhara</i>	Officer who organises dance and drama ; producer of Ankiya plays.
<i>Sisya</i>	Laity.
<i>Singhasana</i>	Wooden throne standing on four carved lions : sacred text is placed on it for worship.
<i>Sula</i>	Trident in Siva's hand.
<i>Sravani</i>	Devotees especially appointed to listen to reading and expounding of sacred texts at services.
<i>Than</i>	Sacred place ; satra.
<i>Thapana</i>	Altar ; place set up for worship.
<i>Udashin</i>	Unmarried ; celibate.

APPENDIX III

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