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LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF MAHAPURSHA SANKARADEVA

KESHAVANANDA DEV GOSWAMI

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LIFE AND TEACHINGS
OF
MAHAPURUSHA SANKARADEVA

CHENNAI

LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF MAHAPURUSHA SANKARADEVA

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GENERAL EDITOR
MAHESWAR NEOG



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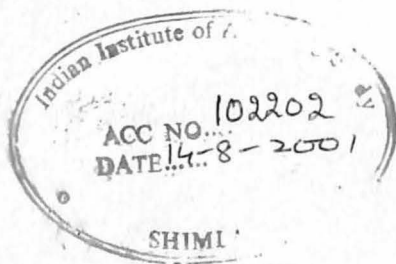
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Foreword by the General Editor

This monograph on the Assam saint, Sankaradeva, was prepared by Dr Keshavananda Dev Goswami, when he was working in Punjabi University as Fellow and, then, Reader for Sankaradeva studies in the Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies. The work was completed as early as in 1974; but for various reasons its publication has not so far been found possible. We do now feel happy to be presenting it to the reading public.

There are quite a good number of publications, big and small, on Sankaradeva in Assamese and English. But Dr Goswami's book possesses one marked character. It is that he has tapped the latter-day sources (metrical and prose chronicles of satras or Assamese Vaisnava mathis) and even oral tradition, to which he has been born and brought up very close, as he hails from a family claiming descent from a great-grand-daughter of Sankaradeva himself. These sources have, of course, only confirmed the earlier authorities on the life and activities of the saint and his immediate circle. The culling of a number of lines from Sankaradeva's poetical works and their reproduction in simple English rendering is another feature of Dr Goswami's pages, which would make for a proper introduction to the saint's works and teachings.

I do only believe this book will be received by all scholars of Indian Vaisnava history with warmth and approbation.

Punjabi University
Patiala-147002
23 September 1982

MAHESWAR NEOG,
Saint Sankaradeva Professor

INTRODUCTION

In the fifteenth century A.D., India was in the throes of a religious upheaval. Saints, religious leaders and social reformers in different parts of the country were striving to put an end to the traditional religious ceremonies, rites and rituals and social evils like caste distinctions. Thereby they tried to promote a feeling of oneness among the people through a religious movement best known as the bhakti movement. The spirit of religious ferment was at work in all parts of the country and the easternmost part of it was also not left out. It was Sankaradeva, who gave a tremendous impetus to this neo-Vaisnavism, which later on came to be known as 'Eka-sarana-nama dharma' or 'Mahapurusiya-dharma'. He wanted to abolish caste-divisions in religious and social matters, spread the message of universal brotherhood and by preaching in the Assamese language rather than in Sanskrit, which was confined to a select few, gave impetus to literature of that part of the country.

But the present state of Assam and its people are not sufficiently known outside even within the country till today and sometimes they are represented rather wrongly.¹ Kamarupa, the earlier name of the place was, however, known as a land of magic and witchcraft for its tantric temple of Kamakhya.² In the epics and puranas, the place is referred to both as Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa. The modern name Assam was connected with the Tai (Thai) invaders, who established their kingdom in the eastern part of the valley in the first half of the thirteenth century A.D. In modern Assamese, the Shan (Tai) people are called Ahom. They first settled in the eastern part of the present state and gradually extended their territory towards the west. The present name

1. J.D.Andersen "Assam", Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. ed. J. Hastings, Vol. 2, pp. 135-137, states that Sankaradeva 'probably' was inspired by Caitanya of Bengal. There is neither any historical record or even any tradition to support this.

2. B. Kakati, The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, ed. 2, Gauhati, 1961.

Assam has thus a connection with the Shan invaders of the thirteenth century.³ The earlier territories of Kamarupa were wider and extended over a considerable portion of West Bengal and the Mymensing district of the present republic of Bangladesh.

According to the Kalika-purana, the ancient religion of the land of Pragjyotisa was Saivism; because it is said that the place was reserved by Sambhu for his own domain. It was King Naraka, who introduced the cult of Kamakhya for the first time in Kamarupa. The region was divided into many small kingdoms and was under different rulers at different periods of history. The Chutiyas ruled over the easternmost part and the south-west region was under the Kacharis. There were the domains of some small chiefs called Bhuyans. The kingdom of Kamata was in the extreme west and was ruled by the Koc kings. Their territory also changed accordingly from time to time. The central and the western part of the present State became places of frequent wars among those independent petty kings and rulers.

It is noteworthy that the mighty Mughals tried to conquer that part of India a number of times but ultimately became unsuccessful. Besides the strong military force of the Ahom kings, there are several other reasons which stood on the way of the invaders. But there was no political stability. The capital of the western part was shifted from one place to another, Kamata, Koc Behar, Jalpesvara, etc., for obvious reasons at different times.

It is said that as a result of a treaty between one Durlabhanarayana, king of Kamata, and Dharmanarayana of Gauda of the thirteenth century A. D., seven families of Kayasthas (Ksatriya) and seven families of Brahmans were settled in Kamarupa. Candivara Kayastha, the great-great-grandfather of Sankaradeva, was one of them, and he became the leader of these fourteen families. He settled in the eastern part of Durlabhanarayana's kingdom. By his scholarship and administrative ability Candivara soon grew in power. He was also recognised by the king as the leader of the group as Bara Bhuyan or Siromani Bhuyan. Candivara was a follower of the Sakti cult as his very name also suggests. His neighbouring territories were ruled by the Koces, the Kacharis, the Ahoms and the Bhotas in the north.

3. B. Kakati, *Assamese, Its Formation and Development*, Gauhati, 1962, Introduction.

Candivara had to change his own headquarters from time to time because of political unrest. At last he permanently settled at Alipukhuri-Bardowa (Batadrava), a place in the present district of Nowgong (Assam). The place is said to be surrounded by an embankment called Tembuvani-bandha; while the area of their settlement is known as Alipukhuri, probably because of many roads (ali) and ponds or tanks (pukhuri).

ANCESTRY AND ADVENT

In tracing the genealogy of Sankaradeva, some biographical works mention the name Prema-purnananda-giri of the Atri Gotra. But these traditional accounts are difficult to be regarded as true history and it is safe to come down to Landavara, ninth in descent from Prema-purnananda-giri and father of Candivara. On the strength of biographers like Ramananda, it is held that towards the end of the thirteenth century, Sankaradeva's forefathers came from Gujarat to Kanauj and after about thirty years they again migrated to Gauda. After more than two decades, they left Gauda for Kamarupa in the middle of the fourteenth century.⁴ The most authentic biographer, Daityari Thakur, provides genealogy of the Guru from Landavara or Landadeva.⁵ According to another account⁶ we have the following genealogical note; 'Prema-purnananda-giri married Savi and she gave birth to Supantha-giri; he used to stay at Kanauj-pur, his wife Mriga had a son, Vriksa-giri. Vriksa married Santa and Candra-giri was born to her, who in course of time married Akuti. Akuti's son Atri-giri had a son Krisna-giri to his wife Kanakavati. The name of Krisna-giri's wife is Dhriti. Her son Suvarana-giri married Mandira and Gandharva-giri was born to her. Gandharva-giri's wife Laksmipriya gave birth to Rama-giri, who married Bharati. Hema-giri was born to Bharati and in due course Hemagiri married Savita. Her son Harivara-giri's wife Prahuti (Prakriti ?), who again had Hari-giri as her son. Hari-giri's wife Bhusana had a son Hayavara-giri by name.⁷ He had three wives, Indhani (Indrani), Aruni and Anasuya. His daughter was Krisna-kanti and her son was Landadeva. Landadeva's wife

4. Daityari Thakur, Mahapurusa Sri-Sri-Sankaradeva-madhavadeva-carita, ed. by R. M. Nath, Sylhet, Saka 1869, intro., p. 7.

5. Ch. II, V. I.

6. Carioghati Mahantar Than-Satrar Vamsavali, Aibheti Na-Sattra Coll., Ms in Agar Bark.

7. Here successively three 'Haris' appear, which seems probably to be a confusion.

Suprabha gave birth to Candivara. In another account it is stated that Candivara stayed at Banduka of the Gauda kingdom.⁸ Candivara married Sandhya and along with other six Kayasthas, namely, Hari, Srihari, Sripati, Sridhara, Sadananda and Cidananda and seven Brahmans, namely, Krisna Pandita, Raghupati, Ramavara, Lohar, Dharam, Bayan and Mathura, was settled at Lenga-Maguri on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra.

Candivara's son Rajadhara married Devahuti. She had four sons. Suryavara, the eldest, married Khersuti, daughter of Rama Caudhari. The second and the third sons Jayanta and Halayudha respectively married Gutimali and Subhadra.⁹ The youngest son Madhava married Satarupa. Halayudha died pre-mature without leaving any issue behind. Jayanta's son was Satananda and Satananda's son was Jagatananda, who married Narayanapriya. Jagatananda is generally known by the name Ramaraya or simply Raya Ata. Madhava's son was named Madhavi Dalai, his son Ratiknata Dalai and Ratikanta's son was Hathiya Dalai. Suryavara's son Kusumavara married Srihari Bhuyan's grand-son Aniruddha's daughter Satyasandha. Srihari's wife Malakanti had a son, Hridayananda by name. He married Ramapriya and in course of time Aniruddha was born to her. Satyasandha's mother was Sarasvati. Having no issue born from his first wife, Satyasandha, Kusumavara married Anudhriti of the Sripati Bhuyan's family. In course of time, Satyasandha gave birth to Sankaradeva and Anudhriti to Bangaya-giri.

When Candivara was stationed at Lenga Maguri, he constructed the Tembuvani-bandha and the Bara Bhuyas settled there. As an able and popular administrator, Candivara could overcome the political troubles created by the neighbouring Bhutiyas when they were at Lenga-Maguri. He had to move his capital as well as his place of residence from Lenga-Maguri to Bhalukaguri, Rauta and Kuthar-dubi for a time due to troubles from the Bhutiyas.

After the death of Candivara, his son Rajadhara became the head of the Bara Bhuyans called Siromani Bhuyan. Rajadhara, after staying at Rauta for a short period, shifted to Alipukhuri-

8. Balisattra-Vamsavali, Ms in Agar bark, f. 3 a.

9. Cario-ghati Mahantar Than-Sattrar Vamsavali, f. 2, a. M. Neog, in his Sankaradeva and His Times, p. 64, shows Subhaga as wife of Madhava Dalai, and further states that Halayudha was the youngest son.

Bardowa and made it his capital. Sankaradeva, in his rendering of the Bhagavata Purana, X, Adi,¹⁰ provides his genealogy and identification from Rajadhara. Rajadhara died at Alipukhuri at the age of sixtytwo. He is said to have reclaimed Bardowa and made it suitable for human habitation after it had remained a deserted forest.¹¹ Rajadhara's son Suryavara succeeded his father as Siromani Bhuyan or Chief of the Bhuyans. Suryavara died after the marriage of his son Kusumavara with Satyasandha. Kusumavara then became the chief of the Bhaumikas (bhaumika madhyata sara). Having no issues from either of his two wives, Kusumavara offered worship to Lord Sadasiva at Gopesvara Singari.¹² The Lord appeared, as the story goes, in a dream and granted Kusumavara the boon of himself taking birth as his son. Therefore, Sankaradeva is said to be an incarnation of Sankara. The story is available in many Assamese and Sanskrit works.

In his own writing, Sankaradeva provides his identity as follows :

baradova name grama sasye matsye anupama
 lauhityara ati anukula
 sehi maha gramesvara achilanta rajadhara
 kayastha kulara padma phula
 tane putra suryavara maha bara desadhara
 jnani mani parama visista
 yara yasa ebho jvalai jayanta madhava dalai
 dui bhai yahara kanistha
 tane putra kuloddhara bhaumika madhyata sara
 prasiddha kusuma nama yara
 tane suta sisumati krisna pawe kari nati
 viracila sankare payara
 (Bhag. p., X. Adi)

The village named Bardowa, situated just near (on the bank of) the Lauhitya (Brahmaputra), was rich in food and fish; the head of that village was Rajadhara, the lotus-like

10. Srimadbhagavata, pub. by Dutta Barua, Nalbari, ed, 1973, p. 914, vv. 121, 26-27. Similar verses are also available in his other works like Bhag. P. VI, p. 426, vv. 5609-10 and Bhag.-p., VIII, p. 617, vv. 8162-64, Hariscandra-upakhyaana and Ramayana.

11. Dvarika Dvija Misra, Santavali, Ms obtained from Madar-guri-sattra, Tezpur, vv. 360-61, M. Neog, Sankaradeva and His Times, Gauhati, 1965, p. 66.

12. Daityari, Ch. III, vv. 26-28, Dvarika, vv. 363-64.

person of the Kayastha community. His son Suryavara was a famous administrator, a charitable, respectable and distinguished person; his fame is still glittering. He had two younger brothers, Jayanta and Madhava Dalai. His worthy son, the rescuer of the family and great among the rulers (landlords) was famous by the name Kusuma. And his son, the poor-minded (immature) Sankara composed these verses by paying homage at the feet of Lord Krishna.

There is no controversy regarding the month and year of Sankaradeva's birth. But in the lunar reckoning, all biographers are not unanimous. Daityari Thakur, the earliest and most authentic biographer, is silent regarding the exact date of birth of Sankaradeva. That the Guru was born in the month of Asvina in 1449 A.D., is an established fact;^{12a} but the exact date differ from work to work; Daityari states that Kusumavara's wife gave birth to Sankaradeva on an auspicious period of midnight.¹³ There are mainly two opinions amongst the biographers. That Sankaradeva was born on Thursday, Kartika-samkranti (last day of the month of Asvina of 1371 Saka) at midnight on the full dark moon, have been recorded in most of the now available works,¹⁴ although it is now generally observed on the 10th day of the bright moon of the month of Asvina, following some works of highly doubtful authority.¹⁵ The former works further hold that the 10th day of the bright moon of Asvina is the date of Kusumavara's passing away. However, there is no doubt that the Guru was born at Alipukhuri-Bardowa, a small village in the present-day district of Nowgong (Assam).¹⁶ Many

12a. One of the early biographers, Ramananda, gives Phalguna as the month of the saint's birth.—M.N.

13. Ch. III, v. 30.

14. (i) *Katha-guru-carita*, pp. 20, 223-24; (ii) *Bardowa-carita*, ch. ii; (iii) *Dvarika*, V. 367; (iv) *Cario-ghati*, Mahantar Than-Sattrar Vamsavali, f. 2b; (v) *Bali-sattra-Vamsavali*, f. 3a; (vi) *Naradeva*, ff 1-2a, (vii) *Diciyal-vamsavali*, f. 1a; (viii) *Vamsavali-caritra* (P. Goswami, Bardowa); (ix) *Kuji-vamsavali*; (x) *Sri Sankaradevara Vamsavali-caritra* (Bardowa); (xi) *Candracarur* (Vamsavali by); (xii) *Gurucaritra* of Balisattra; (xiii) *Mahapurisar Vamsavali*; (xiv) *Dui Thakurdevar Vamsavali*.

15. The most popular one is ascribed to Ramacarana.

16. Some like to identify Alipukhuri with a spot near the railway terminus Mairabari in Nowgong, now called Patekibari. A small temple has since been erected in the place.

miracles are said to have happened at the time of the birth of Sankaradeva. After the birth of the child, Kusuma sent for the family astrologer, Santarama¹⁷ to draw up the horoscope. After astrological calculations the child was named Ganga-dhara.¹⁸ Santarama found in the babe all the marks of a divine person. As Sankaradeva was born as a result of Siva's blessings, he was called Sankara-vara. Afterwards his school teacher, Mahendra Kandali, seeing his extra-ordinary merit and some miraculous incidents, conferred on him the epithet 'deva' and thereafter Sankara came to be known as Sankaradeva. According to tradition, he had ten names : Sankaradeva, Gangadhara, Mahapurusa, Deka-giri, Santa, Adhikari, Mahanta, Gomosta, Ata and Jagannatha.^{18a} Some orthodox Vaisnavas further maintain that as the Guru received illumination in the Jagannatha temple at Puri and as he also performed some miracles during his stay there, so he is to be the incarnation of Lord Jagannatha in the human form.¹⁹ When Sankaradeva was thirteen month old, Kusuma's second wife, Anudhriti, gave birth to a son who was known as Haladhara or Bangaya-giri because he was born in the forest following an attack of the Kacharis.

17. L.N. Bezbaroa; Mahapurusa Sri Sankaradeva aru Sri Madhavadeva, ed. 2. Gauhati, 1963, p. 13.

18. Daityari ch. III, v. 34.

18a. This is the contention of the Bardova-carita, ed. M. Neog.

19. Information gathered from (a) the late Sattradhikar Sivendra Deva Goswami of the Balisattra, Nowgong, who was regarded as an authority on Sankarite learning, (b) Namoram Dutta Nam-lagowa, the 70 years-old monk of Bardowa.

The Katha-guru-carita describes a very interesting story where it is said that during the dance performance witnessed by many saints of different parts of India, Sankaradeva smiled at a very trifling incident and that caused annoyance to others. But when asked, Sankaradeva explained another incident which occurred inside the Bhoga Mandira, which caused his smile. After enquiry it was found true, and with surprise, he was regarded by all as an incarnation of God (Panda bhog namaiche thakurar, utal hate pail, erile pare, nerile pore; upai napai celeka mari khai thale, tatehe hasya kailo nudhule dekhil).

CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

Sankaradeva lost his parents early in his childhood and his paternal grand-mother Khersuti had to take care of the child.²⁰ There are many miraculous stories relating to the Guru's childhood career. Up to the age of twelve Sankara spent his time by playing and roaming in the fields after the cows along with his other comrades. Of his playmates, Ramarama, a descendant of Krisna Pandita and family priest of Sankaradeva, deserves special mention. Others included Jayarama, Bitopana, Canda, Titarama, Bhakuri, Ketai, Sanatana, Harivara, Satananda, Hari, Harijaya, Jayahari, Ramahari, Srihari, Ciran, Biran, Ramaraya, Ramjaya, Bisai, etc.²¹ We have five male and six female attendants who served in the house of Sankaradeva. They are : Dhvaja Banbara,²² Bakara, Ubala, Gada, Gakula and Candari,²³ Gutimali, Madhai, Madhavi, Rohini and Radhika.

As a strong and energetic youth, Sankaradeva caught wild birds, jackals and swam across the mighty river Brahmaputra.²⁴ In all these pastimes nobody could excel Sankara. When he attained the age of eleven he was invested with the sacred thread.²⁵ He had no other passion but sports and games. Though he caught birds, deer and porpoises, he did it only for amusement and left these creatures immediately without any injury. One day, his grand-mother sitting at the table reminded him of the

20. The carit-puthis are not unanimous on this point. L.N. Bezbaroa on the authority of his father states that Sankara's mother died after three days of the child's birth. It is, however agreed on by all biographers that the Guru was brought up by Khersuti.

21. Carioghati Mahantar Than-sattrar Vamsavali, f. 8a-b, states this list as 'guru janar cate sisulila kara bhakta'.

22. The descendant of Dhvaja was the famous monk Haricarana Bara of the Balisattra, whose family members are still living there.

23. This lady one day took a 'little dust, from Sankara's feet' which is now preserved at the Balisattra; see M. Neog : op.cit., p. 323.

24. Daityari, ch. IV, vv. 37-42.

25. Dvarika, v. 371.

glorious tradition of his family and asked Sankaradeva to go to school. Accordingly he was admitted to the *tol* (school) maintained by Mahendra Kandali of Singari.²⁶ Sankaradeva is said to have been admitted to the school on an auspicious Thursday in the month of Bhadra.²⁷

After learning the alphabet within a few days of his admission into the school, Sankaradeva composed a hymn called 'Komal Gita' (soft song, literally; song composition having no use of vowels except the first 'a') glorifying the God. The hymn appears to be a proof of his profound knowledge and divine power, besides poetic genius. It goes like this :

karatala kamala kamala-dala-nayana
bhava dava dahana gahana vana sayana
napara napara para satarata gamaya
sabhayamabhaya bhaya mama hara satataya
kharatara bara sara hata dasa-vadana
khagacara nagadhara phanadhara sayana
jagadaghamapahara bhava bhaya tarana
para pada laya kara kamalaja nayana.

Having seen the composition, the teacher Mahendra Kandali was highly surprised, and he could guess the future greatness of his young pupil. It may be remembered that Guru Nanak also composed his acrostic (called *patti*, in Raga Asa) just on his learning the alphabet. On another occasion, the teacher Mahendra Kandali saw a strange phenomenon. One day Sankara was sleeping in the school house all alone after the class and a large cobra came and extended its hood over the head of Sankara to protect him from the rays of the sun.²⁸ When the teacher approached, the serpent crept away. This also reminds us of a similar incident which happened in the life of Guru Nanak when he was once sleeping in the field. Mahendra Kandali, from that day, had firm belief in the divinity of the young student and reverently conferred on Sankara the epithet of 'deva' which was generally used by the Brahmans. He further asked all the school boys

26. The *Diciyal-vamsavali* provides the name as 'Bahbariya-guru' probably Mahendra Kandali lived in Bahbari, which might be the name of a village.

27. L. N. Bezbaroa, *op. cit.*, p. 17, also M. Neog, *op. cit.*, p. 102; *Daityari* has not furnished the day and the month.

28. Also narrated by L.N. Bezbaroa, *op. cit.*, p. 18 and M. Neog. *op. cit.*, p. 102.

to call him Sankaradeva and exempted him from doing any manual work in the school.

Within a few years, Sankaradeva mastered all branches of learning like the Vedas, the Upanisads, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the tantras, the puranas, the samhitas, kavyas, grammar and lexicon,²⁹ etc., and 'became an unerring scholar.'³⁰ He was so sharp and devoted a student that he could easily 'complete the course of studies within less time than was required ordinarily.'³¹ During that period, Sankaradeva studied some works on Yoga and was attracted to that. Accordingly, he used to practise Yoga day and night and was able to perform many miraculous deeds through it.³² By exercising Yogic power, Sankaradeva is reported to have spent many hours under water. This also has similarity with Guru Nanak's life, who is said to have become invisible under the water for few days. But later on when Sankara came to know the supremacy of the Bhagavata-bhakti, he gave up the practice of Yoga.³³ The Yoga exercises gave him enormous physical strength to such an extent that once he quelled a mighty bull which created problems to the neighbouring people. It was probably for this Yogic practice in his early youth that the Guru possessed an extra-ordinarily sound health and had a long life of nearly one hundred and twenty years.

Sankaradeva spent nearly ten years in his school. It is said that he composed his Hariscandra-upakhyaṇa during that period. Thus in his early boyhood, Sankaradeva had shown some of the qualities, which were inherent in him to make him the famous saint and social reformer in future. According to Bhusana³⁴ and Daityari,³⁵ Sankaradeva became well-versed in all the sastras 'and came out a finished scholar'. With his outstanding merit, Sankaradeva surpassed even his senior school fellows within a very short time. Some biographers are of the opinion that the Guru returned home at the age of seventeen (or according to others, nineteen) after completing the study of all the scriptures. The Master then had to take charge of the Bhuyan estate as Siromani Bhuyan.

29. The Katha-guru-carita gives detail of the learning that Sankaradeva acquired at the seminary of Mahendra Kandali.

30. Daityari, Ch. IV, v. 52.

31. Ibid, also M. Neog, op. cit., p. 102.

32. Daityari, Ch. V, vv. 55-59, Dvarika, vv. 372-3.

33. Daityari, Ch. VI, v. 60.

34. Sri-Sankaradeva aru Sri-madhavadeva-carita, vv. 47-50.

35. vv. 52-54.

DOMESTIC LIFE

Having acquired a solid knowledge of the essential branches of learning, Sankaradeva, after his return from school began to study more intensively with an unbending zeal. When he gave up the Yogic exercises, there seems to have happened some change in his life. It took a decisive turn for his spiritual development. The Guru acquired the true knowledge and became totally indifferent to the worldly affairs. He used to meditate day and night and repeat the Name of God. His nature had changed to such an extent that his grand-mother Khersuti credited him with madness.³⁶ Accordingly, physicians and village quacks were consulted and some medicines were applied. Sankaradeva obliged his old grand-mother by accepting these with a smile.³⁷ A like incident happened in the life of Guru Nanak too. Meanwhile some relatives suggested that in order to change his mind, Sankaradeva should be entrusted with some domestic responsibilities. As such, the Siromani Bhuyanship was given to him by his superiors, though Sankaradeva was unwilling to take charge of it. After the demise of Kusuma, the duties of the Siromani Bhuyan were discharged by Jayanta and Madhava Dalai, grand-fathers of Sankaradeva. When it was entrusted to the Guru, he with great credit performed his duties as such. His pleasant behaviour and sweet words kept all spell-bound as they came into his contact.³⁸ The Guru was then twentyone year old. His relatives further made arrangements for his marriage.³⁹ In order to please his superiors and relatives, Sankaradeva married Suryavati, daughter of Harivara-giri Kayastha.⁴⁰ Sankaradeva

36. Dvarika, v. 389.

37. Ibid., v. 390.

38. Daityari, vv. 61-63,

39. Dvarika, vv. 391-93.

40. Dvarika, v. 389, gives the name Birinci Kayastha instead of Harivara ; while the Cario-ghati Mahantar Than-Sattrar Vamsavali, f. 26, holds Sridhara Bhuyan and his wife Sarama to be the parents of Suryavati. It further holds that Suryavati was then fourteen years old.

had to lead a life of householder, but he kept himself engaged in intellectual activities rather than in worldly affairs.

The Guru conducted with credit his administrative affairs as a Siromani Bhuyan, but suddenly he had a bereavement. After about four years of her marriage, Suryavati gave birth to a girl who was named Haripriya or Manorama (Manu). The little child could hardly complete a year when her mother died. It had a deep effect on the mind of Sankaradeva, who had now to take care of the little daughter. The Guru resolved to give up family life and to go on pilgrimage to some sacred places of the country. But as he could not leave Haripriya, he had to wait for a few years till the girl grew up and attained her 'marriageable age'. After seven years or more, Haripriya was married to Hari Kayastha, popularly known as Hari-jovai (Hari, the son-in-law), who later on was beheaded by the cruel Ahom king. Like the Sikh Gurus, the Assam Vaisnavas had also suffered much persecution and even execution particularly at the hands of some Ahom rulers who were instigated by the Brahmans.

However, Sankaradeva was staying at Bardowa. The place, being very near the mighty river Brahmaputra, was very often inundated by floods causing heavy damage to crops. To get rid of this calamity, Sankaradeva constructed an embankment with the help of a pious lady of the Kaivartta community named Sumthira or Radhika. It is said that Sankara was in search of a chaste lady to construct the said embankment. Women of higher caste like that of Brahman failed to prove their character and at last the Guru found in Sumthira, an outcaste lady, with all the good qualities of a pure woman possessing chastity. The lady, it is said, could perform some miracles by carrying water in a fishing instrument (pala). The dike was also constructed accordingly without further erosion. It is known as the 'Santi-dhar' (embankment of the Santi) and the course through which water could flow is still known as 'Santijan'. How far the story was true is not a matter of our concern; but one point is evident from this that Sankaradeva put a great emphasis on purity of character and inner sanctity without any caste distinction rather than on the then prevailing notions of high birth. The story is to be interpreted in an allegorical sense. By his pure devotion, Sumthira's husband rose to the position of a Mahanta (a preacher).⁴¹ San-

41. Dvarika, v. 492

karadeva declared that there is no distinction between the dwija (twice-born) and the Sudra in Nam-dharma, and that all are equal in his faith.⁴²

There is another story where Sankaradeva is stated to have brought the heavenly Ganges (Akasi-ganga) by his miraculous power and it remained in the form of a tank situated to the north of the Kirtan-ghar (or Nam-ghar) of Bardowa. Even now the tank is considered as a holy place for bath.⁴³

Some biographers hold that after his first marriage Sankaradeva constructed the first Nam-ghar (or Kirtana-ghar, i.e., prayer house) at Bardowa⁴⁴ with his friend Ramarama and composed and placed the work, 'Gopi-uddhava-samvada' in the altar, called simhasana or thapana. 'This institution (Nam-ghar) became the nucleus of the Vaisnava organisation, which later on spread through the three Assamese States of Asama, Kamarupa and Koc Behar in the form of regional establishments called Sattras, and numerous village temples known as Nam-ghars.'⁴⁵ It is said that the Guru arranged the performance of his first dramatic representation, called Cihna-Yatra, during that time. The show is said to have continued for seven days and seven nights, which was highly applauded by one and all. People of all walks of life, it is stated, were astonished at such a wonderful act of Sankaradeva and acknowledged him to be an incarnation of the Divine One. Many people pressed him for initiation to the cult and the Master was compelled to do that. The first batch of neophytes comprised of his close friend Ramarama and the school teacher Mahendra Kandali and other notable Brahmins.⁴⁶ It is further stated in some accounts that while doing the earth-work for the plinth of the above mentioned Nam-ghar, which was built on a plot of

42. Ibid, vv. 393-94

43. Laksmikanta, the bard of the eighteenth century, describes it in a song glorifying Bardowa in the following way :

uttare akasi-ganga bhakti sarovara
nisa-bhage namailanta Srimanta Sankara.

The akasi-ganga situated to the north, is the lake of bhakti, which was brought down by Srimanta Sankara at night.

44. e.g., Dvarika, vv. 402-405. L.N. Bezbaroa, op. cit., pp. 23-24 further considers this to have been done even before his marriage.

45. M. Neog : 'The Vaisnava renaissance of Assam' in 'Aspects of the Heritage of Assam', Souvenir of the Indian History Congress, Gauhati Session (XXII), Gauhati, p. 32.

46. Dvarika, vv. 412-417.

land of Kusumavara, Sankaradeva found an idol of Visnu and it was placed accordingly in an appropriate corner of the prayer-house.⁴⁷ This, however, does not mean that Sankaradeva encouraged idol-worship, because people were initiated before the asana (or Guru-asana) where the holy scripture was placed and not before the idol.⁴⁸ Moreover, Sankaradeva felt the necessity of some personal form of God to be perceived by the common laity—at least in the initial stage of a bhakta's (devotee) life. However, it is clear that Sankaradeva after the 'Cihna-yatra' came to be regarded as the Guru. Some scholars think⁴⁹ that Sankaradeva constructed the Nam-ghar and arranged the 'Cihna-yatra' show after his return from the first pilgrimage, which appears to be more probable. For, during his long pilgrimage Sankaradeva might have had varied experience of dramatic representations of different parts of India, which might have contributed to his own imagination.

47. There is no idol at the present prayer-house of Bardowa. Tradition says that it was carried by his descendants from place to place. When Bardowa was reclaimed by Damodara Ata, great-grandson of Sankara after a long time, he is said to have installed it at his place of residence, i.e., at Balisattrra. Later on the thatched Kirtana-ghar there caught fire and the idol was broken into pieces. There is a plinth, Vasudeva-bheti (plinth of Vasudeva) in Balisattrra which is said to be the actual place where the idol was kept. It may be mentioned here that all valuable articles of the period of Sankaradeva, including that of the famous 'Citra-bhagavata' (Bhagavata-purana, X, Adi, with miniature paintings) of the 16th century A.D., are preserved at Balisattrra, a place near Bardowa.

48. L.N. Bezbaroa, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

49. M. Neog, *op. cit.*, p. 107

FIRST PILGRIMAGE

After the death of his wife, Suryavati, Sankaradeva was thinking of going on a pilgrimage but could not do so due to his little daughter. When Manu was married to Hari-jovai, Sankaradeva became free from domestic life and handed over the charge of the Siromani Bhuyanship to his grand-uncles, Jayanta and Madhava Dalai. The Guru then started on a long and extensive pilgrimage in 1481 A. D. accompanied by some of his disciples. Although different biographers provide variant list of pilgrims, it is held that the group consisted of seventeen members.⁵⁰ Dvarika, who gives a detailed account of the places they visited, records the following fifteen members : Ramarama, Vyasakalai, Mahendra Kandali, Sarvabhauma, Ananta Kandali, Paramananda, Rudradhara, Kalki, Kalpataru, Jagannatha, Dharadhara, Manpur, Nandinatha, Kanu and Govardhana.⁵¹

It is held by all biographers that the Guru spent twelve years in different holy places like Vrindavana, Mathura, Kurukshetra, Haridvar, Badarikasrama, and Jagannatha, etc. But as some biographers relate⁵² it is not certain whether Sankaradeva visited all the places of pilgrimage in India. It is further stated that after visiting Varindavana and Mathura, most of the members returned home and only two, Paramananda and Sarvabhauma, remained with Sankaradeva.⁵³ The Guru spent one year at Vrindavana and Mathura and then went to Haridvar and Badarikasrama. Thereafter, Sankaradeva came to Jagannāthaksetra at

50. Ibid, p. 103; L.N. Bezbaroa, op. cit., p. 32.

51. vv. 507-509, of this list, only Ramarama, Mahendra Kandali and Paramananda appear in the list given by L.N. Bezbaroa. The Cario-ghati Mahantar Than-sattrar Vamsavali, f. 3a, states that only twelve persons accompanied Sankaradeva. They are : Ramarama, Sarvajaya, Paramananda, Balarama, Balabhadra, Govinda, Narayana, Bar Sriram, (Srirama, the elder), Gopala, Chota Balarama (Balarama, the younger) Mukunda and Murari.

52. Dvarika, v. 517.

53. Ibid, V. 513

Puri where he stayed for a long time. During the period Sankaradeva met scholars and teachers of various schools and had discussions with them. It is said that as per request of the priests at Jagannātha, Sankara rendered into Assamese verse the 'Udesa-Varnana', glorifying Lord Jagannatha. This version was later on included in his *Kirtana-ghosa*.⁵⁴ The Guru stayed at Puri for a long time. At Jagannatha-ksetra Sankaradeva 'received his illumination of Jnanabhakti and came in contact with people of various shades of religious opinion.'⁵⁵ For, like Guru Nanak, Sankaradeva too, had no earthly Guru. This he himself proclaimed in the following way :

hridayara parama isvara mora guru
prabhu bhagavanta bhakatara kalpataru. .

O Supreme Lord of my heart, Thou art my
guru, the redeemer of the bhakats—just like
the wish-fulfilling tree.

In some biographies, the names of many persons of various periods are put together and are reported to have discussions on religious matters with Sankaradeva, probably because there existed some affinity in their teachings. These stories in all their details can hardly be acceptable unless we find these corroborated by more reliable testimony. It is possible that Sankaradeva had some disciples outside his own state, particularly at places where he stayed for a long time. The Guru, as mentioned above, stayed one year at Vrindavana and several years at Puri and it was probably there⁵⁶ that Rupa, Sanātana and Vrindavanadasa were initiated to bhakti by the Guru. Rupa's acknowledgement in the Nandi-sloka of his *Vidagdha-madhava* Nataka, to his Guru Sankaradeva is clear from the following verse : 'adyaham svapnantare samadisto' smi bhaktavatarena bhagavata Sri-Sankaradevena.' (This day, I have been commanded (to compose the drama) in another dream by the Lord Sri-Sankaradeva, the incarnation of God as a bhakta.⁵⁷) Some scholars like to interpret the

54. Ibid, vv, 533-38.

55. M. Neog, op cit. p. 104 : also see 'The Vaisnava Renaissance in Assam' in the Aspects of the Heritage of Assam, Souvenir of the Indian History Congress, 22nd Gauhati Session, Gauhati, 1959.

56. Dvarika, v. 514, According to some, Sankaradeva met Rupa on his way back from Jagannatha. There is, therefore, reason to assume that the Guru initiated Rupa and others

57. M. Neog, Sankaradeva and His times, pp. 105-106, 105-106-n.

word 'Sri Sankaradeva' here as referring to Siva ; but the word 'Bhaktavatarena' still remains unexplained, which by no means can be accepted as referring to Siva. It is possible that Rupa, after meeting Caitanya was converted to the Vaisnavism of Bengal, and even then had his respect for his first Guru Sankaradeva. Moreover, it was Sankaradeva who was regarded as an incarnation of Lord Siva. It may again be pointed out that during his second pilgrimage, Sankaradeva wanted to know the tenets of Rupa and Sanatana by paying a visit to Vrindavana, which, however, was cancelled for Madhavadeva's unwillingness.

Sankaradeva went on his journey by foot, and it took one month for him to reach the Ganges.⁵⁸ Thereafter the pilgrims proceeded to Puri and then to Vrindavana, Mathura, etc. After that Sankaradeva journeyed to Haridvara and Badarikasrama, where he is said to have composed the following lyric, one of the class of songs called *bargita* :

- ✓ Rest my mind, rest on the feet of rama
 seest thou not the great end approaching ?
 my mind, every moment life is shortening,
 just heed, any moment it might fleet off.
 my mind, the serpent of time is swallowing :
 knowest thou that death is creeping on by inches.
 my mind, surely this body would drop down,
 so break through illusion and resort to Rama,
 oh mind, thou art blind ;
 thou seest this vanity of things,
 yet thou seest not.
 what art thou, o mind, slumbering at ease ?
 awake and think of Govinda.
 O mind. Sankara knows it and says,
 except through Rama, there is no hope.⁵⁹

58. Dvarika, v. 509.

59. M. Neog, *op. cit.*, p. 105, reproduced from B. Kakati's Sankaradeva, pp. 37f. Some scholars consider this to be the first *bargita* by Sankaradeva who is said to have composed two hundred and forty (*bare kuri*) similar songs in different ragas.

BACKGROUND OF THE MOVEMENT

The period preceding the movement of Sankaradeva may be styled as the darkest one in history in point of all-round deterioration. Morality of the people of India in general was at its lowest ebb, irreligion was rampant and in place of the worship of one God, several jarring cults and creeds reigned in the frontier states of Asama, Kamarupa and Behar. Superstitions and meaningless ritualism became the practice of the day. Injustice, tyranny, selfishness and indulgence in immoral pursuits in the name of religion were in vogue everywhere. The age of the Guru Sankaradeva was an age of great religious upheaval all over the world which produced many great men of revolutionary views. Saints, seers, mystics and scholars like Kabir (1440-1518 A.D.) and Guru Nanak (1469-1538 A.D.) in India and Martin Luther (1483-1546 A.D.), Erasmus (1466-1536 A.D.), and St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556 A.D.) in the West flourished in the same period. A host of saints and mystics appeared in different parts of the country in the same age. In India, great confusion and doubt prevailed in the domain of religion. Caste division and priestly oligarchy had become a source of social irritation and a means of popular exploitation. There was no spirit of piety and the whole atmosphere was surcharged with irreligious and immoral doings. Naturally, there was a reaction against the priest-ridden ritualism of various types and such other social and moral evils. It was at this juncture that a number of religious leaders and social reformers like Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak, Ekanath, Namdev, Tukaram, Caitanya, Dadu, Ravidas, etc., came on the scene. To combat these moral and social evils, there was a great revival of the cult of devotion or bhakti in the 15th and 16th centuries and many saints seem to have taught similar doctrines all over India. They introduced an era of revolution in the history of India as a whole and in Assam, the same was initiated by the great Guru Sri-Sankaradeva, who gave it a new distinct shape; a new impetus to the people and a new life in its various aspects. These saints resembled one

another in their doctrinal fervour, their compassion for all creatures and their spiritual vision. Owing to their love of humanity, they did their best to democratize and vernacularise Vedanta to bring it down from heaven to earth. Madhavadeva, the apostolic successor of Sankaradeva, has rightly expressed this in his following Nam-ghosa :

vaikuntha prakase hari-nama-rase
prema amritara nadi.
srimanta sankare para bhangi dila
vahe brahmandaka bhedi

Formerly the stream of the nectar of love flowed only within the confines of Vaikuntha, until Sankaradeva came and breached the embankment, and lo ! now it flows tumultuous through all the world.

At that period, the vast majority of Hindus were divided into the Vaisnava and Saiva sects, worshippers of Visnu and Siva respectively. Sankaradeva discarded the caste system and protested against the authority of the Brahman priesthood. Thus the bhakti-dharma, which was given a new interpretation and a definite shape in Assam by the great Guru, acquired a new dimension and took the form of a mass movement for the realisation of its ideals. So, the bhakti movement in Assam found an expression different from that in other parts of the country. Sankaradeva's doctrine of universal equality and fraternity were irresistibly attractive and drew adherents in great numbers. Persons of all castes and occupations were admitted into this new-found faith. The Guru brought about a new consciousness and a new awakening, shaking all the old foundation of time-worn society. It was a big step for any one in those days to accept an equal brotherhood instead of the deep-rooted caste system, the right of bhakti for even women and the minimising of the value of all traditional rituals and ceremonies. He declared in a bold way :

stri sudre kare yadi amata bhakati
tahato kahiba ito jnana mahamati
(Kirtana-ghosa : Vaikuntha-prayana)

Krisna says :

✓ If women and sudras cultivate bhakti for me,
impart to them this knowledge, O great-minded one.

Women and low caste people were held in the older order of society to be inferior and not fit for attaining salvation or heaven, but the Guru put an end to these wrong ideas. He embarked on a mighty campaign against the age-old superstitions and prejudices with a view to bringing about the necessary reformation in the religious and social spheres.

Before the advent of Sri-Sankaradeva, Saktism had been the most dominating religion of ancient Kamarupa. Kamakhya, the goddess of Sakti, overpowered the inhabitants with her magic and charm. In the name of religion, people used to practise most heinous deeds including human sacrifice. Instances are not wanting in the tantric and puranic accounts regarding such malpractices and irreligious deeds. Such tantric rituals occupied the place of religious faith for centuries together, and they even continued until the neo-Vaisnava movement of the late fifteenth century A.D. Hinduism was on the verge of extinction under the influence of the later corrupt forms of Buddhism. Even the great Sankaracarya had to go back defeated because Saktism was too deeply rooted in ancient Kamarupa. The period after that is marked by incessant strife among different ruling tribes who had various religious faiths. There were strifes among the rulers for political supremacy in Kamarupa and adjoining parts and unrest prevailed in all spheres of life. Such condition hurled the land into chaos in all matters including religion. In such a situation, the priest-craft took the opportunity of serving their own interests and gradually they became successful in converting the ruling races like the Ahoms, the Chutiyas and the Kacharis into Hinduism. The Koces, who ruled in the western part, also became converts and with the royal patronage Sakti worship began to spread far and wide in a highly vitiated and debased form.

In such a period of social demoralisation, political disintegration and religious stagnancy, the great reformer Sankaradeva emerged from the Siromani Bhuyan Kayastha family of the land and preached his 'eka-sarana-nama-dharma' with absolute devotion to the Supreme One. The Guru expressed his apathy towards idol-worship and deprecated the performance of all ceremonial rites and rituals of the Tantras. He declared with a mighty Voice :

God is the Absolute and the Only Supreme Deity of the universe. He is without attributes and forms. He is all-

pervasive, Omnipresent, and infinite. He is the beginning of the universe and He is the end of it. He is the real and all but Him is illusory and unreal.

To obtain the grace and mercy of Him, Sankaradeva propounded the doctrine of self-surrender through *dasya-bhakti*. The Master further proclaimed :

Throw thy body, soul and all at the feet of that Vast
One with single-minded devotion and thou wilt enjoy the
bliss of human life.

To propagate his mission, Sankaradeva had to fight hard with several inimical forces all through his life. The Brahman priests opposed his ideas in order to keep their own social supremacy. Sankaradeva upheld the teachings of the Gita and the Bhagavata-purana. The Brahmans, who mainly had constituted the priestly class carried on some debased form of rituals and ceremonies and became deeply dissatisfied at Sankaradeva for his new ideas, because it proclaimed equality of man and the hollowness of too much of formalities in ritualistic matter. The interest of the priestly Brahmans being highly affected by this, they became openly hostile to Sankaradeva and they took the Guru as a target of attack. Several attempts were made by them to crush the growing popularity of Sankaradeva's faith. The Brahmans even poisoned the king's ear by reporting things very vile against Sankaradeva. So the Guru had to face some trials at the royal court; but ultimately he came out triumphant. One silly ground of the rejecting of his faith by the orthodox circle was that the Guru happened to be by birth a Kayastha and not a Brahman. The Brahmans held that other castes had no right to preach religion or take active part in matters religious. However, amidst such bitter persecution and severe hostility, Sankaradeva's movement came out successful; and some eminent Brahmans like Damodara and Harideva also joined him. But soon after the passing away of Sankaradeva, a dissension of the above group of people appeared once again and it had a great impact even in the later history of Vaisnavism in Assam.

AT BARDOWA : PROPAGATION OF THE FAITH

The Guru in his pilgrimage visited most of the sacred places of the country particularly in Northern India; and his travels continued for twelve years.⁶⁰ When Sankaradeva returned home after his pilgrimage, he was about forty-seven years old.⁶¹ Following Daityari,⁶² Dvarika⁶³ and Bezbaroa⁶⁴ are of opinion that Sankaradeva's grand-mother was alive till that time. She heard the news of Sankara's return and as she hastened to see him, Khersuti fell down and had an injury on her leg. It is to be inferred that the Guru acquired vast knowledge of the religious movement and of different sects of the time by visiting almost all sacred places of the country. He now determined the form of his own faith and devised ways and means for propagating and preaching that. He was acquainted with the philosophy and theology of various bhakti schools along with their devotional music, which formed part of vehicle for propagating the ideals of contemporary saints and seers of India. With such 'wide experience of religious life' of the country, Sankaradeva started his own Vaisnava bhakti movement known as Eka-sarana-nama-dharma with a distinct and new interpretation in its doctrinal and ritual matters. It may be pointed out that the first sojourn of Guru Nanak also covered a period of twelve years.

After Sankaradeva's return to Bardowa, his old grand-mother Khersuti passed away. His grand uncles, Jayanta and Madhava Dalai, handed him over the charge of the Siromani Bhuyan, but the Guru declined to accept it and expressed his desire of leading a life of devotion and prayer. Then the kinsfolk insisted on his

60. Dvarika, vv. 542, 547; L. N. Bezbaroa, *op.cit.*, p. 38; M. Neog, *op.cit.*, p. 106.

61. Dvarika's calculation in v. 549, in this regard does not seem to be correct.

62. Ch. VII, v. 70.

63. v. 545.

64. *op.cit.*, p. 35.

marrying again, which the Guru declined. But they urged on him repeatedly to marry and at last Sankaradeva had to agree to that. Accordingly, at the age of forty-eight⁶⁵, Sankaradeva married Kalindi, daughter of Cidananda Bhuyan⁶⁶. Later on Kalindi gave birth to three sons—Ramananda, Kamalalocana and Haricarana. Even as a householder, Sankara's zeal for the mission he had in view was not hampered, and he held religious discussions and prayers in the Nam-ghar constructed for the purpose. There he held congregational prayers and chanted songs to the accompaniment of musical instruments. People were attracted to these novel gatherings, which increased in number day by day. The Guru laid down some rules for performing prayer services and offered prasada to the scripture. The prasada, consisting of pulses, rice, banana and other fruits, were distributed among the congregation as soon as the prayers were over.

Sankaradeva composed some lyrics for chanting prayers and a few sections of Kirtana-ghosa for the same purpose. Besides, he translated some Sanskrit Visnuite texts into Assamese verse. The Nam-ghar at Bardowa, which was the first of its kind in Assam, became the centre for religious discussion, literary and cultural activities as well as a nucleus for dissemination of his message of bhakti. Many people came and received ordination from Sankaradeva. Those who had no livelihood, used to stay on the campus of the Nam-ghar after their initiation and Sankaradeva provided the means and expenditure for their maintenance.⁶⁷ People offered Sankaradeva many presents which he used to distribute among the bhaktas. This practice he continued all through his life.⁶⁸

As has already been mentioned, some biographers hold that the performance of the Cihna-yatra at Bardowa to be an event coming after the Guru's return from his first pilgrimage. Sankaradeva, at the request of his relatives and friends organised the

65. M. Neog, *op.cit.*, p. 106. According to the Cario-ghati Mahantar Than-sattrar Vamsavali, f. 3 a, Sankaradeva was of the age of thirty-five and Kalindi was thirteen.

66. Cario-ghati Mahantar Than-Sattrar Vamsavali, f. 3a. It gives the name Aruni as Kalindi's mother, Dvarika, vv. 551-52, gives the name Gunda-giri Caudhari instead of Cidananda. M. Neog, *op.cit.*, gives the name Kalika Bhuyan.

67. Dvarika, v. 568.

68. Daityari, Ch. VI, vv. 60-62; The Katha-guru-carita relates many instances of Sankaradeva's charity and benevolence.

historic dramatic representation, Cihna-yatra. For this purpose, musical instruments like khol (mridangā) and tal (cymbal) were prepared under his supervision. The Guru engaged himself in painting pictures of the 'seven Vaikunthas'. Sankaradeva also prepared masks and composed preliminary orchestral music called dhemali for the performance.⁶⁹ It is said that the Guru himself played the role of Sutradhara and as the show was divided into seven parts, people saw him at all the seven places simultaneously. Leaving aside the element of miracle, it may be contended that the show was unique of its kind in the history of Indian dramaturgy as a whole, because of its dhemalis performed by the gayan-bayan musical party and for the employment of local prose in it in that far off fifteenth century. It was a grand success and the audience was spell-bound as it were. Sankaradeva afterwards composed and staged his ankas or natas, which formed an affective machinery for propagating the faith. The Cihna-yatra was witnessed by Jagadisa Misra of Tirhut, who came to meet and recite the Bhagavata-Purana to Sankaradeva as per instruction of his Guru Brahmananda. But it is to be noted that before receiving the copy of the Bhagavata-purana from Jagadisa, a follower of Visnupuri, Sankaradeva had already rendered some portions of it into Assamese verse. Jagadisa is said to have passed away as soon as the reciting and expounding of the Purana was over. In recent times a queer attempt has been made in a book⁷⁰ to show that Sankaradeva had some sectarian relation with Jagadisa and Visnupuri. The book created a great commotion and di-satisfaction among the followers of Sankaradeva and the theory was proved totally baseless and false in another book⁷¹ and the former is said to have been banned by a court of law. After receiving the Bhagavata-purana from Jagadisa, the Guru 'found it convenient to dive deep into its content' and 'started translating it into simple Assamese verses, making them easily intelligible'⁷² to all. The Than-Varnanargita⁷³ describes how Sankaradeva composed his books at Bardowa :

69. Dvarika, vv. 580-83.

70. M. Sastri, *Asamar Vaisnava Darsanar Ruprekha*, Nalbari, Assam.

71. S. Chutiya, *Asamar Vaisnava Darsanar Svarnarekha*, Golaghat, Assam.

72. P. C. Chaudhury, *Jagat guru Srimanta Sankaradeva*, Gauhati 1972.

73. It is by Laksmikanta of the 18th century.

pachime silikha vriksha⁷⁴ haliya achaya
 tahate auji guru pustaka likhaya

The *terminalia citrina* tree is standing in a reclined position, situated on the west, where the Guru lounged and wrote books.

Sankaradeva's work of proselytisation expanded day by day and he made many converts, including women like the wife of Jayanta Dalai and even a leper named Harirama, who afterwards became known as Tulasirama. From the Janamsakhis, it is known that Guru Nanak also converted a leper and stayed with him. Thus the movement and a cultural upsurge had their inception while Sankaradeva was in his native place at Bardowa⁷⁵. But the Bhuyans had to encounter very frequently with the neighbouring Kacharis, who became a permanent source of trouble to the Bhuyans at Bardowa. The problem could not be overcome and people became panic-stricken of the Kacharis.⁷⁶

74. The tree, known as 'Sankara-silikha' is still there, the original being decayed, a new plant had come up.

75. M. Neog, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

76. Dvarika, v. 596, L.N. Bezbaroa, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36; Daityari ch. VIII, vv. 98-99, confuses this and says it to be an Ahom invasion.

MIGRATION TO THE NORTH BANK

In order to get rid of the Kacharis, the Bhuyan chiefs made a plan, and invited the Kacharis to a feast in friendly terms. When the Kacharis were enjoying the feast the Bhuyans suddenly attacked them. Being perplexed at such an unexpected attack, the Kacharis tried to escape but the Bhuyans pursued the enemy with great slaughter. Many were the wounded and some of them fled away. The incident came to the knowledge of Sankaradeva, who became highly displeased at such behaviour of the Bhuyans and warned them against dire consequences that might follow.⁷⁷ When the Kachari chief could learn of the treacherous activities of the Bhuyans, preparations for a fresh attack were made; and apprehending the revenge the Bhuyans had to arrange retreat to the north bank of Brahmaputra. Even Sankaradeva had a hair-breadth escape from a sudden attack by the Kacharis, and with his kinsfolk crossed the Brahmaputra to Singari. They arrived at Rauta, where Sankara could stay only for six months.⁷⁸ The Guru left Bardowa in 1516 A.D.,⁷⁹ when he was sixty-seven year old. While crossing the river Brahmaputra, Sankaradeva received a copy of the Gita which was floating down the river.⁸⁰ The Guru had to move from place to place. From Rauta, he moved to Komorakata where he spent another six months.⁸¹ In this way Sankaradeva had passed three years,⁸² and then arrived at Gangmau where he could settle for a time.⁸³ Here Sankara's eldest son

77. L.N. Bezbaroa, op. cit., p. 36.

78. Diciaryal-carita, f. 26.

79. M. Neog, op. cit., p. 100, counts 48 years of Sankaradeva's life at Ali-pukhuri, 12 years in wandering in holy places and 7 years and 6 months at Bardowa.

80. Daityari, Ch. VIII, vv. 204-5. The work is reported to have been preserved at Balisattra near Bardowa.

81. Diciaryal-carita, f. 26, Dvarika, v. 601, gives one year.

82. Dvarika, v. 598.

83. According to the Diciaryal-carita, the Guru stayed there for five years. Dvarika, v. 599 also agrees to this. L.N. Bezbaroa op. cit., states 'seven years and six months' !.

Ramananda was born. The two other sons, Kamalalocana and Haricarana, were also said to have born at Gangmau. When the message of Ramananda's birth was given by the maid-servant Candari to Sankaradeva, the Guru instead of rejoicing, composed a lyric (bargita)⁸⁴ expressing his regrets at the futility and transitoriness of worldly things. From Gangmau, the Bhuyans again moved to Cangini where they stayed for six months.⁸⁵ According to Dvarika, the Bhuyans could not stay at Gangmau for troubles created by the Daflas.⁸⁶ So they again moved to Dhuwahata Belaguri and settled there. Here the Guru administered ordination to Govinda Atai of the Garo hill tribe and Ramacandra of the Mishing (Miri) community⁸⁷. Despite such political unrest and turmoil, Sankaradeva was always engaged in performing his religious and literary activities wherever he went. At Dhuwahata, Sankaradeva made many converts and his fame spread wider and wider. Sankaradeva fixed the main tenets of his faith, laid down the method and technique of propagation through literature, devotional services called Nam-prasanga, and drama. The Guru laid the foundation of a creed in which unity of God and brotherhood of man formed the prominent features :

anyatra dharme nahi adhikara.
 janiba kalita namese sara
 kevale kirtane samsara tari
 bandha cindi howe apuni Hari.⁸⁸

In the Kali age, people have no right in other creeds, but only the Nam-dharma (chanting the Name of God) is of the best substance in this age. Man can get rid of the cycle of birth and death merely through kirtana and can attain Godhead.

So the singing of hymns in praise of God occupies an important place in Sankaradeva's system.

bhai mukhe rama bola hridaye dhara rupa
 eteke mukuti paiba kahilo svarupa.⁸⁹

Oh brother, utter the Name of Rama and meditate on Him in your heart; thus certainly will you obtain salvation.

84. Pave pari hari karaho katari, etc., in Raga Kedar.

85. Diciaryal-carita, f. 26, Dvarika, v. 600.

86. V. 599, Bezbaroa, op. cit., p. 41 calls it menace from the Bhutiyas.

87. Dvarika, v. 604.

88. Kirtana-ghosa, Pasanda-mardana.

89. Ibid. Syamanta-harana.

The congregational singing thus became an important aspect of Sankaradeva's religion. He discarded all other formalities and ritualisms of the Hindus and proclaimed :

tapa japa yajna maha dana tirtha snana
koti bhago nuhi krsnakathar samana
yahara mukhata thake hari hena nama
ganga gaya kasi puskarato nahi kama.⁹⁰

All penances, acts of meditation, sacrifices, great gifts and holy bath in water are not even like the lowest number in a vulgar fraction of the Name of God (Krisna-lore). One, in whose speech the Name of Hari is present, need not go on pilgrimage to the holy Ganges, Gaya, Kasi or Puskara-tirtha.

yata tapa dharma veda vedanga
hari name kare save susanga
jnanata karmata kari samprati
hari-kirtanese parama gati.⁹¹

All penances, religious deeds, performance of vedic rites, etc., are accomplished by the Name of Hari. The uttering of the Name of Hari is superior to both jnana-marga and karma-marga.

ana dharma eri hari nama smari
sukle pawe yena gati
aneka prabandhe samaste dharmike
napawe taka samprati,⁹²

Leaving aside all religious deeds one can by remembering the Name of God easily attain such a goal as even by austere practice of other religious ways, no one can attain.

durate dharmaka parihari
yito cinte hridirupa dhari
nitante kirtana matra kare
vaikunthata thake sito nare.⁹³

Leaving all formal religious acts, one who meditates, on the form of the Lord by heart and simply celebrates the Name of God, can easily attain to Vaikuntha.

90. Bhagavata, X, tr.

91. Kirtana-ghosa, Pasanda-mardana.

92. Ibid, Ajamila-upakhyana.

93. Kirtana-ghosa, Pahrada-carita.

suna sarvajana tattva ito maha bhagavata
 tiniyo lokata sarottara
 yata maha yajna dana koti koti tirtha snana
 keho ara napawe ocaro.⁹⁴

Hark ye all. This Bhagavata-tattva is the best substance in the three worlds, all big sacrifices, acts of offering gifts, holy baths and pilgrimages even for crores of times are unable to come near it.

Sankaradeva proclaimed the supremacy of the bhakti-dharma in the same work.

bhakatira pare dharma nahi samsarata
 cariyo vedara jana ehi sara tattva.⁹⁵

There is no other great religion in the world than bhakti or devotion : this is the essence of all the four vedas.

krsna rama nama vani
 kene lela kara jani
 yata maha yajna dana
 tapa japa tirtha snana
 keho nohe aka sari
 daki bola hari hari.⁹⁶

Knowing the (efficacy of the) Name of Krisna and Rama, why should you neglect (chanting) it ? All acts of great sacrifice, gifts, penances, meditations, pilgrimages and holy baths cannot be equal to the Name of God. So do utter the Name Hari, Hari.

yata tapa ache samaste karoka
 paroaka parvate uthi
 samaste tirthata snaniya phuroka
 vedaka padhoka tusti,
 yata yajna ache samaste yajoka
 karoka yoga abhyasa
 harira kirtana nakari tathapi,
 neraya mrityura trasa.⁹⁷

If some one accomplishes all penances, climbs on and falls down from a mountain peak, takes holy baths in all

94. Ibid : Hara-mohana.

95. Ibid : Rasa-lila

96. Kirtana-ghosa : Jarasandha-yuddha.

97. Ibid, Veda-Stuti

places of pilgrimage, acquires vast knowledge through the vedas, performs all sacrifices and practises Yoga, even then he cannot escape the jaws of death so long as he does not celebrate the Name of God.

cari veda astadasa purana yateka sastra
parama vedanta bhagavata
sanaka sunanda muni yoga jnana bicariya
uddharila tara sara tattva
agama purana yata vedantaro tatparya
jani kara bhakatika sara
sravana kirtana bina ana punye napai jana
ito ghora samsarara para.⁹⁸

Sages like Sanaka and Sunanda searched for the truth in the four Vedas, eighteen puranas, all sastras, the Vedanta and Bhagavata, in Yoga and in jnanas, and brought out this essence of all—that the path of bhakti is the best of all; without listening to and chanting the name of God, nobody can overcome the terrible cycle of birth and death, by other virtues.

maha yajna vidya dane kona karya kare
maha ugra tapa kari michatese mare
jagatara guru moksadata narayana
tahana nakare yito sravana kirtana.⁹⁹

Of no avail are huge sacrifices, scholarship and charity; and great and austere penance are performed in vain by one who does not celebrate Narayana, the bestower of salvation and the Guru of the universe, in sravana and kirtana.

tantra mantra yajna yata tapa tirtha koti sata
hari name adhika savate.¹⁰⁰

The name of Hari is higher than crores of tantras, mantras, sacrifices, penances and pilgrimages.

yi jane yaya hari-nama sevi
pachata phure yata deva devi
yateka tirtha take tuti kare
tara bayu papa samaste hare.¹⁰¹

98. Ibid, Veda-Stuti

99. Ibid., Odesa-varnana.

100. Ibid : Bhagavata-tatparya

101. Kirtana-ghosa : Bhagavata-tatparya.

If one serves God by uttering His name, all deities follow him; all holy places of pilgrimages make prayers to him and by pious air blowing from such a person, all sins are destroyed.

Thus Sankaradeva said : See the Lord within yourself. The places of pilgrimage cannot wash away sins; clean your heart first. Fasting and other observances are meaningless unless the mind is purified. Rituals and ceremonies are of no avail if love is not awakened in the heart. The Guru in that way believed in the simple and direct approach to God through bhakti or devotion. Some elements of caste distinction remained within the various Vaisnava sects of India; the bhakti literature reveals the belief in the equality of man but it could not eradicate totally the old and deep-rooted prejudices in this aspect. But Sankaradeva discarded the caste divisions by putting Brahmans like Ramarama, Damodara, etc., a Garo hill tribal Govinda, a Mishing Ramacandra and even a Muslim Chandsai on an equal footing. The Guru questioned the traditional religious ceremonies and declared the message of universal brotherhood. Although he had to face severe obstacles from the orthodox section of Brahmans, by virtue of his unblemished argument, Sankaradeva ultimately rose triumphant. So the Guru declared :

suniyoka abhipraya ata pare punya nai
howai suddha maha antya jati.¹⁰²

Listen, there is no other virtue like this which can purify even the worst low-caste people.

devata janmato kari ajati bhakata srestha
aka bhala janilo niscaya.¹⁰³

I could know it for certain that a devotee having a humble birth is superior even to the gods.

sito candalaka garistha mani
yahara jihvagre srave Hari-vani.¹⁰⁴

Even a Candala is considered superior who utters the name of Hari.

kukura khaya hena mlecha jane
siyo suddha howe hari kirtane

102. Bhagavata, x. tr., Adi.

103. Ibid.

104. Kirtana-ghosa : Pasanda-mardana

candalo hari-nama lawe matra
karibe ucita yajnara patra.¹⁰⁵

Even the untouchable dog-eaters are purified by chanting the Name of God. If a Candala utters the Name of Hari, he qualifies himself to perform sacrifice.

nalage deva dvija risi huibe
nalage sambhrita sastra janibe.¹⁰⁶

There is no necessity of becoming a god, Brahman or a sage (risi); no necessity of acquiring the knowledge of large number of scriptures.

krisnara kathata yito rasika
brahmana janma lage tara kika
smaroka matra hari dine rati
nabache bhakati jati-ajati.¹⁰⁷

Those, who are interested in Krisna-lore, need not be born in high castes. Let them only remember Hari day and night. There is no discrimination of high or low caste in the path of devotion.

yito candalara kaya vakya mane
sadaya sumare hari
ache bahra vrata yito brahmanara
si si srestha tato kari.¹⁰⁸

The Candala, who, by his body, word and mind meditates always on the Name of Hari, is better than a Brahman, who performs all his twelve Brahman-like vows.

maha papi ati adhamajati
tako name kare pavitra ati.¹⁰⁹

Even the worst sinner and low-born person is purified by the Name of God.

brahamanara candalara nibicari kula
datata corata yara dristi ekatula
nicata sadhuta yara bhaila eka jnana
tahakese pandita buliya sarvajana.¹¹⁰

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid; Prahrada-carita.

107. Kirtana-ghosa : Pasanda-Mardana.

108. Ibid, Prahrad-carita.

109. Ibid : Bhagavata-tatparya.

110 Ibid : Vaikuntha-prayana.

He who has no discrimination of caste between a Brahmana and a Candala (the untouchable), who has an equal eye for a donor and a thief, and who has the same respect for the low and the saintly is recognised as a scholar.

In this respect, Sankaradeva expressed the same view as was declared by Kabir : 'In the sight of one God ant and an elephant are equal and there is no difference between a Brahman and a Candala. In both of them shines the light of the same Brahman, just as milk of a white and a black cow is of the same colour.'¹¹¹ Sankaradeva further preached the equality of man and admitted that all human beings are but manifestations of God :

yata jiva jangama kita patangama
aga naga jaga teri kaya.¹¹²

All creatures including insects, and this world—the mountain, the trees, etc., are but Thy body.

samasta bhutara tumisi atama
hridaya parama guru.¹¹³

Thou art the soul of all creatures and the Supreme Guru of the Heart.

yata dekha caracara harimaya nirantara
harita prithaka keho nohe.¹¹⁴

All visible objects are but Hari. There is nothing else except Hari.

samasta bhutate acha viyapi
bhajantaka prabhu bhaja tathapi.¹¹⁵

Thou art pervading all creatures, still then Thou hast some attachment to Thy devotees.

samaste jagate hari janiba niscaya kari
gucayo buddhira ito bhrama.¹¹⁶

Know it for certain that all the world is but God :
Hence remove the delusion of your intellect.

samasta bhutate vyapi acho mai hari

111. R. K. Verma : Sant Kabir, p. 32.

112. Bargita : narayana, kahe bhakati karu tera, in Raga Dhanasri.

113. Kirtana-ghosa : Pahrada-carita.

114. Ibid : Hara-mohana.

115. Ibid : Kamsa-vadha.

116. Ibid : Vaikuntha-prayana

savako maniba tumi visnu-buddhi kari.¹¹⁷

I am pervading all beings, so consider all as Visnu.

samasta pranika dekhibeka atma sama.¹¹⁸

One should consider all creatures like his self.

Sankaradeva's movement gained much popularity when he preached freedom from corrupt religious practices, placing all men and even women, the high and the low on social and spiritual equality. Despite constant incursions by the Kacharis, the Bhutiyas, the Daflas and the like, Sankaradeva engaged himself in propagating his faith and initiated many people from different walks of life. He regularly held Nam-prasanga or congregational prayers and religious discourses. It was here at Belaguri that the Guru met the great Sakta scholar, Madhavadeva, who later on became his most worthy apostolic successor, in 1522 A.D.

117. Ibid.

118. Ibid.

MEETING WITH MADHAVADEVA

According to Daityari¹¹⁰ 'Sankaradeva only revealed the secret of Bhakti; it was Madhavadeva who made it public'. Similar statements are also there in the Naghosa by Purusottama Thakur.¹²⁰ The lives of the two Gurus are so closely related that one is inseparable from the other. In Madhavadeva's life the actual duty of a devout and ideal disciple can be observed well performed and the guru-sisya relationship well established. When Sankaradeva met Madhavadeva and converted him to Vaisnavism, the movement began to sway with fuller vigour and greater success.

Madhavadeva was born to Manorama, wife of Govindagiri Bhuyan, alias Lamkana Dighala Kath¹²¹ of the Bara Bhuyans, in 1489 A. D. Govindagiri migrated from Banduka to Narayanapur. For many years, he had to move from place to place for livelihood. From his first wife Govinda had a son Damodara.¹²² After the death of his wife, Govinda left Banduka and settled at Rauta. There he again married Manohari or Manorama of the family of Suryavara, grand father of Sankaradeva. Govinda was appointed a scribe by Suryavara.¹²³ Govinda afterwards took shelter in the house of the boatman Ghaghari of Habung. When he was at Leteku-pukhuri in modern Narayanapur area, Manorama gave birth to the saint on the last day of the month of Vaisakha in the twelfth bright moon midnight in Saka 1411 = 1489 A.D.¹²⁴ After a few years, Urvasi,

119. *op. cit.*,

120. pub, Pathacakra, Nowgong (Assam), 1947.

121. He is also known by the names, Mahodara and Barkana.

122. Cario-ghati Mahantar Than-sattrar Vamsavali, f. 3b; but according to Balisattra-vamsavali, f. 8b, his name was Daityari and his son was Damodara, which does not appear to be correct. Dvarika, v. 614, gives the name Ramacandra instead of Damodara.

123. Diciyal-carita, f. 3a.

124. Diciyal-vamsavali, f. 26; but according to the Cario-ghati Mahantar Than-sattrar Vamsavali, he was born on the 'twenty-fifth' day.

younger sister of Madhavadeva was born at Habung. In proper time she was married to a Bhuyan youth, Gayapani by name. Then Madhavadeva with his father went to Banduka, where he was educated under Rajendra Adhyapaka and soon became adept in the sastras. After the death of Govindagiri, Madhava returned to the place of Gayapani, alias Ramadasa of Hokorakuci.

When Madhava was at Banduka, his mother used to stay with her son-in-law, Gayapani. Once Madhava received the information of his mother's serious illness. As he was then a staunch Sakta, he resolved to sacrifice a white goat to the goddess Durga so that his mother could have speedy recovery. Then Madhava proceeded to see his mother; but by that time, Gayapani had moved to Dhuwahata-Belguri. There he met Gayapani and asked him to buy goats for the proposed sacrifice. But Gayapani refused to do that because he had already become a follower of Sankaradeva's faith and Sankaradeva had given him the name Ramadasa. The Sakta scholar, Madhava, argued with his brother-in-law Ramadasa on the propriety of blood sacrifices to gods. Ramadasa asked Madhava to go to Sankaradeva and argue with him. Accordingly, Madhava, with a view to arguing with Sankaradeva, came to the latter's place accompanied by Ramadasa.

After introduction, a historic verbal dual ensued between the two great scholars of two different faiths. Madhava in support of his view, quoted verses from various scriptures. Sankaradeva refuted his arguments citing superior grounds from different scriptures and sought to establish the supremacy of the Visnu-Krishna cult. The debate continued for three praharas¹²⁵ and each of them sought to establish his own faith as superior. Madhava spoke in support of the pravritti-marga, while Sankaradeva tried to show the supremacy of the nivrittimarga. At last Sankaradeva cited the following verse from the Bhagavata-Purana¹²⁶ :

yatha taror mula-nisecanena
tripyanti tat-skandha-bhujopasakhah
pranopaharac-ca yathendriyanam
tathaiva sarvarhanam acyutejya.

As the branches, leaves, and foliage of a tree are nourished by the pouring of water only at the root of the tree, as the

125. Daityari, Ch. XVIII, v. 262; Dicityal-carita, f. 41.

126. IV. 39, 24.

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 Acyuta.¹²⁷

At this, the proud scholar Madhava was humbled, and he immediately fell down at the feet of Sankaradeva and accepted him as his Guru.¹²⁸ This historic meeting which took place in 1522 A.D., is called 'mani-kancana-samyoga', union of gems with gold.¹²⁹ Henceforward, Madhava devoted his whole life to the services of his Master as well as to the cause of the Vaisnava faith. By leading the life of a celibate, he became an ideal bhakat and although a girl was betrothed, Madhavadeva managed to break up that engagement very skilfully. After the acquisition of the great scholar, Madhavadeva, the organisational work of the Vaisnava Order of Sankaradeva gradually received wide scope, and the number of its followers tended to increase day by day. Sankaradeva also declared that he became a complete person only on the acquisition of Madhavadeva. Madhavadeva, after his ordination to the new faith, assigned the responsibility of his mother to Ramadasa and used to stay with his Guru Sankaradeva.

At Dhuwahata-Belaguri, Sankaradeva stayed more than fourteen years. He had to his fold, many people including the two Brahmans, Ratnakara Kandali and Vyasakalai. The Guru held regular religious discourses and mass prayers. A section of the priestly Brahmans could not tolerate the growing popularity of Sankaradeva and from the very beginning they opposed the democratic creed preached by the Guru. His teaching was just like a challenge to the Brahmans. Being badly affected in their profession, they brought some charges against Sankaradeva. This hostile group vilely reported to the Ahom king Suhungmung (1497-1539 A.D.) that Sankaradeva was preaching a corrupt religion not envisaged by the Vedas. The Guru was summoned to the court. He was able to refute the charges with his arguments from the scriptures. The king was convinced and

127. M. Neog, op. cit., p. 110, reproduced from B. Kakati, Sankaradeva, p. 41.

128. Besides Daityari, Ch. VIII, Dvarika also provides a detail account of this historic meeting from vv. 678 to 764.

129. Dvarika, v. 764, As considered till late, it was not Bezbaroa who used this phrase first ; the tradition was in vogue in the Vaisnava circles from a long time back.

Sankaradeva was 'honourably acquitted.' Even after this, the hostility of the Brahmans did not cease.

In a place where tantric cults and various tribal faiths were predominant, the effect of preaching such a faith of equality and universal brotherhood could easily be imagined. The saint openly discussed these and invited his opponents to a fixed place where a debate was held. The Brahmans were compelled to admit that the Guru's stand was correct. But as they were losing their supremacy in the society simply on the strength of their birth, they still remained envious of Sankaradeva. By that time, the Bhuyans were made culprits by the Ahom monarch on the charge of their failure in catching elephants.¹³⁰ Sankara's son-in-law, Hari, and Madhavadeva were arrested and after trial, Hari was beheaded and Madhavadeva was kept in confinement for six months.

130. Diciaryal-carita, f. 4a; Daityari, Ch. XXVI ; p. 105 f ; Cario-ghati Mah antar Than-Satirar Vamsavali, f. 26.

WESTWARD MIGRATION

For this tragic incident and the growing hostility of the priestly Brahmins, the Guru was highly embittered and he decided to leave the Ahom kingdom where he could see no hope of promoting his order in a peaceful way.¹³¹ In the meantime, King Naranarayana of Koc-Bihar and his younger brother Cilaraya, alias Sukladhvaja, grew in power in western Kamarupa and invaded eastern Assam. The Guru had already learnt about the scholarly disposition of the Koc king. In 1546, a war broke out between the Ahoms and the Koces. Sankaradeva availed the opportunity to migrate with his kinsmen and other followers to the Koc kingdom. With the help of Gabharu-khan, who provided Sankaradeva military escort, Sankara left the Ahom kingdom for ever and arrived at Kapala, where he could stay only for six months and then again proceeded to Baradi (near Barpeta). Thereafter Sankaradeva moved to Palengdi or Cunpara, now within Barpeta.¹³² The Guru thought that it would be possible for him to fulfil his mission of life in the Koc kingdom. He settled there in comparative peace. Here also he attracted many people to his fold. Narayanadasa Thakur Ata, who was formerly known as Bhavananda,¹³³ a rich merchant, and Damodara and Harideva—the two notable Brahman disciples are among the converts made at Barpeta. Sankaradeva, thus could propagate his faith with full vigour. Narayana, who later on became a devoted friend of Madhavadeva, managed to get a good number of followers of the faith. Finding the atmosphere very calm and quiet, the Guru set himself to the task of propagating his creed through religious discourses, congregational prayers, recitation of the sacred texts and songs and dramatic performances.

Sankaradeva finally came to Patbausi¹³⁴ near Barpeta and

131. M Neog, *op. cit.* p. 112.

132. Daityari, Ch. XXVIII, v. 458; Dvarika, v. 952.

133. Daityari, *ibid*; Dvarika, vv. 952-56.

134. Daityari, *ibid.*, v. 460 ; Dvarika, v. 965.

that became his permanent place of residence. It was here that the major portion of his writings were composed and the Guru stayed here for about twenty years.

Sankaradeva set a rare example of inter-caste marriage when he agreed and gave consent to the proposal of his brother Ramaraya's (Jagatananda) daughter Kamala-priya or Bhubanesvari's marriage with the Koc Commandar-in-chief, Cilaraya. This new relation further strengthened the support of the royal authority and Sankaradeva could attract and convert many people in an increasing number. Naturally, the hostility of the priestly Brahmans again grew in that part also. But the Guru could easily overcome these troubles. The Muslim tailor, Candsai, who was afterwards known as Jayahari and acquired the position of a Mahanta (Atai, preacher), was initiated by the Guru at Patbausi. Because of Cilaraya's marriage with Bhuvaneshvari, Sankaradeva's faith received full support and patronage and his place of residence grew into a centre of dissemination of Namadharma.

SECOND PILGRIMAGE

In 1550 A.D., Sankaradeva set out on a pilgrimage accompanied by one hundred and twenty bhaktas. This time he visited Puri and came into contact with holy men from different parts of the country.¹³⁵ The *Katha-guru-carita* and some other works provide account of this journey even in its minutest detail. This time Madhavadeva was also with him and served the Master all through his travel. In course of their journey, the occasion for composing many songs and lyrics by the two Gurus are fully described. On his way back to Puri, Sankaradeva is said to have visited the abode of Kabir, where he is reported to have met the daughter of Kabir. Some biographers hold that Sankaradeva also met Caitanya at Puri; but from the historical point of view such a meeting was not possible and the narration cannot be accepted as authentic, and may, therefore, be treated as the 'pious imagination' of the biographers. Sankaradeva is also said to have met Ramananda and Harivyasa and some mythological persons, as also a nephew of Rupa and Sanatana. However, the party intended to visit Vrindavana, but as Madhavadeva was unwilling to go, Sankaradeva had to cancel the programme. At Puri, they stayed for a few months and then returned to Patbausi. The journey is said to have covered six months only.

135. K.D. Goswami, *Early History and Development of the Purusa Samhati Sect of Assam Vaisnavism*, Ph.D. thesis (MS), p. 68

THE LAST DAYS AT KOC-BEHAR

On return from the second pilgrimage, the Guru resumed his work. But the Brahmans of the Koc king's court became very jealous of Sankaradeva. They brought some false allegations against the Guru and abused the ears of the king.¹³⁶ Sankaradeva was summoned to the court accordingly. By dint of his dignified mien, erudition and personality, the master rose triumphant.¹³⁷ While presenting himself at the court of Naranarayana, Sankaradeva recited his Sanskrit hymn in the totaka metre (madhudanava darana deva varam, etc.) and two raja-bhatimas, eulogising the king. The king did not know the conspiracies of the priestly class, but he felt much impressed by the personality of the Guru. Sankaradeva expounded the main principles of his Nama-dharma, defeated his opponents and rooted out their malice for good. Naranarayana was deeply convinced and honoured the saint, and assured him of full patronage. Cilaraya built for him a sattra at Bhela-danga near the Koc capital, and requested him to stay there. As was desired by the king, Sankaradeva composed his Gunamala in the Kusuma-mala metre within one night and presented it to the king next day. He also had a long piece of cloth of about sixty metres woven, delineating the activities of Lord Krisna at Gokula and Vrindavana. It took six months to complete that piece of valuable cloth, known as 'Vrindavaniya-vastra'.¹³⁸ Cilaraya and his wife Kamalapriya requested Sankaradeva to write a work for them and the latter asked Madhavadeva to compose the Janmarahasya.¹³⁹ The book was presented to them, and both were administered ordination by the Guru.¹⁴⁰ Though Sankaradeva came back to Barpeta, he had to visit the Koc capital on several occasions. Finally the Guru, at the

136. Daityari, Chs. XXXIV and XL.

137. K. D. Goswami, op. cit. p. 68.

138. Daityari, Ch. XLII, vv. 744-45, simply mentions the name of the place (Tatikuci) and the Guru's supervision of the work there.

139. Daityari, Ch. XLVI, vv. 868-873.

140. L. N. Bezbaroa, op. cit., p. 102.

request of the royal brothers had to stay at Bheladanga for a few years (1567-68 A.D.). Sankaradeva composed his last dramatic work, *Rama-vijaya*, at the request of Cilaraya in 1568.

Of his three sons, Ramananda, the eldest, married Laksmi, daughter of Harikha Bhuyan,¹⁴¹ and Purusottama Thakur was born to her. The second son, Kamalalocana, died a premature death. The youngest Haricarana married the sister of Ramacarana Thakur, to whom Caturbhuja Thakur was born after passing away of the Guru. Thus his family was well settled at Patbausi. The Guru prepared the Vrindavaniya cloth while he was at Patbausi. The cloth, delineating scenes from the early life of Krisna upto the killing of Kamsa, impressed millions of people. King Naranarayana, as a patron and admirer of Sankaradeva became so deeply impressed that he wanted to get himself initiated into the faith of Sankaradeva. But the Guru refused to administer ordination, thinking probably that it would not be possible for a king to observe the religious and ethical code of his faith. In the month of Phalguna of the Saka 1489 corresponding to 1568 A.D., the Guru left Patbausi for Koc Behar. He was attended by his eldest son Ramananda and the attendant Paramananda. Before the departure, Sankaradeva met Madhavadeva for the last time and had the last discussion. The king insisted on him for initiation and the Guru could see no way out of the pressure of the king. He, therefore, decided to leave the world. His end came at the ripe old age of one hundred and twenty years, the cause of which is ascribed to be a boil in an inconvenient part of his body. He was lying on the bed for four days. Then he asked Ramananda to make a seat for him outside. He then went and lay there and in course of his meditation, breathed his last. It was the second day of the bright half of the lunar month of Bhadra in Saka 1490¹⁴² or 1569 A.D. that the great saint closed his eventful mortal life at Bhela Kakat-kuta in Koc Behar.

Considering the versatility of Sankaradeva's genius and the contribution he made to the fields of religion, literature, music and drama, it may be said in the words of Professor B. Kakati, "Sankaradeva had given Assam a new life, letters and a state. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdoms perished in the dust, but Sankaradeva's state endures 'and broad in the general

141. L. N. Bezbaroa, op. cit., p. 147.

142. Daityari, last ch., v. last but one.

hearts of men his power survives'.¹⁴³ As to his personality it may further be added in the words of Madhavadeva, the constant companion and successor to the pontifical seat :

darasita sundara gauda kalevara
yaicana sura parakasa
sakala sabhasada ranjana jakeri
darasane papa vinasa
vine anga bhusana pekhi susobhana
gahina gambhira dhiramati
ayata kamala nayana vara sundara
vayane candakaho jyoti.¹⁴⁴

Handsome to look at, his whole physique is white and resplendent like the sun. His sight, pleasing to people in assemblies, can destroy sins. He is handsome without the aid of any ornaments, grave and majestic, and wise. His lotus-like eyes are large and extremely charming; and his complexion is like the light of the moon.¹⁴⁵

143. B. Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, ed. 2, Gauhati, 1961, p. 83.

144. *Guru-Bhatima*.

145. tr. by M. Neog, *op. cit.*,

LITERARY WORKS

It is surprising how Sankaradeva could contribute such a mass of writings of various forms to Assamese literature. As we have already seen, he had to change his residence very frequently from place to place because of political unrest. Moreover, it was very difficult to obtain and prepare writing materials like the Agar bark folios (*saci-pat*), which were used for writing purpose in that part of the country. Even then, Sankaradeva's contribution in the field to Assamese literature is undoubtedly unsurpassable till today. Some scholars, therefore, have called this period in literature the Age of Sankaradeva. "Around the personality of the poet-reformer centered other literary figures of the time Madhavadeva, the most brilliant amongst them; Rana—Sarsavati, the most voluminous; Ananta Kandali, a pleasant storyteller in verse; Vaikunthanatha Bhattacarya or Bhattadeva and Gopalacarana, the two prose writers and a host of other minor satellites."¹⁴⁶ The saint was a Sanskrit scholar of no mean degree but he wrote his works mainly in the common language of the people, that is, Assamese. His compositions consisted of translations and adaptations, mainly from the Bhagavata-Purana, commentaries and original works of various literary forms which he used as vehicles for expounding his creed. As most of his writings were made for daily prayer services, these were used even by the illiterate folk and thus literacy and learning were greatly encouraged by his writings.

A. POETRY (GENERAL)

The literary career of Sankaradeva has been divided into three periods, corresponding to his stay in the Bara Bhuyan, Ahom and Koc territories respectively.¹⁴⁷ Of all his writings, the

146. M. Neog, *op. cit.*,

147. M. Neog; *op. cit.*, pp. 160-162. The chronology of Sankaradeva's writings was fixed by Professor Neog in his earlier work in Assamese, *Sri-Sri-Sankaradeva*, ed. 2, Gauhati 1952. This has since been accepted by other writers.

Kirtana-ghosa and the Dasama (that is rendering of the Bhagavata-Purana, X, Adi) are treated as most valuable because of their universal appeal. For convenience, his works may broadly be divided into three major groups, viz., poetry, hymns and dramatic writings. His first work, Hariscandra-upakhyana was written while he was a student in the tol. Some biographers, however, hold that the 'Cihnayatra', an opera, was his first literary work; but the same is now not available as a piece of writing. References to 'Cihna-yatra' is found in some biographies only. The 'Cihna-yatra' is claimed by some scholars to be 'the first work of its kind in the whole range of modern Indo-Aryan languages.' Out of the twelve Skandhas of the Bhagavata-Purana, Sankaradeva alone had translated about eight. He had the Bhakti-ratnakara, a work on doctrinal aspects in Sanskrit which, later on, was translated into Assamese verse by Ramacarana Thakur, nephew of Madhavadeva. Sankaradeva composed, besides Cihna-yatra, seven dramas, of which Patniprasada is said to be the first. One of his dramas, Kamsa-vadha, is, of course, lost. He also rendered the Uttarakanda Ramayana into Assamese verse. His lyrical compositions include Bargita, Totaya, Capaya and Bhatima. There are few more gitas and some poetical works like 'Rama-malika', 'Amulya-ratan', etc., ascribed to Sankaradeva; but a section of even orthodox people hold that these works are spurious.

Kirtana-ghosa (commonly called Kirtan), the monumental work of Sankaradeva was written for the purpose of chanting Nama-Kirtana or congregational prayers and thus for propagating the faith. The different sections of Kirtana-ghosa was composed at different periods. The entire work consists of about twenty-two poems comprising more than two thousand couplets in diverse metres.

In the Hariscandra-upakhyana, the Guru declares that there is no difference between God and his devotees and even a low-born Candala is purified by listening to and chanting His Name.

visnu vaisnavara katha duyō samatula
 sravana kirtane kare papara nirmula
 candala paryante kare savake pavitra.

Discourses on Visnu and on Vaisnavas are alike in merit;
 if you listen or chant them, all sins are rootouted. Down

to an outcaste Candala, all are sanctified.¹⁴⁸

In the following passage Sankaradeva glorifies Visnu the Supreme Being, through an argument of the king with Vasistha :

parama purusa hari tanka eri age
kiba gune ganesaka pujibaka lage
jagatara natha samsarara adi mula
visnuka pujibo prathamate diya phula
visnuta arpibe yata puja yajna dana
visnu vyatireka deva najanoho ana.

Leaving the Supreme Being and soul of all, why should I worship Ganesa first ? I must worship Visnu first, for He is the Lord of the world and great source of the universe, I must dedicate all sacrifices, all worships and all gifts to Visnu, for I know no other god than Visnu.

It is narrated in the carit-puthis that in Hariscandra-upakhyana, the four main principles of Sankaradeva's tenets, viz., guru, deva, nama and bhakat, are established as means for pursuing bhakti. Sankaradeva's Bhakti-pradipa is said to have been compiled from the Garuda-purana. The work, consisting of more than three hundred verses, deals with the sole devotion to God, and depicts the supremacy of Visnu-Krisna :

yajne dane vrata moksa kaharo yuguti
keho bole maha jnana yogata mukuti
keho bole sadhe gati ehi rajasui
angira narade bulilanta kichu nui
jnana karma yajoka karanta maha kasta
alpa chidre kare taka tetiksane bhrasta
rajasuya kari yebe brahmaloke care
punya ksaya bhaile dunai samsarata pare.

Some opine that salvation could be obtained by performing sacrifices, by offering gifts and by observing facts; others hold that the same could be had through knowledge. Some said that Brahmaloaka could be attained by performing rajasuya. Hearing this, the sages Angira and Narada said that these are nothing; though something is obtained through jnana, karma and physical austerities, these become useless

148. Some of the translations are taken from : D. Neog, op. cit; B.K. Barua, Sankaradeva : Vaisnava Saint of Assam; M. Neog, op. cit.; etc., rest are the author's own.

on a slight fault. Moreover, Brahmaloaka may be reached by performing Rajasuya, but when the merits are spent, the enjoyer had to fall back on the path of rebirths.

Sankaradeva put much emphasis on *sravana* and *kirtana* as *sadhanas* of *bhakti*. The necessity of supreme surrender to the One is expressed in the following words of Lord Krishna to Arjuna :

eka citte tumi moka matra kara seva
parihara durate yateka ana deva
huyoka saranapanna eka mote matra
moka bhaji haiba tebe mukutira patra.

Devote yourself to me with a single mind. Forsake at a distance all other gods. Surrender yourself to me alone, offer devotion to me; you will then be fit for salvation.

The Lord further exclaimed :

hauka nara yadyapi parama duracara
moke matra bhajiya nupuji deva ana
tathapi parama sadhu sehi more prana
anacara kari aparadhi mora nuhi,
anya deva puje yito sehi mora drohi
maha moksadata mota pare nahi keva
tathapito teji moka puje ana deva

Be a person a big rogue, but if he worships me alone and never worships other gods, he is saintly and dear to me as my life. Violation of moral rules cannot make a man impure, but one becomes a sinner to me by worshipping other gods. There is nobody except myself to grant salvation; even then, a person worships other gods in preference to me !

Like Hariscandra-upakhyaṇa, Rukmini-harana is another *kavya* written in his youth. The materials for the work are taken from the *Bhagavata-Purana*, X, and the *Harivamsa*. The work is so popular that many verses from it are used like Assamese proverbs even today by the common folk. In the opinion of Dr M. Neog, 'It is full of poetical exuberance and descriptive elaboration ; colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions are also numerous. Partly for this popular cast of language and style, and partly for the pleasant subject-matter, appropriately treated, this is one of the most popular of Sankara's works.'

As has already been mentioned, the most important works of

Sankaradeva are the Kirtana-ghosa and the Dasama. The Kirtana is a sort of anthology or collection of about twenty poems in diverse metres. Some of the poems are adaptations from the Bhagavata-purana. While discussing the literary merits of the Kirtana, Jnananath Borah, a modern writer, rightly opines : "All the sentiments—pleasure and pain, love and separation, anger and forgiveness—are equally blended in the 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." Different portions of the Kirtana were written at different periods.

In the daily prayer services (prasanga) in the Nam-ghar and in other places also the Kirtana is used in the Nam-prasanga by both men and women. It is so popular that even an illiterate woman, who leads the congregational prayer, can recite the whole work from her memory. This proves the popularity of and reverence for the Kirtana. Each poem has a ghosa or refrain. The leader is to recite the ghosa twice and the assembly sings it accordingly along with clapping of hands. The leader then sings a couplet or a line and the party is to repeat the refrain at the end of each couplet or line, as the case may be.

The first poem of the Kirtana is Caturvimsati-avatara-varnana (description of twenty-four incarnations) and the first refrain here is :

jaya hari govinda narayana rama kesava
hari rama rama kesava hari.¹⁴⁹

After this refrain, the narrative starts with the following verses :

prathame pranamo brahmarupi sanatana
sarva avatarara karana narayana.

First I pay obeisance to Brahma, which is Narayana and the source of all incarnations.

The first section has four kirtanas, first with six verses, second with eight, third with ten and the fourth with nine verses, thus giving a total number of thirty-three verses.

The second section of the Kirtana is Namaparadha, the source of which is said to be the Svarga-Khanda of the Padma-Purana.

149. Some orthodox Vaisnavas explain that these ten names of God, used in the first ghosa, has some special and very deep meaning.

Sankaradeva further states that he received the original work from Banaras. It consists of two kirtanas, the first having fourteen and the last twenty-four verses. The effects of repetition of the Name of God are enumerated in the form of a discussion between Narada and the four Siddhas. It is said that even the most sinful people are rescued if they take refuge at the feet of Hari, and by incessant repetition of the Name, a devotee ultimately becomes one with God.

Pasanda-mardana is the third section, which was written by the Guru as a reply to those who opposed his creed and when malice and hostility against the Vaisnavas grew to its climax. In order to support his views, Sankaradeva quotes the authority of many Puranas and Samhitas besides the Bhagavata-Purana, in this khanda. It has four kirtanas with a total number of seventy-four verses. The first has sixteen, second eighteen, third seventeen and the last kirtana has twenty-one verses. The Guru declares equal right for all classes of people in devotional matters.

kariya kalita kirtana ati
pawe vaikunthaka chatrisa jati.

By chanting the Name of God in the Kali Age, all the thirty-six races of people can reach Vaikuntha.

Again :

sito candalaka garishtha mani
yahara jihvagre srave hari-vani
sehise kulina vedaka buje
yahara mukhe hari-nama vije

That Candala, on whose lips is ever the Name of Hari, is superior (to all other people), and he is to be regarded as of high order. He who sings the Name of God, alone is to be considered as a man of high caste, understanding the Vedas.

nalage deva dvija risi hui be
nalage sambhrita sastra janibe
michate mare ana karma kari
hoyanta bhakatite tusta hari

One need not be a god or a Brahman or a sage ; and there is no need of knowing all the scriptures. It is in vain that people perform other rituals and get mortified in doing it. God is well pleased with bhakti.

Further, it is here that the Guru discourages such ceremonies as holy bath, pilgrimage and idol worship, for the piety to be earned by all these can be acquired in the holy company of a Vaisnava.

The fourth section is Dhyana-varnana (An account of meditation). The Guru here describes Vaikuntha and its Lord in the first kirtana, which contains ten verses. The next kirtana is a description of the seat of the Lord in eighteen verses. This small poem is a fine piece of writing with splendour and sweetness.

Ajamila-upakhyana is the story of a fallen Brahman, named Ajamila. It is adapted from the Bhagavata-Purana. The story shows how even the blackest of sins could be washed away by the unintelligent utterance of the Name of God. The first and the second kirtana consist of ten and the rest two have eleven verses in each.

The next section is Prahrada-carita. The life of Prahlada, the great Vaisnava, particularly of his boyhood, is here described. Sankaradeva has very clearly propounded the merit of bhakti through this story in simple words. The sources of the story are the Bhagavata-Purana, Books III and IV. It is a most popular poem used profusely in prayer services (Nam-prasanga) by the men and women alike. The poem may be divided into two parts,—the first seven kirtanas comprise the first part. The rest deals with the story of Prahlada and the Man-Lion incarnation of Visnu. The first kirtana has eleven verses, the second twelve, the third fourteen, the fourth eleven, the fifth and the sixth ten verses each, and the seventh kirtana consists of nine verses. The eighth kirtana has ten. The ninth and the tenth have thirteen each, the eleventh kirtana has eleven verses, the twelfth has ten, the thirteen has twelve, the fourteenth has thirteen verses, fifteenth has twelve, the sixteenth has thirteen, the seventeenth has eleven, the eighteenth has fourteen, the nineteenth thirteen, the twentieth has nine, the twenty-first has twelve and the last kirtana has fourteen verses.

As a true bhakta, Prahlada's character is described in the following way :

indriyaka karila niyama
 pranika dekhanta atma sama
 nitante harika kare dhyana
 hari bine nedekhanta ana.

He controlled his senses, and considered all living beings as himself. He wholeheartedly meditated on God and saw nothing but God everywhere.

Prahlada advised his school-mates to regard every being as God himself. The necessity of a Guru and satsanga (company of the holy) is also emphasised, "To become a true devotee, one should take the company of a staunch votary of Visnu, and should accept him as a preceptor." To Prahlada, God was present in every element, and so he declared : "If a person worships Thee, he really worships himself, as one can see his own face by looking at the mirror."

The seventh part, Gajendra-upakhyaṇa, having three kirtanas of a total of thirty-eight verses, is taken from the Bhagavata-Purana, Book VIII. Sankaradeva has effectively used his own imagination in the description of the Trikuta hill. Distinguished by excellent poetic beauty with majestic diction, the poem undoubtedly maintains a classic dignity.

Hara-mohana (The charming of Hara) contains ten kritanas with a total ninety-eight verses. It is also adapted from the Bhagavata-Purana, Book VIII. It is 'one of the best pieces of poetry in all Sankaradeva' (Neog). His originality and descriptive skill are fully at play here. The second kirtana expounds philosophical doctrines so as to be easily understandable to a common man. Hara prays to Visnu saying :

tumi pasu paksi surasura taru trina
ajnanata mudhajane dekhe bhinna bhinna.

Thou art all animals, all birds, all gods and demons and all trees and creepers. It is due to ignorance that people find them different (from you).

The next poem is Bali-chalana, (The cheating of Bali). The poem has thirty-three verses divided into five kirtanas. Sankaradeva has written the entire story of the demon king Bali, grandson of Prahlada, in course of rendering the Bhagavata.¹⁵⁰ Here only the last portion of the kavya has been incorporated. Like Prahlada-carita, this poem and the next, Sisulila, are constantly used in the Nam-prasangas. Because of the 'wonderful devotion' of Bali, the poem has become a matter of keen attention and appreciation for the Vaisnavas of Assam.

150. Bali-chalana, ed. K.D. Goswami.

Next comes the most popular composition of Sankaradeva, entitled *Sisulila*. It contains eleven kirtanas with one hundred and sixty-five verses. Although taken from the *Bhagavata-Purana*, X, Adi, the narrative in *Sisu-lila* as a whole has become more homely and sweeter. Various activities of the child Krishna are depicted in a beautiful and pleasant popular tone. In the third, fourth and the eighth kirtanas, there are some philosophical matters brought forward in easy language. It is observed that some lines of the *Sisu-lila* are identical with lines in the *Dasama* (*Bhagavata*, X, Assamese). In the eighth kirtana, Brahma, the creator, prays to Lord Krishna :

sariraka mai buli buddhi bhaila hata
hiyata haraila tumi khojo bahirata.

My intellect has become so dull by going to identify myself with the body ; and by missing Thee in my heart, while I look for Thee outside.

Rasa-krida, taken from the *Bhagavata-Purana*, Book X, is another beautiful poem. It has eighteen kirtanas with two hundred and eighteen verses. The saint-poet describes the pleasant scenes of nature in a highly attractive way and has put much emphasis on the absolute devotion of the cowherdesses. In spite of its erotic nature of the subject-matter, Sankaradeva has maintained the *dasya* tone of *bhakti*. Here Krishna is equally concerned with all the *gopis* and not with a particular one, named *Radha*, as is found as a characteristic feature in some other *Vaisnava* sects of India.

In the *Kamsa-vadha*, we have fifteen kirtanas with a total of two hundred and fourteen verses. The source of this part is the same *Bhagavata*. Besides the verse narrative taken from the said *Purana*, Sankaradeva is said to have composed a dramatic work on this particular subject, which is today not available. In the twenty-fourth kirtana, Akrura prays :

najani loke ana deva puje
sio budhihine tomake yaje
yehena nada nadi samudaya
aneka pathe sagaraka dhaya.

Just as all rivers and streams run on to the sea through different courses, so also irreligious people worship other gods ; but even in that they actually worship Thee, maybe unconsciously.

Next poems are Gopi-uddhava-samvada, Kujir-vancha-purana and Akrurar-vancha-purana. These are a single kirtana each. The first has twenty-four verses, the second has eleven and the last contains twelve verses.

Jarasandha-yudha, Kalayavana-vadha and Mucukunda-stuti are the succeeding three sections of the Kirtana-ghosa. The first section consists of three kirtanas with forty-seven verses, the second has two kirtanas with twenty-one verses and the last section has four kirtanas with fifty-one verses. The last section is 'characterized by a deeply devotional fervour' (Neog).

The most popular section of the Kirtana-ghosa is the Syaman-taka-harana, which has nine kirtanas with a total of seventy-nine verses. The story-interest and the appropriate rhythm of the verses have been considered to be the causes of its great popularity by Dr Neog. Even the illiterate women-folk can easily recite it from memory even today.

Naradar Krisna-darsana contains five kirtanas with fifty-one verses. Likewise, Vipra-putra-anayana has four kirtanas with fifty-two verses. These sections are also retold from the Bhagavata-Purana, X. Damodara-vipra-akhyana has four kirtanas with thirty-five verses and Daivakir Putra-anayana has three kirtanas with the same number of verses. The Veda-stuti section has three kirtanas with twenty-six verses. Sankaradeva has rendered much philosophical matter in a lucid manner so that it may not be beyond the reach of the common people.

Lila-mala, considered to be the most sacred portion of the Kirtana-ghosa, summarises the activities of Lord Krisna's whole life. The section contains one hundred and nine verses divided into seven kirtanas.

There are nineteen kirtanas with a total of one hundred and thirty-five verses in the section, Srikrisnar Vaikuntha-prayana. The Guru puts there the rules of conduct to be followed by a bhakat. Krisna says to Uddhava :

vaisnavara sanga sito laiba prathamata
mohora caritra sunibeka bhakatata
mora nama kirtana kariba sarvaksane
hridatyat mora rupa cintiba yatane.

One should have the company of a Vaisnava first and should listen to my glories from the bhaktas. He should always sing the Name and the glories, and should carefully

think of My form in his heart.

Again :

brahmanara candalara nibicari kula
datata corata yara dristi eka tula.

Do not consider the caste of a Brahmana or that of a Candala, look upon a thief and a generous person with an equal eye.

Udesa-varnana and Rukminir Prema-kalaha are two other parts of the Kirtana-ghosa. The first is placed at the end of the work and the second is not available in all old manuscript copies of the book. Likewise, Sahasra-nama-vrittanta by Ratnakara Kandali and Ghunuca-yatra by Sridhara Kandali are also appended to the collection of Kirtana-ghosa, but the latter poem is generally not used in prayer services by all people. Another important section is the Bhagavata-tatparya, placed after Udesa-varnana. It has two kirtanas with twenty-one verses.

Of other poetical works of Sankaradeva, mention may be made of the Dasama, which is the most popular Vaisnava scripture. A large number of original passages, called Upadesa, are inserted here by the poet. It also deals with the magnificence of Nama-dharma and bhakti.

Other noted works of the Guru are Anadi-patana (of three hundred verses) (Bhagavata, III), Ajamila-upakhyana (Bhag., V and VI), Amrita-manthana (Bhag., VIII), Bali-chalana (Bhag., VIII, mixed with Vamana-Purana), Nimi-navasiddha-samvada (four hundred and twenty-seven verses) (Bhag., XI) and Kuruksetra. Moreover, he has the Assamese rendering of the Bhagavata-Purana, Books I, II, XI and XII to his credit.

Sankaradeva composed the drama Rama-vijaya at the request of Cilaraya. He made only one Bargita on Rama. The Guru, however, wrote the Uttara-kanda Ramayana and thereby completed the 'incomplete' work of Madhava Kandali. Except these, Sankaradeva did not seem to have dealt with the story of Rama. Although in delineating the characters of Ramayana Sankaradeva 'brought nearer to the sphere of the life of the common man', the poet has, on the other hand, given a Vaisnava appearance to it, recognising Rama as the Absolute Being :

Thou art Lord of the three worlds and the way of the Universe. Thou art inconceivable in your virtues, having unlimited powers,

Bhakti-ratnakara is a treatise—the only one in Sanskrit—compiled by the Guru. When it was apprehended that the work may not be useful to the common people, Sankaradeva asked Madhavadeva to translate it into Assamese. The work, however, was done by Ramacarana Thakur, nephew of Madhavadeva, who also collected different sections of the *Kirtana-ghosa* and arranged them as per advice and approval of the latter. The original *Bhakti-ratnakara* consists of thirty-eight chapters relating to diverse topics on the Vaisnava faith and philosophy.

B. BARGITA, GUNA-MALA, BHATIMA, ETC.

Sankaradeva introduced two new literary forms, which are indeed rare and valuable contributions. These two are the *Bargitas* and the *Ankas* or *Nats*. The *Bargitas* (great songs, noble songs), composed in the artificial *Brajabuli* idiom were put to writing at different periods of his life in various circumstances. The Guru is said to have composed about two hundred and forty (*bara kuri*) such lyrics but only thirty four are now available. These songs are meant for recitation to the accompaniment of *gayana* and *bayana* with musical instruments. It is narrated in the biographies that people were attracted by these songs to accept the Vaisnava order. It is customary to recite a *bargita* without instrument at the commencement of *Nam-prasanga* services.

Each *bargita* is tuned to a particular *raga* (melody), and when it is performed by the *gayana-bayana* musical party, it must have the proper musical time (*tala*). This difficult thing requires proper training in the singing of *ragas*. The *Bargitas* are to be considered as a separate school of Indian classical music. There is a similar type of songs used by the Guru in his drama, but these are called *Ankiya gita*, and not *Bargita*. In the available *Bargita* lyrics of Sankaradeva, the following thirteen *ragas* are used : (1) *Dhanasri*, (2) *Asowari*, (3) *Sri*, (4) *Natamallar*, (5) *Suhai*, (6) *Vasanta*, (7) *Kedar*, (8) *Ahira*, (9) *Mahura-dhanasri*, (10) *Tuda-basanta*, (11) *Gauri*, (12) *Kalyana* and (13) *Bhupali*.

Guna-mala is literally 'Garland of Glories (of God).' *Guna-mala*, written in the *Kusuma-mala* metre is another noteworthy contribution from the pen of the saint-poet. It contains six chapters, where a gist of the tenth and the eleventh Books of the *Bhagavata-Purana* is rendered very briefly. The work has three-

hundred and seventy-eight 'nimble six-syllable rhyming quadruplets'.

Another typical form of poetry is Bhatima. The idea of composing this particular type of poetry might have Sankaradeva's meeting some wandering minstrels during his pilgrimages.¹⁵¹ Bhatimas can broadly be divided into three groups: (i) those used in the dramas, (a) in the beginning, (b) in the middle of the drama (i) used by some characters of the play, (ii) or by the Sutradhara himself and (c) at the end of the play, like the Bharata-vakya of Sanskrit dramas; (ii) Raja-bhatima and (iii) Deva-bhatima. To this, the Guru bhatima was added by Madhavadeva. Capay is another form of song composed by Sankaradeva. In the evening prayer services of a satra, these are to be chanted along with the totaya hymn.

The totaya or the hymn written in the totaka metre, starting with 'madhu danava darana deva varam', is a fine piece of writing of the Guru in Sanskrit.

C. DRAMATIC WRITINGS

Of the distinctive traits of Assamese culture, Nam-ghar (prayer-house) and Bhaona (dramatic performance) are undoubtedly to be counted first, as these are major contributions of the Guru. The tradition of writing and performing a drama, called anka or nat, after the model of those composed by Sankaradeva, is still maintained in satra circles in an uninterrupted continuity since the sixteenth century A.D. This is a unique feature in the history of drama and stage of the world. The Guru thus became the father of the Assamese drama. His dramas mainly were aimed at creating a devotional fervour. He employed a prose in the artificial Brajabuli idiom in the dialogues and this became the earliest specimen of Assamese prose. The Guru also composed Sanskrit slokas for his dramas. These are counted as the four components of a play: dance, gita, sutra or the words of the Sutradhara in Brajabuli, and Bhatima. It was quite natural

151. The Katha-guru-carita states that during the second pilgrimage, Sankaradeva, on hearing some songs sung by one Susumna, asked Madhavadeva: Lokar bhate daho bhat-bhatai, amar bhate no ki kara yai? '(Others' minstrels are babbling, what about ours?). On this Madhavadeva is said to have composed the bhatima, pratasa samaye yasowa janani mukha cumbita syama jagawana ko, etc., and the bargita 'aju gopinatha pekhala akhi.'

that the arts of music, dance and painting were cultivated for the purpose of the performing of a bhaona. The performance of Cihna-yatra is the first dramatic performance, which took place about 1468 A.D.

The Guru is said to have composed seven other plays of which the Kamsa-vadha is now not available. Others are; (1) Patni-Prasada (Bhag. X), (2) Kaliya-damana (same source), (3) Keli-gopala (same source), (4) Rukmini-harana (same source), (5) Parijata-harana (Bhag., Visnu-purana and Harivamsa) and (6) Rama-vijaya (Ramayana, Bala-kanda). The last play is the last work of the Guru written in Saka 1490, corresponding to 1568 A.D.

THE SATTRA INSTITUTION

The word *sattra* is first used in the sense of a sacrifice in the *Satapatha-Brahmana*. In the *Bhagavata-Purana* also it is used in numerous places. But in Assamese Vaisnavism, the term acquired a different and distinctive meaning. A *sattra* is more than a Buddhist *vihara* or a Hindu *math*. The *sattras* in Assam are a peculiar type of institution. The place where Sankaradeva stayed and preached through congregational prayers and religious discourses, came to be known as *sattra*. Bardowa or Batadrava is the first *sattra* of Assam, where the Guru constructed a prayer house and held, besides prayer services, discussions on matters religious. The concept of this particular type of institution might have been taken from the *Bhagavata-Purana*. But the abode of 'the two Gurus' (Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva) and other religious heads are also called *than* (*sthana*). There is, however, a difference between *sattra* and *than*. In the post-Sankaradeva period, the holy places where some religious leaders passed came to be called *than*. Sometimes a temple is created at such a place and this is called *than-ghar* (*sathana-griha*). But the places where Sankaradeva stayed even for a few months are also called *than*; e.g., Bardowa-*than*, Belaguri-*than*, Barpeta-*than*, Damodara-Atar-*than* instead of Bardowa-*sattra*, etc. In early Assamese literature, Bardowa is referred to as a *than*.

o hari e he santijan,
habi kati uliyale bardowa than
he santijan.¹⁵²

Biographers like Ramananda, however, uses the term *sattra* also indiscriminately for a *than*.

The principal house on the campus of a *sattra* is the *Nam-ghar* or *Kirtana-ghar*. There is also a slight difference between the two; in the *sattra* the prayer-house is generally called *kirtana-*

152. From a popular song (*Diha-nam*); see K.D. Goswami 'Few Notations of Assamese *Dihanam*', *Journal of the University of Gauhati*, vols. XXI-XXIII, No. I, 1970-1974, p. 178.

ghar, and not Nam-ghar. Sometimes it is also called Hari-griha or Hari-mandira. There are Nam-ghars in almost all Hindu villages of Assam. These are meant for holding prayer services. They are not generally called kirtana-ghar. The Nam-ghars have played a very dominant role in the life of the people. It is, moreover, a public institution for intellectual and cultural activities of the people.

Sankaradeva appointed his beloved disciple, Madhavadeva, as his successor to preach and propagate bhakti. Madhavadeva intensified the movement and extended its sphere by appointing some apostles at various places of the state. Moreover, Madhavadeva admitted the youngest son of Sankaradeva and the two Thakurs (grandsons of Sankara, i.e., Purusottama and Caturbhuja Thakur) to a high place in the Order. We have a list of twenty-five deputies of Madhavadeva,¹⁵³ where two only had no *sattras*. Others established their own *sattras* and some of them further appointed some deputies, who established their *sattras* in different parts of the state. Thus a good number of *sattras* came into existence. After passing away of the Master, Damodara and Harideva, the two Brahman disciples, seceded from the main body of the Vaisnavas. They appointed their own deputies. In this way, the number of *sattras* increased in Assam, and they have now a total of more than five hundred and fifty.¹⁵⁴

A *sattra* must have its kirtana-ghar (prayer-house). Sometimes this house is divided into two parts : the main hall and the manikut, the place where a scripture is kept. The manikut also serves the purpose of store-house and the library. Prayer services, dramatic performances and general discussions are held in the main hall. Sometimes a separate hall or pandal is built for dramatic representations and general gatherings and such an open hall is called rabha-ghar or sabha-ghar (meeting hall). The Nam-ghar or the Kirtana-ghar is also sometimes known as Gosai-ghar.

In constructing and repairing the Namghar or Kirtana-ghar as well as other houses of the *sattra*, the bhakats and the people of adjoining village come forward to render their services. Every person is to offer his labour and necessary articles to construct

153. K.D. Goswami : op. cit., pp. 70-71.

154. K.D. Goswami ; *Sattra-samskritir Ruprekha*, Gauhati, 1973.

a prayer house, and this encouraged the co-operative management to a great extent.

A prayer house is placed on a east-west line, the door always facing the west. In village Nam-ghars, there may or may not be a separate manikut house. In such cases, a sastra (some work of Sankaradeva or Madhavadeva, like the Kirtana-ghosa, some part of the Assamese Bhagavata-Purana, Nama-ghosa, etc.) is placed in the eastern part of the prayer house. The altar is called thapana, asana, simhasana or Guruasana (the seat of the Guru). The scripture and the Guru are identified with the Supreme Being. The Kirtana-ghar is surrounded by hati, udasinar hati, bhaktar hati or hati-baha (rows of sheds for elderly monks and other celibates :

cari phale cari hati maha bhakta-gana¹⁵⁵

The great bhaktas are on the four sides in their dwellings. This order is, however, not strictly followed in all cases. Such sets are built according to the requirement and the number of bhaktas who like to reside within the sattra campus as celibates or at old age. Except in a few sattras, celibacy is not compulsory in Assam Vaisnavism. It is also noteworthy that there is also no place in the sattras for sadhus and samnyasis. Thus Sankaradeva differed not only from all other Vaisnava sects, including that of Caitanya, but from most of the Hindu religious sects, too. But if some one likes to follow the life of a celibate, he is at liberty to do so.

The head or Superior of the sattra institution is called Mahanta, Adhikar or Sattradhikar. The houses of the Superior and his relatives are also situated within the sattra campus. Some sattras have their relics like padasila (or foot-prints of Sankaradeva on stone) and other articles said to have been used by the Gurus. To preserve such venerable articles, a shrine near the main prayer-house is built. Another notable construction is the gateway of a sattra, called karapat, batghar or bat-ca'ra.

For smooth running of various works of a sattra, the organisation had some officers to conduct their respective duties. They are generally appointed by the Superior or sometimes with the approval of Superior or sometimes with the approval of the general body of the monks. These officers are selected from any

155. Batadrawa Than-varnanar gita, by Laksmikanta.

caste or community on the basis of their religious accomplishment and aptitude for a particular work. The selection of the Adhikar in early days was determined on the basis of intellectual attainment and general behaviour. But later on, the office became hereditary in almost all the sattras of Assam. The rule of becoming a Superior is based on two principles—according to lineage and according to seniority. The first rule is applicable to the Narowa-sattra (Bar-hissa) and the second to the Salaguri-sattra (Cota-hissa) at Bardowa.¹⁵⁰ Barpeta is the only sattra where elections are held in a democratic manner to elect the Sattradhikar.

156. K.D. Goswami; Early History & Development of Purusa Samhati.

DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES AND CEREMONIALS

'Sarana' (ordination or initiation) : The first requirement of a person to be a member of the Vaisnava community is to get himself initiated by a proper Guru into the faith, based on the four fundamental principles consisting of Guru, Deva, Nama and Bhakat. They are called 'Cari-vastu' or four 'reals'; the significance of these is imparted to the neophyte by the Guru at the time of Sarana. The process of initiation or ordination is called 'sarana-lowā' or sarana-howa' and the administering of it is known as 'sarana-diya' or 'bhakat-karowa'. There is no mantra in Sanskrit; and instead of that the Guru imparts the 'katha', 'Nam-katha' or 'katha-vastu' in the common language of the people. So it is called 'Guru-vakya' and not vij-mantra or mul-mantra. The procedure of sarana consists of four parts and at the end of each part the neophyte is to prostrate before the holy scripture, representing the deity and the Guru. It is a very simple and easy thing; but the person seeking initiation is to follow the code of conduct taught at that hour and to take a vow not to bow down to other gods than Visnu-Krisna from that day.

After the death of Sankaradeva, he was regarded as the only Guru and this as an article of faith has been included in the Guru-vakya. As the number of satras increased and as some pontiffs seceded from the main body of the Vaisnavas, there arose some minor variations in the process of initiation. After the death of Madhavadeva again, there were further schisms within the Order, and that led to the growth of four distinct sub-sects, called samhatis or sanghatis; viz, Purusasamhati (followers of Sankaradeva's grandsons), Brahmasamhati (followers of Damodara and Harideva, mostly satras headed by Brahmans). Nika-samhati (followers of Madhavadeva's deputies like Mathura-dasa Budha Ata and Badula Padma Ata) and Kala-Samhati (followers of Gopala Ata and his disciples like Yadumani and Aniruddha). These sects tried to establish their own identity; but in the cardinal principles there is practically little or no difference.

nance amongst them.¹⁵⁷ In the matter of sarana, a slight variation in formalities of minor importance grew in the satras of four samhatis.

The process of initiation is broadly divided into two stages, sarana being followed by bhajana. Only a devotee passing through both may be invested with a rosary (mala-vastu). There are two kinds of rosary—one small and the other long. Nobody can have the superior long rosary without accepting the small first. From the date of receiving initiation, a person is to follow a rigid code of conduct, like cleanliness of both body and mind.

As a general rule, a person may be administered initiation even if he be a minor. But the Mahantas (whether Brahman or Kayastha) are to perform this sarana immediately before or after taking the sacred thread (upanayana). Women are administered sarana only after their marriage. Women, Brahmans and kings are not required to prostrate themselves (astanga-pranama) before the altar when they are initiated.¹⁵⁸ It is noteworthy that even now non-Brahman Mahantas have their Brahman disciples. These disciples are only to bow down before the scripture in presence of the pontiff. Any male member of a Mahanta family¹⁵⁹ may impart ordination to a person. Generally this is done by a pontiff of the satra, with whom the family of the novice is traditionally connected.

The second part of ordination, called bhajana, includes the esoteric and philosophical instructions which may not be given at the time of sarana. A person receiving sarana from a Gosai or Mahanta is called sich (Skt. sisya) or bhakat of that Gosai

157. This was explained by Damodara Ata, great-grandson of Sankaradeva and head of the Narowa group of satras, to the Ahom king, Jayadhwaja-simha, see : R. Muktiyar : *Ai Kanakalatar Caritra*, Kadhalignaon, Nowgong (Assam), 1946.

158. E.A. Gait in, his *A History of Assam*, p. 187, describes the process of the Sarana ceremony with regard to King Rudrasimha's aversion to accept the faith.

159. Kanakalata, Sankaradeva's grand-daughter-in-law and wife of Caturbhuja Thakur, acquired the position of a preacher for the first time in the history of Assam Vaisnavism; but it was Damodara Ata, nephew and adopted son of Caturbhuja, who actually offered nirmali (nirmalya) to the deputies appointed (vide Dvarika, v. 2767), That is why this group of apostles is also called 'appointed by Damodara Ata'.

and of his sattra. He is also called sevak. Generally, however, a distinction is made between the words—bhakat referring to Vaisnavas cloistered in sattras and sich meaning a lay disciple of a sattra living in some town or village.

From the day of receiving sarana a disciple has to practise the process of meditation called 'guru-seva', 'isvara-seva', 'istacarana' or 'gosai-seva', always after morning bath at a suitable place facing the east. The process of the ceremony is very simple but the process is not easy to be remembered by a lay man. So he is to keep contact with the teacher or with some elderly monk. In that way the devotee receives proper devotional guidance to the faith.¹⁶⁰ It is to be noted that unlike Bengal Vaisnavism,¹⁶¹ the choice of proper month, day and planetary influence for sarana is not essential for the followers of this faith. The ceremonies of initiation and conferment of rosary, etc., can be performed at any suitable place like Nam-ghar or outside the sattra campus when the Mahantas go on official tour (called cahar-phura) to see and meet their disciples at various places.

160. K.D. Goswami : op.cit., p. 256-274.

161. S.K. De : Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal, Calcutta, p. 415.

SATTRA CEREMONIALS

Broadly speaking, there are three divisions of the daily ceremonials of a sattra : (1) morning services, (2) forenoon services and (3) evening services. These prayer services are called prasanga. It is said that the sattras are to maintain fourteen such prasangas daily throughout the year. But nowadays some sattras observe only two prasangas, i.e., forenoon and evening. In the village Nam-ghar also these two services are generally maintained. Instead of fourteen prasangas, sometimes references are made only to four prasangas.

cariyo prasanga kare namara kirtana¹⁶²

They observe the four prasangas by means of Nama-Kirtana.

These four are : morning, fore-noon, afternoon and evening services. Although all the sattras cannot maintain the above fourteen prasangas throughout the whole year, it is observed particularly in the month of Bhadra, which is considered as the most auspicious month because of three major festivals of the Vaisnavas, namely, Guru-kirtana (tithi of Sankaradeva, falling on the second day of the bright half of the lunar month), tithi of Madhavadeva (falling on the fifth dark lunar day) and Janmastami (birth of Lord Krisna).

There are some occasional services also which are performed with due pomp and grandeur.

162. Batadrawa Than-varnanar-gita, by Laksmikanta, For a full discussion on fourteen prasangas, see Sattra-Sanskritir Rup-rekha by the present writer and M. Neog, op.cit., pp. 341-345.

THE FAITH AND THE TENETS

Sankaradeva took the essence of the Bhagavadgita, Padma-purana (Sahasra-nama) and the Bhagavata-purana to lay the foundation of his faith on three vastus, namely, deva (only one Absolute Deity, Visnu-Krisna), nama (of nine kinds of bhakti, he put much emphasis on sravana and kirtana) and bhakat or satsanga respectively. To this, the fourth element, Guru (a preacher) was added later on. The four fundamental reals consisting of Guru, deva, nama and bhakta, are called 'cari-vastu'.

Guru : Guru occupies the first place in the system and Sankaradeva in his Bhakti-ratnakara¹⁶³ explains the necessity of a Guru; he further states to serve the Guru at first :

guru seva bine ana yateka upaya
durjana manaka ara jinana najaya.

Other than by serving the guru, the unconquerable mind cannot be controlled by any other means.

samsaraka tare guru carana sevaya
hena jani guru-seva kariyo sadaya.

By serving the Guru, one can overcome the cycle of birth and death; knowing this, do always serve the Guru.

The qualities that are necessary to become a true Guru are also explained in detail in the same text.

Deva : God is the supreme reality and the only worshipful deity. His incarnations and forms are not ultimate truth :

ito rupa tomara kevale gunamaya
brahmese kevale jana nirguna howaya.

This Thy mainfestation is but due to guna, while only the ultimate Brahma is nirguna (devoid of guna).

yito brahma nirguna sehito mora svami.

He, who is the nirguua Brahma, is my Lord.

163. Quotations are from the Assamese translation of the original Sanskrit work by Ramacarana Thakur.

gunara niyanta krisna avyaya isvara
bhaila vyakta nistara karane jagatara.

Krisna, who is the controller of gunas and is imperishable Isvara, manifested himself to redeem the world :

And he is the Supreme deity :

nahi ana srestha deva kesavata para.

There is no supreme God other than Kesava.

ehimane matra sarva sastrara nirnaya
narayana deva sada aradhya howaya.

It is the established fact of all scriptures that Narayana is always the worshipful deity.

Nama : The faith of Sankaradeva is also known as Nama-dharma as it lays great emphasis on chanting the Name and glory of God.

isvara krisnara lila caritra yijane
parama sraddhaye sada karanta sravane
alpa kale asi tente tahara hiyata
honta bhagavanta krisna prakasa saksata.

In the heart of one that always listens to the Krisna lore with great reverence, God manifests himself within a short period.

tomara namara ananta mahima ascarya ati parama
nama matra laile candala dehata howe maha sresthatama.

Uneneding are the glories of Thy Name, and that is very surprising. Even in the body of a low-born Candala, one can attain the highest position by uttering Thy Name.

krisnara namaka uccari bareka
candalo suddha howaya

Chanting the Name of Krisna even for once, a Candala is also purified.

madhavara nama lawe jnane ba ajnane
tathapito bhasma howe papa ache mane

If somebody utters the Name of Madhava whether knowingly or unknowingly, all his sins turn into ashes.

samsarata hante moksa cahe yitojana
krisnara namaka sada karoka kirtana
karma-bandha-cheda-astra nahi ata pare.

Those who seek emancipation from the world, should always chant the Name of Krisna; there is no other weapon to sever the bondage of Karma.

Bhakat : The last element of cari-vastu of the four fundamental principles, is sat-sanga or bhakta. Sankaradeva has put great stress on the company of holy persons for the cultivation of bhakti :

mahantasavara sanga anga bhakatira.

The company of holy persons is a part of devotion.

The Guru furnishes the characteristics of a true bhakta in detail.

mora bhakataka sadaye yijane

kariya thake bhakati

sitojana mora parama bhakata

kahiloho prati prati.

Those who always serve My devotees, is a real devotee of Mine—I assert this repeatedly.

vaisnavaka paile labhe bhakati amara

eteke vaisnave visnu kailo sare sara.

One can attain bhakti only in the company of a Vaisnava; so, know it for certain that a Vaisnava is Visnu himself.

kailo sadhu-sanga bine bhakati nohaya.

(I) say that without sat-sanga, bhakti cannot be had.

Sankaradeva's creed is also called 'Mahapurusiya-dharma'. The word 'mahapurusa' is found in the Bhagavata-purana in the sense of the Supreme being. He is the controller of Prakriti and Purusa (cf. Nam-ghosa : 405, by Madhavadeva : prakriti-purusa duiro niyanta madhava). This parama-purusa or maha-purusa Visnu is the only worshipful God and, therefore, the creed is so named.¹⁶⁴ Except Visnu-Krisna, no other deities are to be worshipped and one should seek sole refuge in that vast Being. This is called ekanta-sarana or eka-sarana, and the Vaisnava creed in Assam is also called eka-sarana nama-dharma. No reverence should be shown to any other gods and goddesses, who are inferior to Visnu-Krisna. But it does not mean that the faith has fostered hatred to other creeds. Love to that Absolute

164. A wrong interpretation is given in some works, including Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 2, pp. 135-137, ed. by James Hastings, Edinburgh, 1917, where the term is said to have been connected with Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva who were called Mahapurusas.

should be without any hope of getting something in return (niskama-bhakti). The devotee should not even aspire after attaining salvation (cf. Nam-ghosa, I, by Madhavadeva : muktita nispriha yito, etc., 'those who have no thirst for salvation).

Sankaradeva propounded the dasya element of bhakti, putting emphasis on sravana (listening) and kirtana (chanting). In the primary stage a devotee may, of course, worship an idol of Visnu-Krisna if he so desires. But in the higher stage, a true devotee realises this as meaningless and looks upon all creatures of the universe as manifestations of the Lord.

As has been stated earlier, Sankaradeva tried to abolish caste-distinctions in religious matters. So he invited people of all castes and communities without any exception to join his fraternity. Being himself a non-Brahman, he had many Brahman disciples. It is a remarkable thing that even now some non-Brahman Vaisnava preachers have their Brahman disciples, which is one of the unique features of Sankaradeva's faith.

The religious philosophy of Sankaradeva is based mainly on the Bhagavata-purana. One has to look into the four main scriptures (Kirtana-ghosa and Dasama or Bhagavata X, Adi, of Sankaradeva and Nam-ghosa and Bhakti-ratnavali of Madhavadeva) of the faith for tracing out the religious philosophy. The Sanskrit Bhakti-ratnakara by Sankaradeva alone is, of course, enough for this purpose. It should be borne in mind that as the faith was propounded for the common people, Sankaradeva tried to avoid highly philosophical matter in his Assamese works as far as possible. In translating and adopting the Bhagavata-purana into Assamese the Guru and his followers depended mostly on the Bhagavata-bhavartha-dipika by Sridhara-svami, who happened to be a follower of Sankaracarya's Advaita school, but who moderated his idealist Advaitism with the emotionalism of devotion.

In the process of cultivating bhakti, bhaktas are divided into uttama, madhyama and prakrita. From the lowest or prakrita stage one is to go upward in his pursuit. Complete surrender or taking absolute refuge at the feet of the Supreme Being, chanting his glories with a pure heart, doing one's own duty within this world as a house-holder, considering all creatures, in God and God in all creatures, one should meditate upon His Name in his heart. These are some important aspects of Sankaradeva's tenets.

A few more verses mainly from the Kirtana-ghosa are quoted below to illustrate Sankaradeva's way of thinking.

God :

tumi paramatma jagatara isa eka
eko vastu nahike tomata vyatireka
tumi pasu paksi surasura taru trina
ajnanata mudhajane dekhe bhinna bhinna.

—Kirtana-ghosa, Haramohana, Kirtan 2, vv. 9-10

Thou art the Supreme self, the only Lord of the Universe. There is nothing real except Thee. Thou art all beasts, birds, gods and demons, trees and herbs. People, because of their ignorance, look at these in a sense of difference.

savato bara prabhu cakrapani
achoka tumi ami kona jana
brahma hare seve yara carana
apuna mayara bale anante
srajanta palanta samhare ante

—Prahada-carita, Kirtan 10, vv. 175-176

The Lord Cakrapani is the greatest of all. Who are we ? Even Brahma and Hara worship at His feet. The Endless with his power of maya, creates, preserves and at last destroys (the universe).

mayadiro isa tumi anadi ananta
dekha sarva loka kene ajnani varvara
tumi antaryami tomakese bole para
sariraka mai buli buddhi bhaila hata
hiyata haraila tumi khojo bahirata

—Sisulila, Kirtan 8, vv. 106, 112

Thou art the Lord of maya (illusion) and art devoid of beginning and end. Look how foolish the people are : Thou art the inner controller; even then Thou art said to be different. The intellect collapses when the body is treated as self. Thou art lost within the heart and people seek Thee outside.

jagatara bandhu atama tumi
samaste dharmara apuna bhumii. . .
nubike yasoda-nandana govinda
niscaye bulilo vaka

tumi samastare buddhi saksi sakhi
prarthila Brahma tomaka

—Rasa-lila, Kirtanas 3,8, vv. 24, 27

Thou art the friend and soul of the universe. Thou art the origin of all religion. (We) say certainly, Oh Govinda, Thou art not the son of Yasoda. Thou art the inner controller (witness of the intellect) of all; Oh friend, Brahma prayed to Thee (for his incarnation as Krisna).

namo narayana karoho seva
samastaro srasta tumi adi deva
tomara nabhita bhailanta vidhi
yata hante bhaila sristira siddhi
yata panca bhuta indriya deva
tomara rupaka najane kewa
najani loka ana deva puje
sio vidhihine tomake yaje
yehena nada nadi samudaya
aneka pathe sagaraka dhaya

—Kamsa-vadha, Kirtan 24, vv. 287, 289

I salute, O Narayana, and bow down to Thee. Thou art the creator of the creator, the prime deity. Brahma was born of Thy navel, from whom the creation became complete. All five gross elements and the gods of the organs are not able to know Thy form. People worship other gods not knowing Thee; even such anti-religious people too worship Thee; for, all rivers and streams actually run through diverse courses to the sea (and blend with the sea).

jagatara atma isvara deva
tomara satru mitra nahi kewa
samasta bhutate acha viyapi
bhajantaka prabhu bhaja tathapi

—Kamsa-vadha, Kirtan 26, v. 329

Thou art the soul and Lord of the Universe; Thou hast neither any friend nor foe; Thou art pervading all bhutas (elements); still Thou showest mercy to those who worship thee.

tomara bhakati pathaka pasande
karaya yebe ucchana
santara raksara hetu avatara
howa tebe narayana

—Akrurar Vancha-purana, Kirtan 1, v. 4

When Thy path of devotion tendeth to be destroyed by the heretics, then O Narayana, Thou manifestest in order to protect the pious.

parama purusa tumi sanatana hari
yadu-kule avatari acha chadma kari

—Syamantaka-harana, Kirtan 1, v. 7

Thou art the Supreme Purusa as established by the Puranas, O Eternal Hari, Thou hast incarnated in the Yadu race in guise.

janilo tomaka jagata-isvara
tumi sanatana hari
samasta bhutara tumi prana-bala
jagatake acha dhari
srastaro srasta tumi sarvadrasta
uddhari dharila bhumi
jivara niyanta parama atama
mrityuro antaka tumi

—Syamantaka-harana, Kirtan 5, vv 32-33

I could know that Thou art the Lord of the Universe, the Eternal Hari, Thou art the life-force of all beings (bhutas), Thou art keeping up the Universe. The creator of the creator, Thou art Omniscient, and hast uplifted the earth. Thou art the controller of the jivas (creatures) and the Supreme Soul : again the destroyer of death.

apuni srajila caracara deha yata
samaste aisvarya bhava acha samastata

—Veda-stuti, Kirtan 1, v. 7

Thou hast created all the forms, movable and immovable, and residest in all these with all powers.

yata dekha yata suna yateka manata guna
save mayamaya swapna sama
samasta jagate hari janiba niscaya kari
gucayo buddhira ito bhrama

—Vaikuntha-prayana, Kirtan 3, v. 32

Whatever you see, hear or think are but illusory just like a dream. Know it for certain that the whole universe is God (Hari) and, therefore, remove the illusory apprehensions.

dekhiyo krisnara kena karma vidambana
vasudeva grihata ajara upajana

—Vaikuntha-prayana, Kirtan 27, v. 197

Behold, what sort of elusive activities of Krisna; He, who is without birth, was born in the house of Vasudeva:

yato krisna karanaro karana niscaya
etekese krisna vine vastu nahikaya

—Bhakti-ratnakara, v. 151

As Krisna is definitely the cause of all causes (i.e., ultimate cause), so except Krisna, nothing is real.

God is spoken of as both saguna and nirguna. Sankaradeva's concept of God is remarkable : He is transcendent and immanent. God transcends His creation and yet is present in it. The presence of the Infinite in the finite is explained at many places. The concept of God in Sankaradeva is based on Absolute Monism. God may be called Brahman or named otherwise. On the other hand, God as a Personal Being is omnipotent, and is a form in which the one substance exists. God can be described in many ways. He manifests himself in different forms, and so come such manifestations of His personality as Brahma, Visnu or Siva. Some manifestations have also appeared in different times such as Krisna, for special purposes. All these are avataras due to His lila or the gracious sport of God as portrayed in the life of Krisna given in the Bhagavata-Purana. Of all His incarnations, that of Lord Krisna is considered as the most perfect and highest form of God. He is God in fulness (purna-brahma); others are considered as only partial. So Krisna was Supreme God himself.

NAMA AND YUGA-DHARMA

The chanting and repeating of the Name of God is the main feature of Sankaradeva's religious practice. In this Kali age, salvation could be had only by uttering the Name. Even for sinful deeds of any sort, no purificatory rite is necessary; the Name alone can purify in all cases. The Nama-aparadha section of the Kirtana-ghosa is the best testimony to this view. If one fills his mind with the Name, the self will submerge in Divinity :

yito mandamatī adhama nare
hariro maha aparadha kare
namata sarana lawe bareka
name hare tara save pataka,

—Namaparadha, Kirtan 1, v. 10

If the evil-minded and degraded one, committing great sins even to Hari, takes refuge in the Name only for once, all his sins will be washed away by the Name.

anyatra dharme nahi adhikara
janiba kalita namese sara

—Namaparadha, Kirtan 2, v. 35

There is no authority of other religions in this Kali age. Know that Name is the only substance.

kaltra dharma hari-nama jana
papira nindata nidiba kana

—Pasanda-mardana, 1st refrain

The religion of the Kali age is the Name of God (Hari); don't pay heed to the blasphemy of the sinners.

This whole Kirtan glorifies the Kali age as the best of the four ages, because people can easily attain salvation by chanting nama-kirtana.

sakala dharmate kari visista
hari-kirtanese dharma garistha

—Pasanda-mardana, Kirtan 3, v. 35

Of all religions, the religion of chanting the (Name of) Hari is the best.

samsarara yata ano asamkhyata
ache mahapapi gana
savaro ehise mukhya prayascitta
harira nama kirtana

—Ajamilopakhyana, Kirtan 1, v. 10

The ultimate purificatory rite for all sinners that there may be in this world is the chanting of the name of Hari.

deva risi nara siddha vidyadhara
asura carana gane
harira namara gopya mahimaka
tesambe keho najane

—Ajamilopakhyana, Kirtan 2, v. 18

Devas, Risis, men, Siddhas, Vidyadharas and Caranas —all do not know the hidden mystery of the Name of Hari.

dharma artha kama yito abhilase
yi cawe moksara patha
siyo hari nama kirtana karisi
pawe save manoratha

—Ajamilopakhyana, Kirtan 3, v. 28

Those who desire dharma, artha, kama and moksa, can have these fulfilled only by the chanting of the Name of Hari.

hari hena ito duguti aksara
jihva agre thake yara
ganga gaya kasi prayaga setuta
yaibaka nalage tara

—ib., v. 31

Those on whose lips the two syllables, 'Ha-ri' is present, need not go to Ganga, Gaya, Kasi, Puskara and Setu-khanda, etc., for pilgrimage.

hari rama hari rama e mula mantra
kalita nahi tapa yajna yantra

—Pahrada-carita, Kirtan 8, refrain

'Hari Rama' is the mul-mantra in this Kali age : there is no place for penance, no sacrifice and no tantric rites.

sunar sarvajana kahe krisnara kimkare
nahi ana dharma aura kirtanata pare

—Pahrada-carita, Kirtan 22, v. 255,

Sisu-lila, Kirtan 6, v. 82 and

Jarasandha-vadha, Kirtan 2, v. 27

Hark ye all, sayeth the serf of Krisna : there is no other religion except kirtana.

nameśe parama dharma kalita

nameśe marana-samala-bitā

—Bhagavata-tatparya, Kirtan 2, v. 19

The (chanting of the) Name (of God) is the supreme religion in the Kali age ; this name is the property at the time of death.

ito hari nama dharma maha guhyatama

ihata visvasa yara sehi narottama

—Nimi-navasiddha-samvada, v. 72

This religion of singing of the Name of Hari is a great secret religion. He, who has faith in it, is the best of man.

In Bhakti-ratnakara, there is a separate chapter (vv. 714-762), which glorifies the religion of this Kali age. In the same work it is said that God never shuns the company of His Name, and that it is absolutely certain that Nama is Hari Himself.

BHAKTA AND BHAKTI

According to Sankaradeva, the company of holy person is most essential to pursue bhakti. They are designated as bhakta, sadhu, santa, mahanta, etc., and the necessity of sat-sanga is frequently cited. The Lord sayeth :

bhakata janese mora hridaya
mayo bhakatara hiya niscaya

—Pahrada-carita, Kirtan 4, v. 53

The same line is repeated in the Vaikuntha-prayana section (v. 46) : 'My devotees are my heart and Myself also am the heart of the devotee.'

In the same context, the characteristics of a true bhakta are explained :

tomara pawata laile yijane sarana
tayu guna-nama kare sravana kirtana

—Pahrada-carita, Kirtan 4, v. 45

Those, who seek refuge at Thy feet, chant and listen to Thy glory and Name.

indriyaka karila niyama
pranika dekhanta atma-sama —
dukhatu udvigna nuhi citta
nahi spriha sukhato kincita...
nitante harika kare dhyana
hari bine nedekhanta ana...
hari buddhi howe apunaka

—Pahrada-carita, Kirtan 10, vv. 105-111

(He) controls his organs and considers all creatures like his own soul. He is not agitated in sorrow and does not crave for happiness,.....always meditates upon Hari and sees nothing but Hari,.....sometimes considers himself as Hari.

samasta pranika puja visnu buddhi kari

—Pahrada-carita, Kirtan 13, v. 144

Worship all creatures considering them as Visnu.

visnu-bhakatara sanga laiba prathamata

guru mani susrusa kariba bhala mata

—Prahada-carita, Kirtan 15, v. 160

Do first have the company of the devotee of Visnu.
Regarding him as Guru, serve him well.

nakare pranika himsa nahi eko spriha

amata arpana kare apunara deha

—Prahada-carita, Kirtan 22, v. 245

(He is) not envious of any living being and has no desire
for anything. (He) dedicates his body to Myself

bhakatara vasya tumi hari

sukhe pawe grihate sumari

—Sisu-lila, Kirtan 4, v. 63

Oh Hari, Thou art obliged to Thy devotee, and can be
obtained in the midst of household life.

bhakatira pare dharma nahi samsarata

cariyo vedara iana ehi sara tattva

—Rasa-krida, Kirtan 17, v. 201

There is no other religion in the world than bhakti; this
is the essence of all the four vedas.

yogaka abhyase yito bhakatika ere

taharese mana dunai samsarata pare

—Mucukunda-stuti, Kirtan 9, v. 107

He who practises yoga and leaves bhakti for that, falls
back into the cycle of rebirths.

isvaraka dekhe yito samasta pranita

prani samastato dekhe isvara-murtita.

—Nimi-navasiddha-samvada, v. 80

(He) sees every being in God and God in every being.

In Bhakti-ratnakara (vv. 419-20, 429, 480, etc.) bhakti has
been shown as superior to mukti and it is stated further that the
bliss of emancipation is inherent in bhakti.

HUMAN LIFE AND EMANCIPATION

Sankaradeva glorifies human life in this Kali age, particularly in Bharatavarsha. Very often the association of four valuable things, viz., Kali-yuga, Nam-dharma, Bharatavarsha and human life, are eulogised in the commonly used term 'carira samyoga'. This is the most worthy life to attain emancipation :

krisnara rahasya janma jana sarvajane
moksa pada sadhe ara sravana kirtane

—caturvimsati-avatara-varnana, Kirtan 4, v. 33

Hark you all : the mysterious birth of Krisna; by chanting and listening to it, attain emancipation.

krisnara kimkare kahe jaakare
manusya janmaka napay senthare

—Namaparadha, Kirtan 2, v. 36

Sayeth Sankara, the serf of Krisna, that this human life is not easily attainable.

devaro durlabha ibena janmaka
vritha kara kona kame
grihate thakiya harika smariya
moksa sadha harl-name

—Ajamilopakhyaṇa, Kirtan 4, v. 41

This (human) life is not attainable even by the gods; what for do you pass it in vain? Remembering Hari in the household life, obtain salvation by the Name of Hari.

kahe krisna-kimkare sankare krisna-katha
bola hari hari janma nakariyo vritha

—Prahada-carita, Kirtan 9, v. 100

Sankara, the serf of Krisna, narrates this Krisna story : say Hari, Hari, and don't pass away life in vain.

durlabha manusya janma paila kata bhage
satvare samsara-sindhu taribaka lage

—Gajendra-upakhyaṇa, Kirtan 3, v. 37

By good luck you have obtained this rare human life, the sea of the cycle of birth and death is to be overcome soon.

yateka samsara-naya save svapna mayamaya
antake kesata ache dhari
bharatata janma pai bilambaka nuyuwaya
sadaye ghusiyo rama hari

—Bali-chalana, Kirtan 2, v. 18

All the (visible) world is illusory just like a dream; death is (approaching, and) catching you by the hair. Having been born in this Bharata, delay is undesirable; so utter always 'Rama, Hari'.

krisna-katha suniyo samaje
janma labhi bharatara maje
aka vritha kara kona kame
sadhiyo mukuti hari-name

—Sisu lila, Kirtan 7, v. 100

Listen you all to the Krisna-lore. Having been born in this Bharata, what for do you spoil it? Attain your emancipation by the Name of Hari.

janiya save era bhasa-bhusa
bhagyese bharate bhaila manusa...
save mayamaya svapnara sari
janama saphali bola Hari Hari.

—Naradar Krisna-darsana, Kirtan 5, vv. 55-51

Knowing this, leave all silly things : by good luck you have got human life in BharataAll are illusory just like a dream; so making this life successful, say 'Hari, Hari'.

krisnara kimkare sankare bhane
kariyo kirtana samasta jane
kali yuge ito maha upaya
hari nama laile mukuti paya

—Daivakir puttra-anayana, Kirtan 3, v. 34

Sayeth Sankara, the serf of Krisna . you all chant the Name. This is a great way in this Kali age that by uttering the Name of Hari, salvation can be attained.

nara deha bine jnana bhakti duiko
sadhibaka naparaya

—Bhakti-ratnakara, v. 41

Jnana and bhakti cannot be cultivated together except in the human form of life.

In the bargita also the Guru declares : 'The Name of God, devoutly repeated, is the sole religion of the Kali-yuga.' The Bhakti-ratnakara devotes one chapter (vv. 34-56) entitled 'Nara-deha-mahatmya', Glorification of human life.

EGO AND ILLUSION

According to Sankaradeva, the individual soul and the world outside appear as real due to the impure mind, which is clouded with maya or illusion. But God alone is the real substance. In order to unveil this truth, one should constantly meditate on Him.

dustacitto yadi hari sumare
tathapito tara pataka hare

—Pasanda-mardana, Kirtan 1, v. 8

Even if the evil-minded remembers Hari, his sins are washed away.

sarira-savaka mai bole citte
mamata kare putra bharya bitte

—Pasanda-mardana, Kirtan 4, v. 60

(The ignorant) innerly identifies this body, but a corpse, as "I", and sons, wife and riches as "my" (property).

asuddha manara karma viphalā

—Pasanda-mardana, Kirtan 4, v. 68,
and also Bhakti-ratnakara

Rites become fruitless if done with an impure mind.

kahilo tomata save svarupa
jani hiye cinta krisnara rupa
ata pare punya lokata nai
eriyo ata ahammama bhava
dridha kari dhara krisnara pawa

—Pahrada-carita, Kirtan 14, vv. 158-159

I have said the real thing to you; knowing this, meditate always on Krisna in your heart. There is no other merit in man; life is going to end at any moment. Leave the ego and firmly stick to the feet of Krisna.

yata suta dhana jana save visnumaya
akasata prakase meghara yena chaya

—Gajendra-upakhyana, Kirtan 3, v. 37

All riches, sons (and other members of the family) are but illusion of Visnu, they appear just like shadows of cloud in the sky.

choda maya kara daya bhailo tuwa dasa

—Haramohana, Kirtan 6, refrain

Oh God, remove my illusion, have mercy on me ; I become Thy serf.

visnura agata mai parama ajnani

jinilo mayaka buliloho garva-vani

Hara-mohana, Kirtan 8, v. 80

I am extremely dull in the presence of Visnu ; for I declared proudly that I have controlled maya.

yijana bhakti-hina si dekhe harika bhina

harira mayaye taka mohe

—Hara-mohan, Kirtan 9, v. 89

He, who is devoid of devotion, sees Hari as different (from everything else) ; such a person is under the spell of the maya of Hari.

madhavara pawata arpila apunaka

balise jinila ito durjaya mayaka

—Bali-chalana, Kirtan 1, v. 13

He has dedicated himself at the feet of Madhava. Bali could overcome the unconquerable maya.

hena ahammama sadaye karo

yahara mayata upajo maro .

—Sisu-lila, Kirtan 3, v. 36

Such egoism we always have ; for His maya, we are born and we do die.

mayamaya putra dara geha

—Syamantaka-harana, Kirtan 9, v. 78

Son, wife, etc., are all due to illusion.

save mayamaya svapnara sari.

—Naradar Krisna-darsan, Kirtan 5, v. 51

All are due to maya, just like a dream.

mayamaya ito visaya eriya

daki bola rama rama

—Damodara-viprakhyana, Kirtan 4, v. 35

Leaving these wordly affairs, which is but illusion, say loudly, 'Rama, Rama'.

samasta jivara kara mayaka vinasa

—Veda-stuti, Kirtan 1, v. 2

Thou art the destroyer of maya of all creatures.

janilo tumisi sanca ana yata save micha

tathapi dustyaja moha maya.

—Vaikuntha-prayana, Kirtan 3, v. 33

I have come to know that Thou art the only true one and all others are false : still it is difficult to overcome attachments and illusion.

mayara racana ito jagatake jani

—Vaikuntha-prayana, Kirtan 10, v. 112

Know that the whole world is the creation of maya.

CONCLUSION

Thus Sankaradeva preached his faith, giving a new and simple interpretation of the doctrine of bhakti. He reiterated the 'efficacy of repeating the name of God and the singing of His praise in congregational worship, and finally on an absolute and complete surrender of oneself to the will of the Lord.' His faith concentrated on the dasya aspect of "devotion to God which conceived of man's relationship to God as that of a faithful slave to his Master."

It has been rightly observed that "Sankaradeva gave to Assam a new discipline a faith in a single Divinity, and helped Assam to break away with a past with its complicated esoteric doctrines and its unmeaning practices, and gave to the people something simple and straightforward, divested of all questionable associations or implications. He was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing in a powerful spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest India has produced. ... He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual life of medieval India as a whole shone upon the life of Assam."¹⁶⁵

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