

The Katha Guru Carita

A Document of Immense Historical Value

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www.tributetosankaradeva.org feels proud to present before the readers an excerpt from the Foreword to the *Katha Guru Carita* (UC Lekharu ed.), the most voluminous and comprehensive biography of the Vaisnavite Saints of Assam, written by the eminent scholars Profs Banikanta Kakati and Birinchi Kumar Barua of Gauhati University (Gauhati, Feb., 1952)

Early Assamese Literature is abundantly rich and varied in prose writings. The two great Sanskrit texts, the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana* were reduced into Assamese prose as early as the 16th century AD. Besides other kinds of religious writings Assamese developed a secular prose literature in the *Carita Puthis* – biographical narratives of the Vaisnavite Saints, such as Sankara Deva (1449-1568), Madhava Deva (1489-1597), Gopala Deva (p. 1611). Written from a devotional point of view and recording the day to day experiences and incidents of the Saints' lives personally witnessed by the authors or handed down by sacred traditions, the *Carita Puthis* may be considered to be the most humane and realistic documents of early Assamese literature. They further possess immense historical value for the light they throw upon contemporary social life, manners, Vaisnavite movement and institutions.

Of all the biographies of the Vaisnavite Saints of Assam hitherto discovered, the **Katha Guru Carita** appears not only to be the most voluminous and complete but very trustworthy and authoritative as it was compiled within the sacred precincts of a Satra. The manuscript of the book was obtained from His Holiness the Late Shri Chaturbhuja Mishra Satradhikar of the Barpeta Satra. It contains one hundred and fifty folios written on strips of Saci barks, each folio measuring 6½" x 18" and bearing an average of seventeen lines per page. The Vaisnavite modesty prevented the author from putting down his name in the book. But from an examination of the list of successive Vaisnavite Saints enumerated in the book, it may be surmised that the book was compiled immediately after the ninth guru, whose time may be placed at the end of the seventeenth century, if not earlier.

The *Katha Guru Carita* is a remarkable compilation. It does not confine itself to the description of the life of a single Saint, but throws light on the lives of several great men of mediaeval Assam. All eminent men and women of Assam who came into contact with the Vaisnavite movement and worked for it are portrayed in the pages of this book with details and attendant circumstances. In no period of our history do we find such a galaxy of men of letters as in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The first thing which strikes us most on the study of the present publication is the tremendous awakening of learning during this period. We hear of a large number of *Chatrasalas* or schools providing instruction in important villages and towns which were mainly maintained by public charity. The schools were cosmopolitan in character and admitted pupils from all castes. Both Sankara Deva and Madhava Deva had their early education in such schools maintained respectively by Mahendra Kandali at Bardova (p. 25) and Rajendra Adhyapaka at Banduka (p. 62). A school kept by Jadavendra Bhattacharya at Srihati on the north bank of the Brahmaputra attracted students from different parts of the country (p. 321). Vyaskuchi, Hajo, Cooch Behar, Ratnapur were among the other prominent centres of learning. The syllabus was wide and comprehensive as it is reported to have included the four Vedas, the fourteen Sastras, the eighteen Puranas, the Mahabharata, the fourteen Vyakaranas, the eighteen Kavyas, the eighteen Koshas.

Education generally commenced from early years on an auspicious day (p. 25). Among the pupils there were keen students as well as dullards who used to while away half their lives in schools like the Brahmana Dhilai (p. 405). Sometimes old people, like Budha Ata showed a keen desire to join school (p. 310).

There are many instances to show that the Vaisnavite teachers were greatly responsible for educating the masses of the country. Without the aid of a slate or a pencil, Bhavanipuriya Gopala Ata made Laksmana Ojha remember the entire Book XI of the *Bhagavata* (p. 270). We may refer to another instance where an old couple arranged among themselves that the wife would manage the household duties and the husband daily attend the *Nama Kirtana* party held by Gopala Ata and his disciples during the day and would in the evening recite the verses learnt during the *Kirtana* to his wife. One evening on his return home, the old man could not however, remember the verses heard in the day's congregational gathering. His wife, therefore, refused him food and drink till he would go back and learn the verses. The old man then went to the Satra and narrated his lot to a disciple, who taking pity on him taught the verses again (p. 332). Such was the zeal of the Vaisnavites to teach the illiterate people.

The Vaisnavite epoch was an era of classical learning in Assam. During this period Sanskrit was assiduously studied in our schools, and all the Vaisnavite teachers and theologians were erudite scholars in Sanskrit language and literature. King Naranarayana of Cooch Behar maintained in his court not only a circle of reputed Sanskrit scholars, but also directed his officers high as well as low, to cultivate Sanskrit for administrative purposes. (p. 193). An interesting incident is noted in the text in this connection. Once to Naranarayana's capital came a profound scholar named Kavichandra with two hundred pupils as his followers in search of a rival disputant. While the scholar with his pupils was moving around the city enquiring about the residence of Sankara Deva, they to their utter surprise found that all their enquiries to the passers-by were ably replied to in Sanskrit. Kavichandra then made a significant remark to his followers. "Look! This seems to be a country of scholars" (p. 193). The Persian language was also cultivated and songs were composed in it (p. 187).

It should be noted that during this period Assam maintained constant contact with all-India centres of learning. The *Katha Guru Carita* records many instances of Assamese scholars going out for higher studies to centres like Benares, Mithila and Nadiya. Scholars from these places, also particularly from Santipura in Nadiya (p. 10, 194, 357), came to Assam to hold scholarly discussions. Even women

were found solving knotty problems of scriptures (p. 116).

Our text gives us a detailed account of the growth and development of the huge mass of Vaisnavite writings; it records how, when, where and under what circumstances a particular treatise was compiled or translated, and a certain *Kavya*, drama or song was composed. As such, the *Katha Guru Carita* serves as a splendid commentary upon the works of the early Vaisnavite poets. Without the light thrown by such a historical document much would have remained unintelligible; for Vaisnavite literature was mainly the outcome of the religious experiences of our saint poets. Further, the book incorporates incidents relating to the popularity of the Vaisnavite authors and their works in their own time. It records that even illiterate people preserved manuscript copies of texts like *Ratnavali* with veneration (p. 275). Murari Koch, who was hardly conversant with the 3 R's, showed his eagerness to transcribe Vaisnavite texts (p. 342).

The *Katha Guru Carita* not only gives an elaborate and faithful account of the Vaisnavite faith and movement of Assam, but also throws much light on the organizational aspects of the Vaisnavite movement, the nature and structure of the Satra institution and its administration, method and procedure followed in winning converts, difficulties and hardships undergone in its propagation, history of the schisms and accounts of the different sects. It further gives us glimpses of the religious history of the other faiths such as the *Sakta*, the *Tantric*, and the Buddhist which were prevalent in the country during the period. Incidentally it refers to and records incidents from the lives of the contemporary saints of India, such as **Visnupuri Sannyasi**, **Caitanya**, **Kabir**, **Rupa**, **Sanatana** and others. The book is a treasure house of information on religious beliefs, customs and superstitions of the Assamese people. It gives a vivid account of the ordeal systems prevalent at the time (p. 40).

The institution of pilgrimage and the system of setting up *Satras* (monasteries) immensely advanced the geographical knowledge of the people. In connection with the accounts of the pilgrimages, we get valuable information regarding many sacred places of India and of the then existing communication systems. To propagate their faith and to build up monasteries and *Nam-gharas*, the Vaisnavite teachers were on constant move within the state. In describing these accounts, the *Katha Guru Carita* indirectly refers to the internal communication and other routes from Sadiya to Cooch Behar.

The book sheds a flood of fresh light upon the economic condition of the time. Generally speaking, the people enjoyed considerable prosperity and trade and commerce progressed favourably. Eastern Assam has been described as a land of plenty and prosperity, as it possessed gold, silk, ivory in abundance. The book refers to various arts and industries that were flourishing, particularly, weaving, rearing of silk cocoons (p. 57), designing, basket-making, net-making, wood carving and pottery. The village wells were constructed by the potters with burnt clay-rings (p. 252-253). In rural areas barter was frequently resorted to, though gold, silver and cowries were also employed as other mediums of exchange. Occasionally there were famines (p. 55) when food became difficult to obtain even by begging (p. 57).

In respect of social customs what strikes us most is the slave system. The slaves were not always kindly treated and they often changed hands (p. 101). The condemned criminals were sold and

sometimes bartered for horses to the Bhotiyas (p. 179).

As referred to above, the book narrates chiefly the events of the 15th and the 16th centuries. During this period Assam was politically divided into a number of independent principalities. The Chutiyas ruled over the easternmost region of the country while the south-east was under the Kacharis. West of the Chutiyas and of the Kacharis on the south were the domains of some petty chiefs called *Bhuyans*. To the extreme west was situated the kingdom of Cooch Behar, and the rest of the Brahmaputra valley was under the Ahoms.

In narrating the life of Gopala Ata, the book gives an interesting information of a '*Kalita Desa*', an Aryan settlement at a distance of fifteen days' march through hilly roads from the Ahom territory beyond the regions occupied by the Abors and the Miris. The people of the region bore Hindu Vaisnavite names like Vasudeva, Harideva, Sankarsana, etc. There was also a king in the *Kalita Desa* (p. 249).

The *Katha Guru Carita*, therefore, affords us glimpses of the political history of several states. The references to different kings and to their courts therefore seem to be wider in scope and as they were made incidentally and in a historical context they are more trustworthy and realistic than the official accounts of the *Buranjis*, the chronicles of the Ahom court. The *Katha Guru Carita* recounts incidents relating to the alliance of Gauda with Kamata, the conflict between the Koch kings of Cooch Behar and the Ahoms, the struggle between the Kacharis and the Bhuyans, and the invasions of the Muhammedans. Further, it preserves accounts relating to the menace of the Bhotiyas, who later on, though for a short period, established suzerainty over the Cooch territory. Moreover the book presents a picture of the prevailing administrative system, and of the various punishments imposed by the court on the culprits (p. 177).

Apart from its historical importance, the *Katha Guru Carita* stands pre-eminently as a detailed and systematic prose biography in the early Assamese literature. Any language may feel proud of a prose work of such magnitude produced as early as the 17th century AD. Here for the first time we come into more intimate relationship with the great personalities of our country and see them in social surroundings in which they lived, and the contemporary men and women with whom they worked and daily conversed. In this respect the *Katha Guru Carita* claims to be a human document of irresistible charm, absorbing interest and of wide appeal.

The language in which this classic is written is elegant and elevated; it perfectly befits the dignity of the narration. The author was wholly conscious of his sacred task and he tried his best to reproduce the Vaisnavite atmosphere with right use of right expressions. It is a kind of hieratic prose which in its rhythmic movement may be compared with the English prose of the Authorised Version of the Bible.