

Sankaradeva and Ezhuttacchan as Poets of the Bhakti Movement

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Sri Sankaradeva of Assam and Tuncattu Ramanujan Ezhuttacchan of Kerala were not only contemporaries in terms of chronology; they were almost identical in their respective roles in the cultures which they fostered through their writings. Both of them belonged to the 15th-16th centuries; both of them spearheaded the *bhakti* movement; both were staunch Vaishnavites, eager to prove through their works that Lord Siva was himself a worshipper of **Vishnu**. In Ezhuttacchan's *Ramayana*, Siva explains the glory of **Sri Rama** to his consort Parvati.

In Sankaradeva's *Kirttana* ('**Hara-Mohana**') we see how Siva pays obeisance to **Hari**. Both of them were inspired saints who used poetry as a means of singing the praise of the **Lord Narayana**. They represent the high-tide of the bhakti movement, strongly fortified by a deep understanding of the philosophical doctrines behind the prayers and songs especially the *Bhagavata*. Both provided the foundation for the growth of the literature in their respective languages. Both commanded an absolute mastery of the metrical resources of the concerned languages. Both drew on the one hand from classical Sanskrit sources and on the other from the rich tradition of folklore. In giving a local habitation to the great *puranic* myths and beliefs, both have succeeded in amalgamating the elitist scholarly tradition with the popular heritage. In their attempt to bring the religious and metaphysical speculations of the Vedas and Upanishads to the common people they were both revolutionary. Not being Brahmins, both tried to go beyond the taboos of the age, translated scriptures into the regional languages, and thereby gave a strong foundation for the regional literature as well as the cultures of the local people. They brought the stories of *Rama* and *Krishna* - indeed of all the avatars of **Vishnu** -

within the parameters of the everyday life of the average Assamese and Malayali respectively.

In Birinchi Kumar Barua's *History of Assamese Literature* the concept of *bhakti* that inspired Sankaradeva is clearly explained.

“People interpret the *Bhagavata*,” says **Sri Krsna**, “according to their own whims. They find sanction for everything except *bhakti*. Some make it out that the Vedas inculcate ceremonials, sacrifices, gifts, and oblations; others that the Vedas prescribed the worship of smaller gods, pilgrimages and bathing in sacred waters; others again, that the supreme bliss comes through knowledge. Their interpretations are coloured by the dominant attributes of their minds. But, know thou this, my friend, I am not accessible through knowledge nor through penance, nor through renunciation, nor through gifts, I am not accessible by Yoga nor by knowledge, I am accessible by *bhakti* alone.”

Identical thoughts are presented in Ezhuttacchan also. The superiority of *bhakti* over other ways of attaining closeness to God is established throughout his *Ramayana*. Humility and a certain daring go hand in hand in both authors. Ezhuttacchan is quick to pay his respects to the Brahmins as the source of all knowledge, of all virtue; nevertheless he defies the prohibition of translating sacred texts into the local language of Malayalam. The author of *Sankaradeva and His Times* says: “The orthodox views of those times considered a non-Brahmin's handling and, at that, translating this Purana [i.e., The *Bhagavata Purana*] into the local language as an act of sacrilege. Sankara continued his work in spite of this opposition and met the protest with citation of the Purana's own authority.”

Ezhuttacchan was a Chakkala Nayar - he belonged to a low caste engaged traditionally in the work of crushing oil seeds like the coconut - so the legend goes that a Brahmin asked him sneeringly how much will go into his oil grinder, and Ezhuttacchan is believed to have retorted, “Four and six”, thereby meaning the four Vedas and the six *sastras*. The discomfited interlocutor found his insult boomerang, with himself at the receiving end. Another legend concerns his advice “start with the fish” to a Brahmin scholar who had become ill but who understood the advice correctly. He was not being

asked to start eating fish but start his prayers beginning with the incarnation of **Vishnu** as a fish.

jatinamadikalkalla gunagana
bhedam ennatre budhanmarute matam.

The wise believe that virtue does not lie in caste, name etc. Even when He repeatedly proclaims his profound respect for Brahmins, he undermines the ban imposed by them against translating the Vedas and other scriptural texts. His works have been enjoyed by Brahmins as well as non-Brahmins for centuries now. What the author of *Sankaradeva and His Times* says of Sankaradeva is equally true of Ezhuttacchan.

“His knowledge of humanity and poetic genius inspired him to pieces of genuine characterization; to create living men and women who love and quarrel, brag and fight, and think and work like living beings; to create quick dramatic situations; to give the results of his own observations in similes, metaphors or otherwise, and to recreate the poetry of the original texts in unimpaired beauty. The greatness of his poetry lies in the fact that it has provided the leaven to a rich folk-culture pervading the Assamese people as a whole, and that in spite of the neglect of the educated modern, it has always appealed to the common man, who still find in it the solace and enjoyment of life.”

Both Sankaradeva and Ezhuttacchan grew up in the Sanskrit tradition. B.K. Barua says that “in literary conventions, modes, and figures of speech, Sankaradeva closely adhered to the canons of Sanskrit poets and followed the classical traditions. Most of the images, expressions and ideas used in his poetry were drawn from the traditional Sanskrit poets.” Ezhuttacchan too owed his ideas as well as metaphors to Vyasa and Valmiki. But he turned to Dravidian metres both in his narratives and in his lyrics. The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata* were great narratives he rendered into Malayalam, thereby enriching at once the language and the literature. *Harinamakirtanam* and *Irupattinaluvrttam* (literally, 24 metres) are lyrical effusions with a puranic and philosophical dimension. Together they represent what is most sublime in Malayalam.

Before Ezhuttacchan, *Niranam* poets had rendered the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, but the language was not ripe enough at that time to bear the weight of Vedantic thought with ease and clarity. **Cherusseri** in the 15th century narrated the story

of **Krishna** in *Krishna gatha*: it seldom achieved seriousness and sublimity in the later Krishna legends. Only the *Sisulila* came off with magnificent splendour. In the hands of Ezhuttacchan, however, not only the stories of **Rama** and **Krishna**, but those of **Narasimha** or of *Amritamanthana*, all came alive and intimate. In the words of Barua, Sankaradeva's writings have been to the people of Assam a source of delight, inspiration, consolation and wisdom. He comments:-

“The Assamese honour him for greatly developing the resource of their language, for widening the imaginative range of their literature, and for raising it to classical elegance and richness by imparting to it what is good and beautiful in Sanskrit.”

To quote B.K. Barua again, “Sankaradeva's religion.....brought a new meaning and depth in social and cultural life. For the first time in Assam's history he asserted the dignity of man in society independent of the accident of birth and social rank, and established the spiritual equality of all men.”

As translators of classics too, both Sankaradeva and Ezhuttacchan appear to have followed identical principles. The essential thing is to bring the classical stories, characters and situations into the imaginative framework of the readers. **Rama**, **Krishna** and **Devaki** and **Yashoda** are all intensely human and real because they speak and act like everyday characters in the reader's own village. The second thing is the freedom with which the original is translated. Imaginative correspondence rather than mere literal exactitude seems to have been their ideal as translators. The third thing is the free manipulation of the narrative - the omission, the condensation and the addition or elaboration. Barua's comment on the Assamese translation of the Mahabharata underscores Ezhuttacchan's practice as a translator too.

“..... the Assamese *Mahabharata* is not a literal rendering of the original epic. Through compression, omission, alteration, innovation and adaptation the Assamese version emerged as an epic of the soil. To make the narrative sweet, direct, and appealing, particularly to the village people, Assamese poets have deliberately omitted most disquisitions on law, morality and abstruse philosophy. Furthermore, the Assamese recension took on the character of Vaisnava *Sastra* as it was translated by Vaisnava poets to disseminate the Vaisnava creed.”

Ezhuttacchan's translations are mostly creations marked with subtle originality. They gave a freshness to the language and received a freshness in feeling in return. The Assamese idiom marks the originality of Sankaradeva's translations; the Malayali idiom marks the originality of Ezhuttacchan's translations.

Both Sankaradeva and Ezhuttacchan could handle philosophical matter with depth in their eloquent medium. *Cintaratnam* by Ezhuttacchan and *Bhaktiratnakara* by Sankaradeva are profound speculations. But their visions merge at the lotus feet of **Narayana**. To be one with the beloved is the goal of all bhaktas:- The Vaishnavite bhakta has his sole objective on *sayujya*. I conclude with two verses from Ezhuttacchan's *Harinama Kirtanam*:-

*O Hari, embodiment of bliss and knowledge
Beloved of the Gopikas.
Do not let me have the feeling this "I"
And if I do get it,
Let me feel that all is One,
O, giver of boons,
I bow to Narayana.*

*Whatever I see is Narayana's form,
Whatever I hear is His Name,
Whatever I do is His worship,
Whatever exists is all Hari,
Let me bow to Narayana.*

(Tr. by K. Raghavan Pillai)

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