

Pilgrimage as Revelation:

Sankaradeva's Journey to Jagannatha Puri

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Was Sankaradeva's pilgrimage to Jagannatha, Dvaraka and other sacred places of India really a pilgrimage? As Phyllis Granoff points out, it had none of the characteristics of a pilgrimage in the conventional sense of the term. It "seems to be the very antithesis of a pilgrimage, however conceived". Sankaradeva does not meet his Guru, nor does he collect any books that are central to the propagation of his doctrine. Indeed, as the biographies of Sankaradeva reveal, it was the *Bhagavata* that came to Sankaradeva and not the other way round. Sankaradeva is Himself God and he undertakes the so-called 'pilgrimage' only to prove His divinity to His followers. Therefore, although one of the possible objectives (among many others, according to the author) of the biographer of the Saint may have been to "transcend the strictly local through pilgrimage", he (the biographer) cannot (in fact, does not) lose sight of the divinity of Sankaradeva, which had already been established. As a result, the biographer need not seek 'legitimacy' in any of the 'established centres' or 'fixed places' outside Assam.

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Introduction: The Paradox of the Divine Pilgrim

Pilgrimage is often a central event in the biography of a holy man in medieval India. During the course of his journeys the saint may meet his guru and receive the transmission of the teaching, often in the form of books that are considered most authoritative and important to his teachings; he may also defeat opponents in debate and begin to gather around himself his own followers, thus initiating the religious community that will survive him and recount his deeds in the wide range of biographical texts that have come down to us. The saint may also act as an ordinary pilgrim, visiting holy sites and praying at famous temples. He may in addition create his own holy sites, by the miracles that he performs as he moves from village to village, temple to temple.

Despite this centrality of pilgrimage in religious biographies, the saint as pilgrim often seems to be problematic in biographical texts. In the *Sankaradigvijaya*, when Padmapada, Sankara's famous disciple, wants to set off on a pilgrimage, his guru tells him that pilgrimage is not particularly productive of spiritual ends¹. In the words of the text (chapter 14),

*sa ksetrvaso nikate guror yo vasas tadiyanghrijalam ca tirtham /
gurupadesena yadatmadrstih saiva prasastakhiladevadrstih // 2*

*susrusamanena guroh samipe stheyam na neyam ca tato 'nyadese /
visisya margasramakarsitasya nidrabhutya kim u cintaniyam // 3*

*sambhavyate kva ca jalam ca nasti pathah sayyasthalam kvacidihasti na ca kva
casti /
sayyasthalijalaniriksanasaktacetah pantho na sarma labhate kalusikrtatma // 5*

*jvarataradi ca rogajalam badheta cet tarhi na ko 'pyupayah. /
sthatum ca gantum ca na parayeta tada sahayo 'pi vimuñcatimam // 6*

Dwelling near to one's guru is called dwelling in a holy place; the water used to bathe the guru's feet is holy water. And seeing the self through the instructions of a guru is the highest vision of God.

One who wishes to serve his guru should stay near him and not journey abroad. How can a person practice contemplation when he is overcome by sleep, exhausted and weary from his travels?

For the traveller is beset with worries. Where will he find water to drink, and where not? Sometimes there will be a place to stay and sometimes not. His mind absorbed in looking for water or a place to stop, the traveller is in turmoil and finds no peace.

Fever and dysentery, all manner of ills may beset the traveller; what can he then do, unable either to go on or to stay. And at such a moment his companion deserts him.

¹ [Vidyaranya], *Sankaradigvijaya*, Anandasrama Samskṛta Granthavali 22, ed. Vinayak Ganesa Apte (Pune: Ananda Asrama 1932). In the discussion several participants reminded me that the notion of a God worshipping himself is not confined to these texts; indeed, the daily ritual of worship in the Agamas involves the worshipper first becoming a God and then worshipping. On this, see Richard Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Siva in Medieval India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). The Vedic gods also perform sacrifices. I would argue that what makes the question of the saint/god going on pilgrimage different is that the texts themselves self-consciously highlight the incongruity and seek to find a suitable explanation for what they regard as an anomaly. Text citations in this essay are to chapter and verse.

Padmapada is not deterred, however. He agrees that his teacher's words contain a germ of truth, but he nonetheless repeats that he is eager to see new places: *anekan desan aviksyā hṛdayam na nirakulam me*, 'Unless I see many places my heart will know no peace' (v. 8). Padmapada readily agrees that the journey is difficult. But he adds, it is never easy to acquire merit: *margo hi vidyeta na suvyavasthah sukhena punyam kva nu labhyate adhuna*, 'It may well be that the path is not lined with comforts, but these days how is merit to be acquired without hardship?' (v. 9). Even the threat of illness does not make him turn back; after all, disease is a result of previous karma, and that will come to fruition whether one stays at home or sets out on the road: *sadharanad iha ca va paradesake va karma hyabhuktam anuvartata eva jantum*, 'Whether here or in a foreign land, karma that has not been exhausted by living it out, will surely follow a person' (v. 10). Padmapada then seeks to counter a common prejudice against travelling in foreign lands: -

*iha sthitam va paratah sthitam va kalo na muñcet samayagatascet /
taddesagatyā amṛta devadatta ityadikam mohakṛtam jananam // 11*

Death comes to a man, whether he stays at home or goes abroad, if his time has come. It is just superstition that makes people say, 'It was going to that place that killed Devadatta.'

Padmapada further argues that some men go abroad on pilgrimages and return in good health, while others stay at home and die in the meantime (v. 14). He then goes on to extol the virtues of pilgrimage:-

*sattirhaseva manasah prasadini desasya viksa manasah kutuhalam /
ksinotyānarthan sujanena samgamas tasman na kasmai bhramanam virocate // 16*

Visiting an excellent holy place gladdens the heart, while seeing a new place stimulates the mind. Meeting fine men puts an end to misfortunes. Who would not delight in travel?

And so Padmapada undertakes his longed-for pilgrimage². The text suggests, however, that there are still incongruities in a holy man journeying to a holy site. In the

² Véronique Bouillier pointed out the similarity between this exchange between the guru and his disciple, and the ritualized exchange between the young student and his family during the *upanayana* ceremony. Information on this may be found in her article 'Preliminary Remarks on Balajogis or Ascetic Children', in

course of his travels, Padmapada stops to visit his maternal uncle. His relatives welcome him and then say,

*caranti tirthanyapi samgrahitum lokam mahanto nanu suddhabhavah /
suddhatmavidyaksapitorupapas tajjustam ambho nigadanti tirtham // 89*

True it is that the great, pure in heart, make pilgrimages out of a desire to help others. For they have already destroyed their own sins through their pure knowledge of the true soul; indeed they say that the water such men use is the real holy water.

This is actually a very significant verse; it introduces us to an important theme in the treatment of pilgrimage in religious biographies, namely, that there is something incongruous in a sage being a pilgrim. The sage is already pure and does not need to make a pilgrimage, the purpose of which is to remove sin, often by bathing in holy water. Indeed such a person's own bath water purifies others of sin. What need would he have, then, of making a pilgrimage? The answer given here is simple: The sage makes a pilgrimage to help others. He does so by setting an example, and by providing them with the chance to be in his presence³.

The problem of the sage as pilgrim is even more acute when the sage is regarded as a God or incarnation of a God. This is the case of all the figures in medieval Hinduism who were the main subjects of religious biographies. The question then arises, why would God ever need to travel to see God? The *Madhya Lila* section of the *Caitanya-caritamrta* by Krsnadasa describes in great detail **Caitanya's** pilgrimage to Puri and other sacred sites⁴. At one point on the journey the text tells us: -

tirtha pavitra karite kare tirthabhraman /

Recent Research on Nepal, Schriftenreihe Internationales Asien Forum, Band 3, ed. Klaus Seeland (München: Weltforum Verlag, 1985), 12–15.

³ Indeed one definition of a holy place is a place where sages and saints dwell: *gosiddhamuninivasasca desah punyah prakirtitah*, Ballalāsena, *Danasagara*, Bibliotheca Indica 274, ed. Bhabatosh Bhattacharya (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1953), 326, quoting Vyasa.

⁴ The text is edited by Srimadbhaktikevala Audulomi Maharaj (Calcutta: Gaudiya Mission, 1957). Bimanbihari Majumdar has an extensive discussion of the pilgrimage routes and a comparison with other biographies of Caitanya in his *Sricaitanya-cariter Upadan* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1959).

sei chale nistaraye samsarika janan // 10.11

Great men make pilgrimages to purify the holy sites. That is how they save people caught in transmigratory existence.

Krsnadasa then quotes the *Bhagavata Purana*, as he often does, as textual support for his view on holy men and pilgrimages: -

*bhavadvidha bhagavatas tirthibhutih svayam vibho /
tirthikurvanti tirthani svantasthena gadabhrta // 1.13.10*

Great devotees like you, O Lord, are themselves holy. They sanctify supposed holy places by the presence of Visnu, who resides in their hearts.

The verse from the *Bhagavata Purana* is spoken by Yudhisthira to **Vidura**, who has returned to Hastinapura after making a pilgrimage. It lends support to at least part of Krsnadasa's statement that holy men do not need to make pilgrimages for their own sake; indeed the verse seems to say that the presence of such men is what makes a place holy. They bring with them God, who is said to reside in their hearts, that is, who is the constant focus of their thoughts. We then must go back to Krsnadasa's own verse to understand why in fact someone who carries the divine within him would seek God in a pilgrimage place. The answer is simply that somehow this is part of the holy man's efforts to rescue people from the cycle of rebirths⁵.

Religious biographies treat the holy pilgrim in a number of ways and adopt a variety of strategies to show that the saint is not an ordinary pilgrim. Although in much of the *Madhya Lila* Caitanya seems just that, as he visits well-known temples and prays to the famous images, there are indications that he has an unusual relationship with the God to whom he prays: in many cases he is that God. Thus when Caitanya goes to Remuna to

⁵ It is interesting to note the way in which the text problematizes pilgrimage here; pilgrimage is problematic for any holy man and not just for one who is regarded as an incarnation of God. This statement of the problem does not allow the text to solve the dilemma simply by playing upon the very notion of a divine incarnation, who can act at times as an ordinary human being although he or she is divine. We shall see that even when the problem is the incongruity of God journeying to meet Himself, the concept of *lila* is not necessarily offered as the solution, although such a device would have readily been available to the biographer. Instead other explanations may be sought to explain the divine journey or, as we shall see, the pilgrimage will serve as proof of the divinity. In these cases, the fact that God is also human does not seem to be part of the discussion.

pay homage to the image of Gopinatha there, an unusual event transpires. The garland that was on the head of the God suddenly finds itself on Caitanya's head instead⁶.

Despite the fact that the biographical tradition of Caitanya in stories such as this one recognizes the inherent incongruity of the divine Caitanya bowing to God as an ordinary pilgrim might, the accounts of Caitanya's pilgrimage overwhelmingly suggest an extraordinary but nonetheless human quest. Caitanya does at times exhibit unusually strong emotions in his overwhelming love of the God he sees; thus in the temple of Jagannatha at Puri, he rushes to embrace the image and falls into a swoon (2.5.144; 2.6). Caitanya bows down, dances, and sings before certain images (2.6.235), but more often he just worships in various temples without any mention of anything unusual. He also simply meets various people who will become his disciples. Most important, perhaps, he meets his teachers and receives the holy books that will form the basis of his ecstatic religion. Caitanya, on one pilgrimage, receives a copy of the important *Brahmasamhita* (2.9.23-7) and of the *Krsnakarnamrta* (2.9.306). In each case, he has copies of the manuscripts made. It was on an earlier pilgrimage to Gaya that he had met Isvara Puri, who had initiated him. The *Caitanya Bhagavata* of Vrndavanadasa describes this as Caitanya's *mantra diksa*, his initiation through the transmission of a mantra (1.7.105)⁷.

In this text, when Vravanadasa describes Caitanya's visit to the temple of Jagannatha, mentioned above, he does remark on the unusual situation of Caitanya's fainting and swooning in joy at the sight of God, given the fact that Caitanya is himself God. He says simply,

*kseneke padila hai anande murchita /
ke bujhe e isvarer agadha carita // 3.2.430*

⁶ This incident is told in *Karnapura's Caitanyacandrodaya Nataka* (Calcutta: Sarasvati Press, 1885), 6.9, and the *Caitanyacaritamrta* of Krsnadasa 2.4.12–13. Majumdar dates the first text to 1572 (*Sricaitanyacariter Upadan*, 102), while S.K. De dates the second to around 1615. See his *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961), 56.

⁷ The text is edited by Srimadbhaktikevala Audulomi Maharaj (Calcutta: Gaudiya Mission, 1961). S.K. De dates the text roughly to sometime just before AD 1550. He cites Majumdar (*Sricaitanyacariter Upadan*, 183) in his speculation about the date (De, *Early History*, 47–48 n.).

For an instant he fell down, swooning in joy. Who can comprehend the unfathomable deeds of God?

Thus the paradox remains. We are left with the anomaly of God in a swoon over Himself as proof of the fact that God's ways are beyond human comprehension. Vrndavanadasa does not stop here, however; he seems to be intensely concerned by the strangeness of the Divine Pilgrim and offers an alternative explanation for Caitanya's pilgrimages. On his trip to Puri he has Caitanya say that he really came not to see the deity, Jagannatha, but to see the human Sarvabhauma, who will become one of his most faithful devotees (3.3.11–12). Caitanya repeats this assertion later (3.3.143). Here the seemingly ordinary events of the pilgrimage are put into service as an explanation for the enigma of God travelling to worship Himself. God has another design, which is to meet a human devotee and bring him into His worship. We might compare this with Krsnadasa's assertion that the Divine Pilgrim acts to save mortal beings caught in the cycle of rebirth.

Sometimes bringing God to mortals requires an extraordinary revelation and thus there are moments during the pilgrimages when Caitanya's divinity becomes immediately apparent to his devotees. We have seen one such moment in the story of the garland of Gopinatha of Remuna being miraculously transferred onto Caitanya's head. On the banks of the Krsnavena River, Caitanya is recognized as an incarnation of Rama when he embraces a certain tree in the Dandaka Forest and the tree vanishes to heaven (2.9.314)⁸. Pilgrimage in this biographical tradition is thus a complex phenomenon, offering the occasion for the divine saint to reveal his divinity, and theoretically serving in some way to save the mass of humanity. Nonetheless, most often Caitanya's travels seem to be part of a very human quest of an emotionally sensitive devotee, who along the way finds his teachers and his books, and worships fervently at various holy sites, as we might imagine other human pilgrims do. At the same time, behind the account of all of these activities, as we have seen, there lurks a suspicion of their very appropriateness. In varying ways the biographers all question the point of a holy man making a pilgrimage. In the end Vrndavanadasa offers as an explanation the inscrutability of God's ways, while

⁸ The complexity of conceptions about the divinity of Caitanya has been amply explored by Tony K. Stewart in his *Biographical Images of Krsna-Caitanya: A Study in the Perception of Divinity* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1985). I thank Tony Stewart for a copy of this thesis.

Krsnadasa suggests that holy men make pilgrimages to save others. Both tell stories that highlight the anomalous nature of Caitanya's pilgrimage, of God praying to God. Pilgrimage is thus both a major event in the biographies of Caitanya and a major problem.

When we look at the biographical tradition surrounding another Northeastern Indian Vaisnava saint, **Sankaradeva** of Assam, the problem of pilgrimage seems even more acute. Like Caitanya, Sankaradeva was regarded as divine by his followers. There is thus the incongruity of the God going to worship Himself. But there was another problem with pilgrimage for the Assamese Vaisnava community, which advocated the sole reliance on the worship of **Krsna**, particularly on reciting the **Name of Krsna** in these degenerate times. Thus, in the biography of Sankaradeva by Ramacarana, we are told: -

*kalita Sankare suna nirantare bhaktar sadhibe gati /
tanta vine an samsar taran kalita nahi samprati //
bhailanta udita Sankara vidita prakasila nijadharmā /
deva tirtha vrata yag yoga yata dur kaila ana karma // 3444*

Listen now, in this time of Kali Yuga, Sankara will save his devotees. There is no other means now in this Kali Age to cross the ocean of transmigratory existence, but Sankara. Sankara, like the sun, has now risen, spreading the light of his religion. He has cast far away other religious practices, worship of the Gods, pilgrimage to holy places, fasts, sacrifices, meditation and all⁹.

Despite this bold assertion, that Sankara's new religion rejects all ritual, including pilgrimage, pilgrimage remains a central event in the biographies told of Sankaradeva. Like Caitanya, Sankaradeva goes to Puri and to Gaya. In the rest of this essay, I explore how his pilgrimage is treated by one biographer, **Ramacarana**¹⁰. I argue that the suspicion of pilgrimage in the Assamese Vaisnava community led the biographer to treat

⁹ Ramacarana, *Sankaracarita*, ed. Harinarayan Dattabarua (Nalbari: Dattabarua Publishing Company, 1996). I thank Dr Dilip Kalita of the ABILAC Institute, Guahati, for providing me with a copy of the text.

¹⁰ On Ramacarana see Maheshvar Neog, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam Sankaradeva and His Times* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), 5–7. The extant biography ascribed to Ramacarana is now thought to be a late text, written around 1688. To avoid being tedious, I refer to the author by the name 'Ramacarana', with the understanding that this is nothing more than a traditional ascription.

the holy pilgrim very differently from the way in which other holy pilgrims had been treated by their biographers. I try to show that unlike Caitanya, Sankaradeva was not described as either an ordinary or a particularly fervent human devotee, but more consistently as God.

Sankaradeva is not an ordinary pilgrim; he does not find a guru on his journey, and he does not collect books. His pilgrimage is more a series of divine revelations, in which, in dreams and visions, he shows the faithful his true nature as God. Pilgrimage has become so problematic that it has ceased to be a pilgrimage at all for the pilgrim, and became a spiritual journey for the onlookers.

Sankaradeva's Journey

Despite Sankaradeva's unambiguous rejection of pilgrimage in Ramacarana's biography of him, people do make pilgrimages throughout the text. The biography begins with a detailed account of Sankaradeva's ancestors. All of Sankaradeva's ancestors were born in somewhat unusual circumstances, to parents who were childless until they obtained a boon from a god or goddess. As the biography opens, we hear of a woman Induni, whose husband rejects her. In the years since the celebration of her *puspotsava*, the festivities celebrating her reaching puberty, her husband has not once come to her bed. One day he finally relents and comes to her (1.29). She prays fervently for a child, and reflecting on the fact that if a son is born a husband's ill-fame as sterile is removed, while if a daughter is born, a wife is no longer rebuked for having been the cause of infertility, she prays to Siva for a daughter (1.31). She gives birth to a daughter Krsnakanti, who is the *sakti* of Krsna. This Krsnakanti is later miraculously made pregnant by Siva, who makes Visnu's seed fall from the heavens into her mouth (1.40). We learn of this child's, Landadeva's, descendants, who include Suryavara, born after his parents worshipped the sun God, Surya, and Sankaradeva's father, Kusumavara, born from a boon obtained when his father, Suryavara, worshipped the Lords of the Quarters, the Dikpalas. Kusumavara is childless and he and his father together make a pilgrimage to a famous *siva linga* situated in a cave at Sngarika. Kusumavara tells the priest that he

has come seeking a child. The priests give him some *prasada* and offer an oblation into the sacred fire (1.319–320). A garland on the *siva linga* falls onto Kusumavara, in this case, confirming that he has received a boon from the God.

The child born to Kusumavara is **Sankaradeva**, who thus ironically seems to owe his very birth to the ritual of pilgrimage that he later rejects. The birth of Sankaradeva's first wife is also the result of a pilgrimage. We are told of one Satananda Bhua, who went to Puri to worship. He prayed to Subhadra for a daughter. That night Subhadra appeared to one of the temple priests in a dream. She predicts the birth of a son, Harikha, who will father a daughter, Suryavati. It is this Suryavati who will wed Sankaradeva (2.1659ff.).

After a long account of the unusual circumstances of Sankaradeva's conception and birth, the biography goes into great detail about Sankaradeva's early history; indeed we are given a day-by-day account of his exploits for much of his infancy. The biography tells us again and again that **Sankaradeva is Krsna**; his childhood is filled with pranks that resemble those of Krsna. Like Krsna, he is naughty and torments his mother; like Krsna, he kills various threatening creatures. But the author of the biography does not simply stop at drawing these obvious parallels; he actually makes his text an extension of the authoritative texts that tell the life of Krsna, for example the *Bhagavata Purana*. Thus when Sankaradeva kills a snake, we are not just told that this was like Krsna, who had once killed a snake. We are told that in a former life the snake was Satrajit, the father of Krsna's wife, Satyabhama. Satrajit had verbally abused Krsna, who had turned him into a *vidyadhara*, predicting that he would be reborn as a snake when Krsna himself was reborn as Sankaradeva and that Sankaradeva would bring about his final release from *samsara* (2.1226ff.). The life of Sankaradeva is here seen as a continuation of the life of Krsna, its very events foretold during Krsna's own lifetime¹¹. I might add that this also

¹¹ It is difficult for me to assess at this stage of my research the extent to which Ramacarana is an innovator in extending *puranic* stories this way into the life of Sankaradeva. The corresponding sections in an early biography of Sankaradeva by Daityari do not do this. See Daityari, *Sankaradeva-Madhvadevar Jivan Carita*, ed. Haribilas Gupta (Tezpur: n.p., 1990). On Daityari, see Neog, *Early History*, 5. Daityari is the son of Ramacarana. In general Daityari gives only a very brief account of Sankaradeva's early life.

makes Ramacarana's text something of a new *Bhagavata Purana*, continuing the account of Krsna into the present.

In this way, Ramacarana frequently takes events in the life of Sankaradeva back into the world of the *Bhagavata Purana* as he attempts to establish without question the identity of Sankaradeva with **Krsna**. Thus when Sankaradeva's father dies an early death we are told why: He was Nanda, Krsna's father in an earlier birth, and he had not believed the children when they had told him of Krsna's marvelous exploits. And so it was that he had to pay for his lack of faith with a gripping fever that carried him off early in life. Sankaradeva's mother also dies young; we are told that this is because as Krsna's mother, Yasoda, she had tied Krsna up after he had made a mess of the house (2.1139ff.). Ramacarana frequently cites some *purana* as an authoritative source as he explains how events in Sankaradeva's life are prefigured and foretold in the accounts of Krsna. Thus at one point he cites the *Narada Purana* (2.1258); at another, the *Visnu Purana* (2.1303).

We are thus amply instructed in the biography that **Sankaradeva is Krsna**. It seems natural, then, when we do come to the point in the biography where Sankaradeva is ready to make his first pilgrimage, that the question is raised openly about the suitability of someone we know to be God going on a journey, the ostensible purpose of which is to see the visible God in His temple. Sankaradeva has gone to take leave of his guru, Mahendra Kandali. Here is the exchange between them in our text: -

*Sankare suniya harisa kariya bolanta suniyo vani /
jagannatha ksetre yaive iccha bhila vidaya diyo apuni // 1753
guruve bolanta tumi ye isvara ksetrata kaman kama /
brahmanda loka sabe nistariba tomather gaya nama // 1754*

Hearing his words, Sankara was delighted and said, 'Hear my words! I wish to go to the holy place of Jagannatha. Give me leave to go.' The teacher said, 'But you are God! What could you possibly want with a holy place! All the beings in the universe will be released just by chanting your name!'

Sankaradeva's reply is not terribly helpful: -

Sankare bolanta nubuliba guru sisaba vakya amaka /

diyo anumati yaiboho samprati tirtha ksetra dekhibaka // 1755

Sankara said, 'Please don't say such things to me, O teacher! Give me your permission. I must go now, to see the holy place, the holy site!'

The guru next proposes to consult the almanacs to determine the propitious day on which Sankaradeva should set out; Sankaradeva dismisses all of that with contempt and gets permission to make the journey (1755-1756).

Sankaradeva has obviously not answered Mahendra Kandali's very fundamental question: Why would God need to go on a pilgrimage to find or see Himself? The text does give us its answer, although somewhat later on. At this point, Sankaradeva is still on his pilgrimage. Along the way he has picked up Rupa and Sanatana Gosvami, the famous followers of Caitanya. Sankaradeva has bathed in a sacred spot and offered memorial oblations to his ancestors. Some pilgrims are gathered under a large tree that has miraculous fruit; eating the fruit of this tree instantly stills both hunger and thirst. But no one is able to reach the fruit. As Sankaradeva approaches, the fruit falls down to him, all by itself. Rupa and Sanatana are both amazed. The pilgrims under the tree include four priests, who were sleeping at the time. They see a dream in which Sankaradeva assumes the appearance of Rama. Sita is worshiping him with songs of praise. The priests ask Rama from where he has come; Rama replies that he has been born in Kamarupa as Sankara, in a family of *sudras*. He proclaims the doctrine of exclusive refuge in **Krsna** and he has come on a pilgrimage to prove this (*tirthaka lagiya ailo dekhaite pramana*, 2049). With these words Rama vanishes and the priests see Sankara right before their eyes, shining like the full moon (3.2042-2050). This phrase, *dekhaite pramana*, 'to show proof,' occurs again, when Sankaradeva is in Vrndavana. One of his followers asks him, *dharibek nijarupa dekhiyo pramana*, 'take on your real form and show us proof' (3.2101). They then all fall asleep and in a dream they see Sankaradeva, who has taken on his real form as Krsna, surrounded by the *gopas* and *gopis* (3.2102). The purpose of Sankaradeva's pilgrimage is thus to show proof of his divinity by revealing his true, that is, his divine nature. As we go back now and look at some of the other events that take place during Sankaradeva's pilgrimage, we shall see that this is exactly how Ramacarana

depicts the pilgrimage. It is a visionary experience, not so much for Sankaradeva himself, as for the select devotees to whom he reveals his divine nature.

Once he obtains permission from Mahendra Kandali to make the pilgrimage to Jagannatha, Sankaradeva first settles some important matters at home. He arranges for his daughter's marriage and is then ready to set out. As if to remind us of that other Sankara's words to his disciple, Padmapada, with which I began this essay, the first major incidents in the pilgrimage have to do with the efforts of the pilgrims to obtain food and drink along the way. In one incident the party has not been able to find any inhabited place to stop; they are forced to camp out in the wilderness. They are worried that they will not find anything to eat and they lie down to sleep. Suddenly a shining and handsome man, his body aglow like the sun or moon, appears. He is accompanied by others and they have together brought all that the pilgrims require. The two disciples, **Sarbajaya** and **Balarama**, are awake and see the shining person; they pinch a third person, **Ramarama**, so that he wakes up¹². Sankaradeva tells them to wake up all the other pilgrims so that they can eat. When the pilgrims awaken and see the food, they ask who has brought it all.

Sankaradeva tells them that he had gone and brought the food. Ramarama then speaks up; he says that it is unlikely that anyone could have found a market and a store in that wilderness; Sankaradeva has brought the food from heaven. He describes the glowing apparition and the fourteen others who accompanied the shining person. Balarama, Sarbajaya, and Ramarama then all tell the others what they had seen (3.1901ff.). **Mahendra Kandali** is among the pilgrims and he declares that Sankaradeva is himself Jagannatha; what need have they of going to Puri, when Jagannatha is among them? (3.1908).

¹² These three individuals, and sometimes Mahendra Kandali as well, play a special role on the pilgrimage. They seem to be the most frequent recipients of the visions and dreams that attest to Sankaradeva's divine status. They also act as mediators between Sankaradeva and the other members of the pilgrimage party by explaining to them what they have experienced and that Sankaradeva is actually God. Ramarama and Balarama are both mentioned by Neog, *Early History*.

This incident, early in the pilgrimage, sets the tone for what will follow. During the pilgrimage Sankaradeva will repeatedly reveal his divinity to select devotees, either in visions or in dreams. Others who are present often do not see the dreams or visions, although they may later be told about them.

Soon after the vision in the wilderness, the party reaches the Ganges and Mahendra Kandali has a dream in which he sees nine beautiful women. They are all richly bejeweled, though the one at their lead is particularly richly appointed. This woman places a gold garland on **Sankaradeva's** head calling him **Narayana**, and proclaims herself his servant. She says that he will purify her. She tells Sankaradeva that once before she had gained release from touching his foot. With this, all the women bow to Sankaradeva and Mahendra Kandali wakes up (3.1913). Kandali is overwhelmed and cries. He rushes to where Sankaradeva and the other devotees are and he tells them of his dream; he tells them how the women praised Sankaradeva and proclaimed him to be Krsna. The pilgrims are all astounded and they rush to the Ganges River. Sankaradeva also goes to bathe in the river. A beautiful woman comes out of the river. She praises Sankaradeva. This vision is both the fulfillment of Mahendra Kandali's dream and a somewhat private revelation; the pilgrims do not recognize the woman as the Goddess Ganga, although they do see her rise out of the water and hear her words glorifying Sankaradeva (3.1926ff.).

The pilgrims continue along their way to Jagannatha. When Sankaradeva is about to reach Jagannatha, there is yet another revelation of his divinity. This time **Jagannatha** speaks to his priests in a dream, telling them that Sankaradeva is coming and that he is Jagannatha's Lord (*Prananatha*, 'Lord of My Life,' 3.1934). He describes Sankaradeva to them so that they will know him and instructs them to offer him food from the temple along with Jagannatha's greetings. The priests do as they are told, and even explain to Sankaradeva that this was what Jagannatha had instructed them to do in a dream. In this scene, the God sends food from the temple to the pilgrim, instead of the normal course of events, in which a pilgrim would be expected to go to the temple himself or herself and receive food. *Sankaradeva, though a pilgrim, is thus not really a pilgrim at all.*

In another negation of his status as a pilgrim, the three Gods of the temple at Puri then come to Sankaradeva at night. Jagannatha himself, Balarama and Subhadra come disguised as cats (3.1957). This, too, is a reversal of the normal order of things, since pilgrims come to see gods and not the other way around. The text further makes clear that it is the Gods who are the real pilgrims, for when they visit Sankaradeva in this surreptitious night visit they eat what Sankaradeva has left uneaten; in other words they take *prasada*, food eaten by the God, from Sankaradeva, which is what pilgrims do, taking *prasada* from a temple that they visit. The ever watchful Sarbajaya sees the cats and tries to shoo them away, but Sankaradeva stops him. The cats vanish. Now the three pilgrims, Sarbajaya, Ramarama, and Kandali, have a dream in which Jagannatha comes to them and says that he has eaten the *prasada*. He tells them that it was he who came in the form of a cat. With that he vanishes and they wake up. Once more we have an incident in which the divinity of Sankaradeva is revealed to select disciples, for this is what it means for Jagannatha to take *prasada*, which is the word that designates the food given to the God and then distributed to the worshippers. The incident tells us that Jagannatha is the worshipper and Sankaradeva is the God.

The same relationship between Jagannatha and Sankaradeva is confirmed by what happens when Sankaradeva finally enters the temple. In an incident that closely recalls what we saw happen to Caitanya at Remuna, when Sankaradeva approaches the image, Jagannatha gives his garland to him. While no one actually sees him transfer the garland from his own head onto Sankaradeva's head, they all see the garland on Sankaradeva. The pilgrims all praise Sankaradeva as the highest lord (3.1973–4).

Perhaps the most striking of all of the divine revelations during the pilgrimage occurs to the pilgrims at **Dvaraka**. The visit to Jagannatha is over and the pilgrims are making a tour of various holy places. They go to Prayaga and Puskarini, for example. We are told that at each place they visit, the pilgrims see dreams and know that there is no higher God than Sankara (3.2963). The group then comes to Mathura. The pilgrims ask Sankaradeva to show them Dvaraka; they want to see the palace of Rukmini (3.2064ff.).

Sarbajaya explains that at the time of the equinox Rukmini's palace rises from the ocean (3.2065). He and Balarama and Paramananda beg Sankaradeva to take them and he agrees. They make their plans to go to the sea at the time of the equinox. As the four of them, Sankaradeva, Sarbajaya, Balarama, and Paramananda, all sit by the shore in the lotus position, facing West, they hear a rumble from the depths of the ocean.

Sankaradeva tells them to close their eyes and he moves away from them. When they open their eyes and do not see him they are afraid, but then they see someone in the midst of the ocean. They cannot tell if they are in heaven or in the underworld, but they realize the divine person that they are seeing is their own Sankaradeva (3. 2075). They also see a divine city with palaces like golden suns. It has groves, lakes, and ponds, and Sankara is in the middle of all this. There are sixteen thousand palaces that all glow like the sun, but among them is one palace even more glorious than the others. There is a woman in this palace, seated on a jeweled throne. They see **Sankaradeva** by her side on the jeweled throne. A heavenly retinue from **Visnu's** heaven, **Vaikuntha**, waits on the couple. The three pilgrims are astonished. They know that Sankaradeva is God and that he has left their side and is in the divine palace on a jeweled throne (3.2086). And then the vision vanishes. They look around and Sankaradeva is with them again. They praise him and are ready to move on. They have seen Dvaraka, which is as wonderful as heaven itself¹³.

This vision, although more detailed and splendid than the other visions on the pilgrimage, is perfectly consistent in character with the other divine revelations that have taken place during Sankaradeva's travels. It is an esoteric vision, given only to select disciples and Sankaradeva is the object of the vision and not its recipient. There was a tradition in medieval Indian writing on pilgrimage that emphasized the visionary quality

¹³ It is worth noting that both pilgrimages to Puri and Dvaraka are very differently treated in a later biography. In Puvarama Mahanta's *Bardowa-gurucarita*, ed. Mahesvara Neog (Guwahati: Guwahati Book Stall, 1977), the pilgrimage to Puri is very briefly described; the only unusual event is that the local priests are told in a dream not to make the offering in the temple but to bring the offering to Sankaradeva; there is also no visionary experience at Dvaraka, although Sankaradeva does carry two devotees into the ocean to see the temple of Rukmini. The vision of Sankaradeva in the ocean is reminiscent of the vision of Krsna and Balarama in the Yamuna that Akrura witnesses in *Bhagavata Purana* 10.39.

of the goal of pilgrimage and its exclusivity; this text is not unique in associating pilgrimage with private visions. At the same time, I would stress that it is distinctive in that here it is not the prime pilgrim who has the visions; Sankaradeva does not receive visions but somehow causes others to see him in a vision. *He is thus not really a pilgrim here, as he was not a pilgrim in Jagannatha's temple*; he is the God, the goal of someone else's pilgrimage¹⁴. However pilgrimage is defined, whether as visionary experience or as an ordinary journey to a temple, it is difficult to characterize Sankaradeva as a pilgrim in either sense.

It is also as instructive to note what does *not* happen to Sankaradeva on the pilgrimage as it is to study what does happen. Sankaradeva does not find a guru, nor does he receive any teaching in the form of books, both important events for Caitanya on his pilgrimage as we saw above. Sankaradeva is regarded as an innovator by his biographer; although Mahendra Kandali is referred to as his guru, he does not teach Sankaradeva anything that one might consider to be the basis of Sankaradeva's religious doctrine. Mahendra Kandali had been Sankaradeva's childhood teacher and had taught him the rudiments of Sanskrit and had been responsible for his early education. The biography at one point tells a curious story of **Narada** and **Uddhava**, both famous from the *Bhagavata Purana*. In the story, Uddhava makes fun of Narada, saying that he has no guru. Narada vows to take the first person who comes along as his guru. God comes disguised as an outcaste, reeking of liquor and carrying a pig. The outcaste has no wisdom to impart to Narada, so Narada must teach him something that the outcaste can then teach back to him! (5.2694). This story seems to me to mock the need for linear transmission that was the concern of so many medieval Indian religious sects. It is thus perhaps not surprising that Sankaradeva does not use his pilgrimage to seek or find his teachers¹⁵.

¹⁴ I have written about the visionary and esoteric nature of medieval pilgrimage in my articles, 'Rama's Bridge: Some Notes on Journeys Real and Envisioned,' East and West 48, nos. 1–2 (1998), 93–117; 'Medieval Jain Accounts of Mt. Girnar and Satruñjaya: Visible and Invisible Sacred Realms,' Journal of the Oriental Institute Baroda (forthcoming); and 'Defining Sacred Place: Contest, Compromise and Priestly Control in Some Mahatmya Texts', Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute 79 (1998), 1–28.

¹⁵ Given the importance of transmission in medieval Indian religions, Winand Callewaert suggested that this feature might offer some internal evidence for a late date of the text. Neog suggests as a context for the biography ascribed to Ramacarana the efforts by Kanakalata Ai and Sankaradeva's descendants to set up *sattras* of their own under the leadership of Kanakalata Ai at the newly rediscovered birthplace of

Sankaradeva also does not collect books on his travels. The books come to Sankaradeva, while he stays at home. Thus we are told how a Brahmin from Tirati goes to Puri to recite the *Bhagavata Purana* in front of Jagannatha. Jagannatha appears to him in a dream and tells him to go and recite the text to Sankaradeva, for Jagannatha and Sankaradeva are one (4.2161ff.). Thus the *Bhagavata* comes to Sankara. If one function of the pilgrimage in religious biographies is to bring the holy man in contact with his teacher and teachings, then *in this sense, too, Sankaradeva is not a pilgrim.*

Finally, Sankara does not make most of his converts on his pilgrimage; they, too, come to him. In fact, one particular disciple, Narayana, seems to collect many of the others around Sankaradeva. We are left with the impression that in this text, Sankaradeva's pilgrimage seems to be the very antithesis of a pilgrimage, however conceived.

Conclusion

I began this essay by trying to show that despite the importance of pilgrimage in religious biographies, these texts are often ambivalent about the spiritual benefits to be gained from pilgrimage. The *Sankaradigvijaya* both doubts the usefulness of pilgrimage in a search for religious knowledge and suggests that there is some fundamental incongruity in the very idea that the holy man, who makes holy places wherever he goes, should have something to gain from visiting a place that popular opinion holds to be sacred. I briefly noted how, in the biographical tradition concerning Caitanya, the ambiguities surrounding pilgrimage are often explicitly discussed. We have seen that stories are told that clearly problematize the notion that God would go to worship Himself, while reasons other than worshipping God are offered for going on pilgrimages. At the same time, however, it seems undeniable that Caitanya can and does often act as

Sankaradeva, Bardowa. Perhaps the denial of the necessity of belonging to a direct line of transmission reflects an atmosphere of sectarian division.

an ordinary pilgrim, going from temple to temple, meeting his teachers, and collecting texts that he carefully has copied.

By contrast, in the biography of Sankaradeva ascribed to Ramacarana, pilgrimage has been radically transformed. In keeping with the strong emphasis throughout the biography on Sankaradeva's identity with Krsna, Sankaradeva is portrayed as a highly unusual pilgrim. He does not go to worship, but to be worshipped. Pilgrimage becomes the occasion for him to reveal his divinity. That he does so at famous pilgrimage sites, for example Jagannatha at Puri, and Dvaraka, surely attests to the importance of these places at the time when the biographies were written. Nonetheless, attention is deflected from the holy sites onto Sankaradeva himself. Thus, at Puri, it is Sankara's lodgings that become the temple when Jagannatha, Subhadra, and Balarama go there and eat Sankara's leftover food. And without the presence of Sankaradeva, the pilgrims would not have seen Rukmini's palace in Dvaraka at all; they certainly could not have seen the God in Dvaraka, since that was Sankaradeva himself.

Regional religious movements with their emphasis on vernacular writing are obviously more locally rooted than religious movements writing in a language that transcends local boundaries. It may not be irrelevant that this biography, while allowing pilgrimage to pan-Indian holy sites a place in Sankaradeva's story, at the same time denies many of its defining characteristics. It is perhaps not surprising that even after Sankaradeva's pilgrimage is over, Jagannatha travels again to see Sankaradeva, coming as far as Assam, to the place where Sankaradeva holds his prayer sessions (4.2330). The devotees know that he has come by the divine fragrance that suffuses the assembly. Sankaradeva even has an image of Jagannatha made and consecrated (4.2298ff.). Jagannatha in this text retains his authority, but not his position as the God in a particular temple which was the goal of pilgrims from all across India¹⁶. Now Jagannatha is the

¹⁶ In the late biography, the *Bardowa-gurucarita*, the importance of Jagannatha is both acknowledged and subtly compromised. A wonderful story is told of the devotee **Dhvajai**, who takes his leave of Sankaradeva and goes to Puri. He sustains himself for a few days by begging, but eventually gets nothing to eat. He climbs up on the image of Jagannatha, placing his foot on the image, and steals the God's crown. He sells it in the bazaar and buys something to eat with the money. The priests of the temple find out from the shopkeeper that it was Dhvajai who stole the crown and they seize him and are about to beat him. He runs

pilgrim, and the religious centre remains in Assam, wherever Sankaradeva and his followers gather. God as pilgrim in this text is thus both a problem and a solution to another problem, that of creating and maintaining regional religious identity.

If there is a concern in Ramacarana's biography to transcend the strictly local through pilgrimage, it would seem to emerge not in any search for legitimacy outside Assam at an established centre or fixed place. Rather, it takes the form of creating links between Sankaradeva and the other Vaisnava saints of medieval India that seem to defy the natural boundaries of time and space. Pilgrimage helps to accomplish this goal either by bringing Sankaradeva into contact with major Vaisnava leaders from other sects or by giving the author of the biography the opportunity to state explicitly the essential unity behind their doctrines. We have seen how Sankaradeva on his first pilgrimage met and impressed **Sanatana** and **Rupa Gosvami**, the famous followers of **Caitanya**. It is instructive to reflect on how their encounter is described; there is no question of rivalry or hostility. We are told that when Sankaradeva reaches the place in which Rupa and Sanatana are residing, the two brothers rush to meet him. Seeing him, they are beside themselves with joy; they lose all sense of reason and fall to the ground at his feet (3.2021). Sankaradeva lifts them up and embraces them. He asks them what religion they follow and they reply with a brief summary of Sankaradeva's own doctrine on the sole reliance on reciting the name of Krsna. They also praise Sankaradeva as the supreme God (3.2023–4). There is no question of conversion or conquest, familiar to readers of medieval Indian religious biographies such as the *Sankaradigvijaya*, with which I began this essay. The supremacy of Sankaradeva's position is amply demonstrated by showing that it is in accord with what other great Vaisnava leaders teach.

to the image and throws his arms around it, begging Jagannatha to save him. He disappears into the image. The priests see the traces of Dhvajai's death on the image and are amazed. His feet are hanging out! The text tells us that Sankaradeva told this story to his devotees (chapter 24). This is not an easy story to analyze; surely there can be no greater insult to an image and to the God it represents than to place one's feet on the image, or for that matter, steal what belongs to the God. Sankaradeva's devotee does both of these things and is still saved by the God. The meaning of the story must be at least in part that as a ritual object under the control of the priests Jagannatha is not important; what saved the devotee is his devotion to the God according to the practices that Sankaradeva has taught.

In addition to this encounter with these two men who were known as Caitanya's followers, the biographies tell us that Sankaradeva made a second pilgrimage, which was to bring him into contact with other leading Vaisnava saints. One of his stops is at the home of **Kabir**'s daughter. She relates to Sankaradeva some incidents from Kabir's life and concludes with an account of how Hindus and Muslims alike refused to cremate Kabir and the corpse was left unattended until Caitanya took care of it (5.3327–54). Caitanya is given an opportunity to explain the fundamentals of his religious beliefs, which of course accord completely with the doctrines that Sankaradeva preaches! When Kabir's daughter finishes her account, Sankaradeva praises Kabir. In this single episode we are encouraged to see in Kabir, Caitanya, and Sankaradeva three exemplars of the one correct religious belief and life. If pilgrimage in religious biographies is in part a quest for legitimacy, here that legitimacy comes not from a single conquest or moment of divine approbation in an established religious centre, but from creating a sense of community that goes beyond time and place. Here pilgrimage has little to do with a fixed point in time and space and everything to do with timeless truth. As the text itself explains, Sankaradeva's purpose was to make known the true doctrine of non-duality and save people; pilgrimage was simply the convenient excuse to do so (5.3367).

Finally, I would like to suggest that there were political reasons as well as religious reasons for maintaining the centrality of pilgrimage in Sankaradeva's biographies. The biographies are open about the hostility that the orthodox Brahmins displayed to the new religion promulgated by the low caste *sudra* Sankaradeva. One of the accusations they made against Sankaradeva in the court of King Naranarayana was that Sankaradeva rejected Vedic rituals and therefore threatened the security of the kingdom. Both Sankaradeva and his disciples use the fact that Sankaradeva went to Puri twice as evidence of his eagerness to maintain orthodox rites¹⁷. Pilgrimage to an established religious centre takes on a very different significance here; it is a necessary compromise with established religious authority. Nonetheless, we have seen how our texts at the same time undermine the existing religious authority and seek to create new

¹⁷ In the biography by Puvarama Mahanta, *Bardowa-gurucarita*, chaps. 29 and 30.

religious authority in their descriptions of what transpired on the pilgrimages that Sankaradeva undertook.

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