

A New Life, Letters and a State

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Since the beginning of the thirteenth century, the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. After the fall of the last Hindu kings of the Pala dynasty, a class of local potentates called the Bara-Bhuyans was keeping watch over the broken fragments of the ancient Hindu kingdom like so many wardens of the marches without any overlord. But even their vigils were challenged by the entry of the Ahoms, the rise of the Kacharis in the east and of the Koches in the west. The existence of society was threatened. Moreover, society itself was moth-eaten from within and without any sustaining vitality from any external source. The land was infested with itinerant teachers of the Vamacara Tantric schools with their insistence on the philosophy of sex and palate. Amongst religious rites the most spectacular were bloody sacrifices to gods and goddesses amidst deafening noises of drums and cymbal, nightly vigils on virgin worship and the lewd dances of temple-women.

A Programme of New Life

The official name of Sankaradeva's Vaisnavism is Eka-Sarana Dharma, the religion of supreme surrender to One. The surrender to One is very rigorously enjoined. For an Eka-saraniyā, the worship of other gods and goddesses is strictly prohibited. It has been said by Sankara himself that "a Vaisnavite should not worship any other God except **Vishnu**, he should not enter into any other god's temple, nor should he partake of the offering made to any other god. In so doing, bhakti would be vitiated".

Bhattadeva, a Brahmin Eka-saraniyā, has enjoined that a Brahmin should **not** make the customary offering to the five gods (panca-yagna) at the time of his meal as prescribed by the smritis. An offering like that would spoil his Eka-sarana bhakti to **Vishnu**. He should instead make an offering to Vishnu and that will satisfy all other gods. For, has it not been said in the **Bhagavata-purana**, that if water is poured at the foot of a tree, then all the branches and leaves of the tree suck up nourishment? Another Brahmin Eka-saraniyā Vanamalideva, when casually confronted with the phallic image of god Siva, uttered the mantra, namo Lakshmiapati Bhagavanta (Salute to Thee, God, Lord of Lakshmi). All other gods and goddesses were mere manifestations of **Vishnu** and the recognition of their status as independent divinities was uncalled for.

The central texts of Assam Vaisnavism are the Gita and the Bhagavata which have been rendered into verse and prose by Sankaradeva himself and his followers. The process of initiation is called **sarana** and not diksha. Sankaradeva was a Kayastha (a Sudra), but he counted some of the most prominent Brahmin scholars of his time amongst his immediate disciples. To the first batch of Brahmin followers, he gave the sarana himself. They bowed to the sacred book placed on a tray. Later on when a good number was converted, he entrusted the task of giving sarana to the Brahmins to Ram-Ram Guru who was earlier his family priest. Sankara's practice was hotly challenged by hostile Brahmin Pandits. How could a Sudra give sarana to Brahmins? But the reply of Sankara and the Brahmin associates was that a Sudra was debarred from giving Vedic mantras only to Brahmins. There was no injunction against a Sudra giving *nama-mantra* to any person. According to the Varnasrama dharma, each social order had its own allotted duties but in reciting and communicating the Name of the Lord, there were no

scriptural injunctions curbing any other's liberty. Sankaradeva rejected caste superiority as a ground of respect among men. "Why need one be a Brahmin" says Sankara, "who devoutly recites the Name of Krishna? He might be a candala, but he is far superior to any man who is not attached to the Name of Hari."

To renounce the world for one's religion is said to be easier than to live for it in the world. Sankaradeva chose the difficult path of living up to his faith in the world, and what is still more difficult, to persuade the world to live up to it. To the exhausted kingdom without inner vitality and external cohesion, he threw out a gospel of absolute surrender to One, the Eka-sarana religion. It was a difficult religion for contemporary Assam where every woman was looked upon as a miniature incarnation of the Devi and every hill-top as a petrified god or a goddess. It is often misunderstood even now.

The Eka-sarana system is not a religion of barter and bargain between God and men or of sacrifice and easy recompense; it is one with exclusive emphasis on slow spiritual regeneration, on growth of a new spiritual outlook by laying flesh and spirit in the hand of the Lord. Life once surrendered, given over to the Lord, can no longer be lived according to the desires and impulses inherited from old Adam. They are to be governed by higher laws and purer manners. Sankaradeva himself once drove out a follower (Vyasa Kalai) from this fold, because he secretly offered worship to the goddess of small-pox when his son was ill. All this sounds harsh and fanatical. But the new life is a life sold out to God in absolute faith and devotion and it requires supreme courage and sacrifice to live it in the new context of ideas.

This was the programme of new life he placed before his fellow beings. It was a difficult ideal but it has its own appeal. Once devoutly begun, it unfolded its inherent sweetness and light which became its own allurements.

It was not a secret doctrine whispered from ear to ear. It was proclaimed in places of amusement, it was echoed when people in the course of the day's business relieved their heart in songs. The clash of arms of the contending chiefs lost its terror and the nocturnal revelries, their temptations.

A new gospel requires new bible. And Sankaradeva gave his gospel in songs, dramas, stories and devotional exhortations. He inspired his followers and associates to popularise the literature of devotion. He led the way in acting in dramatic performances and singing in devotional congregations. He was in the full blaze of the day in all his activities, the mystic haze belonging only to the life of his spirit.

It has been said by a modern prophet that perfect equipoise of body and mind is absolutely necessary to receive the impact of the divine. It is easier to develop religious consciousness than to retain it. Some people go mad; saints and prophets often break into frenzies or fall into hysteric trances. There is the story of a saint who in a religious frenzy induced by the sound of khols and kartals threw himself into the sea in a moon-lit night and so ended his life. Sankaradeva's voluminous biographies contain details of minute incidents of his life, but there is no hint of any occasion when he lost his mental balance or sanity. He kept himself wide awake whether singing, acting or reciting; he was perfectly self-conscious in the midst of polemics with his religious opponents. Yet he has a keen sense of humour. He saw life steadily and saw it whole.

Literature was not the only expression of this new life. Regional **Satras** (monasteries) were established as the centers of new consciousness and the allegiance of the mind and soul was given to them. These regional institutions framed moral laws and controlled the activities of society. As miniature replicas of the Satras, village **Nāmghars** were built and the nāmghars combined the functions of a village

parliament, a village court, a village school and a village church. These institutions served as sheet-anchors to Assamese society in the midst of continually shifting political circumstances. They often shook to their very foundations under the blast of the rulers' fury, but stood erect again when the fury was spent. But whether in the sunshine or under the clouds, they were regarded as the vital centres of life and worthy of the gift of all that was prized and loved best. Unto Caesar was given only what belonged to Caesar! And so a state was built within a state!

Thus Sankaradeva has given Assam a new life, letters and a state. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdoms perished in the dust, but Sankara's state endures "and broad in the general hearts of men his power survives."

[Dr. Banikanta Kakati was an eminent linguist and critic. He was Professor and Head, Department of Assamese, Gauhati University. His *Sankaradeva : Vaisnava Saint of Assam* (Natesan and Co., 1921) was one of the earliest write-ups in English on the life and works of the Saint. Dr. Kakati was also the first to introduce western literary criticism in Sankaradeva studies; the current article has been reproduced in a slightly condensed form.]