

## Sankaradeva : The Founder of Assamese Vaisnavism

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If any great religious leader and poet has received much less attention than he deserves he is Sankaradeva (1449-1568), the founder of Assamese Vaisnavism and one of the finest writers of devotional verse in Indian literature. It is indeed very curious that JN Farquhar's *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India* (1920, a work of 450 pages which is a sourcebook of our sacred literature, does not mention Sankaradeva either in the text or, in its long, descriptive bibliography of Vaisnava writings. No less curious is the fact that Estlin Carpenter has no occasion to refer to him in his *Theism in Medieval India* (1921). When eight years later Ksitimohan Sen gave his lectures on medieval mysticism of India in Calcutta University, he ignored the great Assamese mystic, and there is not a word on him in the English version of the lectures published in London in 1935.

Those who have written on Caitanya and Vaisnavism of Bengal have considered Sankaradeva as a disciple of Caitanya. Melville T Kennedy, for example, remarks in his *The Chaitanya Movement : A Study of the Vaishnavism of Bengal* (1925) that it is altogether likely that the inspiration behind his advocacy of Vaisnavism was due to the Caitanya revival of Bengal. It has now become important for us to remember that Sankaradeva was thirty-six years old when Caitanya was born and that Vaisnavism had struck deep roots in Assam when the great leader of the new faith in Bengal had just begun his work. Wm. Theodore De Bary's *Sources of Indian Tradition* (1958) has done a good deal to bring a sense of chronology in our religious historiography by mentioning Sankaradeva as a "forerunner of Caitanya in Bengal".

But our indifference to the great Vaisnava poet of Assam remains. There is not a line on Sankaradeva in the *Penguin Anthology of Indian Literature* (1971) of more than six hundred pages, and very rarely do we see any verse of this poet in the works on Indian literature that we read. Dr. V Raghavan has drawn our attention to the Assamese poet by including three of his fine lyrics, two bargits and a kirtana-ghosa, in his *The Great Integrators* (1965), and he has taken care to mention him as "a predecessor of Caitanyadeva of Bengal". It is reassuring to see that Dr. Dusan Zbavitel does not say anything more about Sankaradeva's links with Caitanya than that he met him at a theological discussion.

As a religious reformer, Sankaradeva's greatest achievement is his success in bringing his people from a debased form of Sakta *tantricism* to the pure monotheism of his Vaisnava faith. And he did not accomplish this through polemics or organized propaganda. He thought that the best way of reforming the religious life of a people was not to attack what was evil but to present to them what was good and to make it appeal to their imagination. He called his faith *ekasarana namadharmā*, that is, the religion of worshipping the One by uttering His Name. He established monasteries called *Sattras* and in this he was probably influenced by Buddhism. His *namghars*, that is, halls for congregational prayer and *nama-kirtana*, became a popular institution in the religious life of the Assamese people. What made them attractive to the masses was that they were open to all irrespective of caste. Though himself a landlord, Sankaradeva did not confine his work to the landed aristocracy and his influence was stronger on the common people of Assam.

As a theologian, Sankaradeva made the *Bhagavata-Purana* the main canon of his Vaisnavism and his works include a creative translation of a large part of that text. But he was very careful about the erotic overtones of its *Krishna-gopi* episodes and he did not allow any form of eroticism in his faith, not even as an allegory of divine love. There is no Radha cult in Assamese Vaisnavism. Obviously, Sankaradeva was a little too severe in his rejection of all forms of eroticism in religion as a reaction against the vulgarities of the Sakta cult in Assam.

But it was important for him to spell out the nature of the relationship between Visnu or Krishna and the devotee and he said that it was the relationship between the Lord and His servant. In Assamese Vaisnavism, then, the *bhakti-rasa* is arising out of the *dasya-bhava*. Here Assamese Vaisnavism is distinguished from the Vaisnavism of Bengal where the deepest of bhakti is expressed in an erotic idiom. Sankaradeva, however, did not favour asceticism as something essential for the spiritual life. He married twice and reared up a family.

The works of Sankaradeva are a large corpus. **Harinarayan Datta-Barua**'s edition of it published as *Sri-Sankara-Vakyamrita* in 1953 running to about a thousand large pages covering eleven titles. Amongst these works, *Bhakti Ratnakara*, the canon of Assamese Vaisnavism, is in Sanskrit, and his *Bargits*, that is devotional lyrics and *Ankiya Nats*, a kind of one-act play, are in Assamese *Brajabuli*. The rest of his compositions are in Assamese and they have given a new power to that language.

Sankaradeva is to be particularly valued as a poet for his devotional songs included in his *Kirtana-ghosa* and *Bargits*. Amongst the 189 *kirtanas*, each of which has a *ghosha* or refrain, there are songs which are some of the finest things in Assamese poetry. As a whole, they constitute the Psalter of Assamese Vaisnavism. Philosophically, they are not far too different from the best of the religious poetry of medieval India, their theism having both monistic and pantheistic overtones. In the *Kirtana-ghosa*, beginning as *trāhi Rāma , nirākāra, niranjana Hari*, the poet affirms:

**‘Thou art in animals and birds, gods and demons, trees and shrubs. Only the ignorant take Thee as different from the universe.’**

What is striking in his devotional poems is that he places *bhakti* above *mukti* or salvation and does not value devotion as a means of liberation:

**‘I desire not happiness and I have no need for salvation. Let me only love Thy feet.’**

The diction of the *Bargits*, the Assamese *Brajabuli*, gives them a music of their own and it is a pity that only thirty-four of his innumerable songs in this class have survived. Sankaradeva is often stricken with a sense of sin and, in some of the *Bargits*, there is an agony of repentance which alone, he thinks, can bring him the Lord's grace. The well known *Bargit*, ‘*Nārāyana, kāhe bhakati karu terā*’ is one of such songs:

**‘Say, Narayana, how can I offer Thee my love? My sinful heart cannot shun evil.’**

And even in the midst of this haunting sense of sin, the poet has faith in the Lord's infinite compassion:

**‘Thy Name is my hope, and Thy grace can redeem me.’**

And in the *Bargits*, he is a true vedantist, believing in the presence of the Lord in His creation:

**‘Thou art in all things like the wide sky in all pitchers.’**

Sankaradeva intended his episodic poems to be part of the *nama-kirtana* of the Lord, the episodes being revelations of His *lila*, His descent into time for His love of man. Every story is meant to be a miracle, a bringer of the word of God to man. This is as true of his translation of the *Bhagavata-Purana* and the *Uttarakanda* of the *Ramayana* as of his *upakhyana kavyas* and plays.

But, what is striking in the history of Assamese literature is that it has been so enriched by the work of a man, who had no literary ambition and whose only object as a writer was to bring his faith to the masses. His command on *Brajabuli* is remarkable and in this, he has no distinguished follower<sup>1</sup>. As a writer in Assamese, he was master of a new diction, introduced a style and a rhythm which were a model for a generation of poets and, above all, discovered the beauty of plain homely Assamese which is the ambition of all writers in the language to master. A distinguished European scholar of Assamese, Dusan Zbavitel, has observed that innumerable successors were directly influenced by his ideas and poetic style, characterized by novelty of expression, rhythmic fluency and good characterization. No less valuable is his contribution to the formation of the Assamese literary language. Not too many religious poets of the world have done as much for the language in which they wrote.

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<sup>1</sup> Sri Madhavadeva, the apostolic successor of Sankaradeva, was also an outstanding writer in *Brajabuli* - *ed*