

# Aspects of *Guru-carita-kathā*

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[[www.aTributeToSankaradeva.org](http://www.aTributeToSankaradeva.org) presents a paper on the Guru Carita Katha, the most voluminous and comprehensive biography of the Saints of the Sankaradeva Movement, authored by Maheswar Neog, one of the most eminent scholars of the last century. The paper is redacted from the Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Research Institute, Vol I, Nagaon (1990), Bhaba Prasad Chaliha ed.]

## **The Nature and Importance of the *Guru-carita-kathā***

In the wake of the great Sankaradeva movement that washed the valley of the Brahmaputra and some of the adjoining hills there was the growth of an extensive biographical literature both in verse and prose. This was taken up in the first instance as a spiritual exercise of the type of celebration of the Holy Name and activities of the Lord in human and other forms in songs and metrical and prose narratives. It became the passionate duty of the cloistered monks in the characteristically Assamese Vaisnava establishments called Sattrā to keep up this particular flame of worship in its glory. In fact an eminently select section of these clerics, called **budhā bhakatas**, ‘the Elders’, evolved, whose specialised duty became the narration of guru lore and the preservation of records, known as **guru-caritas** and **vamsāvalis**. The *Guru-carita-katha* is an excellent example of this genus of literary activity of the Vaisnavas and is indeed a great book by way of covering the cultural history to Assam of a vital period in its various aspects - social, religious, ethnic, economic, political and administrative, fiscal, artistic, etc., in a fair way. Its central subject is the early history of Assam’s Vaisnava church in the shape of concatenated biographical accounts of its saints - the **Two Gurus**, namely, **Sankaradeva** and **Madhavadeva**, the **two Thakurs** (grandsons of Sankaradeva), the **nine Ātās** (Holy Fathers - **Sri Rama, Harihara, Bar-Visnu, Gopala of Bhavanipur, Mathuradasa, Kesava-carana** and **Badula Padma Ata**) and **fourteen other Mahantas**. This task of narration of the tales of all these holy persons is proposed at the very beginning<sup>1</sup>, and even though no name of the book is given

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<sup>1</sup> §03: **dujanā Guru, najanā Ātā, dujanā Thākurar caritra ānosav sevakar, guru-yasa-lilā-caritra.**

in its body or in the form of a colophon, that name seems to be indicated in the final articles<sup>2</sup>.

In my earlier work *Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam* (1965)<sup>3</sup>, I have classified the different biographies of the Assamese Vaisnava saints into: -

- the Early Group of caritas (Daityari, Bhusana, Ramananda, Vaikuntha, and
- the Later Group (Aniruddha's carita, the kathā-guru-caritas, the one ascribed to Ramacarana)

Aniruddha's work can more appropriately be assigned to the first division. Some characteristics of the Later Group of biographies are the exuberance and a large mass of materials sometimes with variant versions of the same piece of detail; a strong infusion of supernatural and miraculous elements; the reading of **Krsna**'s tales into the life of the guru; very uncertain references to events described in the buranji and rajavamsavali chronicles of Ahom and Koc rule; the grouping of Sankaradeva (Assam), Caitanya (Bengal), Harivyasa (of the Nimbarka school) and Ramananda (Northern India) as quadruple incarnations of Hari to propagate bhakti<sup>4</sup>; the tracing back of the origin of bhakti through a queer succession list to the Advaitin, Sankaracarya, etc., etc<sup>5</sup>. The *Guru-carita-katha* possesses the exuberance and richness of detail that identifies community with the other caritas of this Later Group. It becomes a great human document with the description of many momentous events in the life of the saints and even of tiny but realistic situations, of many real human characters and of homely pictures of fundamental human relations.

### **The Guru-carita-katha's Date and Authorship**

The *Guru-carita-katha* states how the practice of celebrating the deeds of the guru

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<sup>2</sup> §1128: **Guru-sevakar lilā-caritra yasa-rasa; §1129: amṛta gurucaritra lilā-khelā; §1130: ene dujanā Guru, dujanā Thākurdeu, najanā Ātā, anek Mahābhāgavatar caritra.**

<sup>3</sup> pp. 5-24. Vide ultra.

<sup>4</sup> § 30

<sup>5</sup> §321

(Sankaradeva) was initiated by his disciple and apostle Madhavadeva, as a part of the ceremonial prayer services<sup>6</sup>. It also goes on to mention how there emerged two eminent exponents of the guru lore - **Cakrapāni Vairāgi Ātai** of the Bardowa group of Sattras and **Dhanjay Ātai** of the Barjaha-Sattra<sup>7</sup>. The carita delineates in that connexion the line of pontifical succession from **Kesavacarana Ātai**, who was ordained by Madhavadeva. Counting fifteen years as the average tenure of a Sattrādhikāra and calculating from 1518 Saka (the year of Madhavadeva's demise), I arrived at 1638 Saka / 1716 A.D. as the date of compilation of the carita<sup>8</sup>. This date was accepted by Upendrachandra Lekharu, the editor of *Katha-guru-carita*, 1952, and by Dr Banikanta Kakati and Dr. B.K. Barua, who going by the same computation, said that the book may be surmised to have been complete immediately after the ninth guru, whose time may be placed at the end of the seventeenth century, if not earlier<sup>9</sup>.

Earlier (1950) I considered Dhanjay Atai to be the vaktā, exponent, of the carita. But the statement in the book to that effect now appears to have been a later 'graft' in the text and the real author seems to be **Cakrapani Vairagi Atai**. We get fairly reliable details of the Atai's life from a work, *Ātā Purus-savar Carita* dated 1738 Saka, appended to a bigger work of 188 large Aguru bark folios, dated 1742 Saka (since lost, but appearing to have been a compilation closely of the type of *Guru-carita-katha*)<sup>10</sup>. He was a brahman scholarly adherent of the Narowā Sattra (Bardowā) and died in 1680 Saka / 1758 A.D. so that the *carita* might have been compiled and written in his life-time in the early part of the century.

The undated manuscript of the *Guru-carita-katha* bears the hands of more than one writer or scribe. It is quite probable that some of its folios were replaced by new ones (sometimes of unequal size) and many articles (amounting each to a unit of carita) were added to the manuscript after the book was written out completely for the first time.

## Language and Style

One of the most outstanding features of this work is its language and style - at once

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<sup>6</sup> §01

<sup>7</sup> §§ 02, 03.

<sup>8</sup> This was done in my review, 'Carita-tolā āru Kathā-gurucaritar vaktā', pub. in the daily *Natun Asamiyā*, 14 January 1950.

<sup>9</sup> Foreword to *Katha-guru-charita*, Guwahati, 1952, p.i.

<sup>10</sup> **This work has since been published. See *Ātā Purus-savar Caritra*; critically edited and annotated; Kesavananda Dev Goswami Ed.; Pub. by Narowa-Bali Sattra Management Committee; 2010 [ - editor@www.atributetosankaradeva.org]**

dignified and homely, making the narrative flow easily; the discursive has its elegance and the familiar scenes and dialogues glow with a fire-side intimacy. The language of the *Guru-carita katha* exhibits many peculiarities. The impact of the languages of Northern India appears to have been most felt in Assam during the times described in this work. Sankaradeva and his followers travelled in the North for twelve years in the course of their first pilgrimage. When they came back home, they demonstrated to people at home specimens of the language of those parts of the country. That language is called in the text ‘māt boli phārsi’<sup>11</sup>, the Persian language, even though it did not mean Persian but the current tongue of the North (Hindi? Urdu? Khadi-boli? ) with an admixture of Perso-Arabic words, for even the language of Sankaradeva’s bhatimā song, ‘pekhie cānura sabhā māje jāi’, is called ‘bhāsā phārsi māt’. The buranji chronicle of *Saraighatar Yuddha* mentions ‘phārsi māt hindu aksar’, that is, Hindustani in the Nagari script<sup>12</sup>. *Laksmisimhar Buranji*<sup>13</sup> gives specimens of pharsi mat: *kāhese āyā he tum dedhā so āyā he*. Many words ultimately of Persian, Arabic and Turkish origin as also some Desi and Videsi (mainly English) words entered into Assamese through contact with Northern India. There are elements of Bengali and Oriya too. There are certain words and forms which refer themselves specifically to Ahom or Tai origin or to the dialectal regions of Western Assam, Goalpara and Cooch-Bihar.

The language of the prose guru caritas and Assamese buranjis represents the spoken word of Assam of those times (from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards), while the vast mass of literary writings of the period, Vaisnava in content, for the most part in verse and sometimes in prose, is couched in a literary idiom (the language of *bargits*, *bhatimas* and the *anka* plays being in a much more specialised idiom, which the present work would call ‘bhasa pharsi mat’ and we would term Brajāwalibhāsā or Assamese Brajabuli). The phonological and morphological aspects of the language of the *Guru-carita-katha*, therefore, calls for a special study. Some of these are noticed in the Assamese Introduction to my edition of the carita basing the evidence as we find them recorded in the original manuscript.

Sanskrit and Prakrit had their grammars and dictionaries, but Bhāshā or vernacular speeches had none till modern times. As a vernacular language like Assamese

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<sup>11</sup> §69.

<sup>12</sup> *Saraighatar Yuddha*, ed. L. Gogoi, Dibrugarh, 1947, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> D.H.A.S. transcript, p. 97.

incorporated quite good number of Sanskrit grammatical forms and vocables, its grammar came to be based on the Sanskrit, and Assamese vocables, which did not follow the Sanskrit dictionary, were readily reclaimed to Sanskrit. But the earlier writings like the poetical and dramatic works, the caritas and buranjis did not have the occasion to be under the command of Sanskrit grammarians or lexicographers. The rules of sandhi, natva and satva, etc., etc., were simply ignored when one wrote Assamese in those times, even though they had to be abided by in Sanskrit works. The duplication of consonants after -r- is optional in the *Guru-carita-katha* manuscript.

The language of this work is, of course, by no means medieval or unrealistic. It reflects the speech habits of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, of which the present usages are a continuation. We find almost the same forms as we use today; but our written speech has adopted certain norms which are not in consonance with the spoken word; and it is here that we today mostly differ from the language of the carita. Only a few peculiarities are noted below: -

**Plural Suffixes:** - Two peculiar plural suffixes, -bhor, and -han (eibhor 81, 123, ‘these’; harowābhor 166, ‘the lost ones’, bāmunbhor, ‘the brahmans’, sārāhan 982, ‘the messengers’) are to be noticed as in common colloquy in the eastern and western parts of Assam respectively. In eikhini, 912, ‘this much’, khini works for a plural suffix.

**Vibhakti and Declension:** - In employing the usual -e vibhakti for the Nominative, the *GCK* does not precede it with a -y- even after high vowels (burie, 168, ‘the old woman’). So also in adding the Instrumental vibhakti, -ere (ankusere, 158, ‘with the elephant goad’). The peculiar Ablative suffixes are: -

-te (kamrupte 861; thāite 395) (Skt. -tas)

-tte (homatte 37, eikhitte 75)

-r- tte (gosāirtte 2, janmartte 2, tārtte 3, nangalārtte 856)

parā - really a post-position (cāhi parā 1039, sarir parā 1040, khari-parā 155, caliparā 350)

-r parā (eherparā 335)

-kai; ‘more than’ (laksinārāyankai)

The Locative sign -t is put as halanta (amurit 83, burit 166, hātat 335)

**Feminine Gender:** - Feminine suffixes noticed all through the work are -i and -ani (not ī- and -anī, as in modern tampered form)

-i: burā-buri 858, gop-gupi 74,381, cākolā-cākuli 373a, pautrapautr 159

-ani/-āni: bara-barāni 103, gosāi-gosāni 140, 872, pasārani 913 as well as pasāri 33, 455, pahāri 1048 (the last two forms referring to both Masc. and Fem.)

**Other suffixes:-**

-i (no -ī as to-day) bhāri 859, ‘one carrying load’; -iyā (not -īyā as to-day);

jyotisiyā 17, dāngariyā 848, dāngariyābandhiyā 181, cuburiyā 953, saikiyā, sakiyā 1019, 1024 (mod, Saikiyā)

A whole peculiar series of numerals seems to be indicated- ācāri 120=3<sup>1/2</sup>, ādpāc 401=4<sup>1/2</sup>, ādsapta 9=6<sup>1/2</sup>, ādatha 214, 400=7<sup>1/2</sup>, ādpondhera 401 = 14<sup>1/2</sup>, etc.

### Historical References

A knowledge of the historical writings (that is buranjis, describing Ahom rule, and rajavamsavalis, concerned with the Koc rulers) in Assamese was considered in those days a very much necessary equipment of a cultured person. The writer or writers of the *Guru-carita-katha* also had to have that equipment particularly because the events narrated were intimately connected with the political history of the country. But it would appear very certain that a thorough knowledge of that history is here found wanting, and it is only a kind of ‘oral history’ that the carita-writer could have fallen back upon. There is no concurrence in the dates of events described, even though the writers were masters of the *carita* materials they were handling. At times fictitious names are given to Ahom kings and military officers. The situation changes a bit where Koc history is concerned and the writer seems to stand on firmer ground. When, again, the writer or writers bring in Pathan and Mughal accounts, they become very shaky indeed. The *Guru-carita-katha* recounts some incidents, connected with minor states that sprang up from time to time in this north-eastern zone - Kamata, the Barabhuya confederacies, Heremda, **Banduka**, Kalita-rajya, etc.; but authentic historical materials

concerning them are very rare indeed.

### **Economic Conditions**

The *carita* provides an ample picture of the economic life of this part of India. Agriculture has ever been the mainstay of the people of the three states of Assam, Kamarupa and (Koc-) Behar. Agricultural land was the property of the state and for its enjoyment revenue (*jāmin*) had to be paid. Those who could not afford to have draught bulls and labourers for the tilling of the soil had to use the hoe for the purpose. The usual enemies of the good crop were drought and flood, stray cattle and sometimes, plunderers of neighbouring nonagricultural regions.

Different professional castes come in for mention. Daivajna, astrologers; Vaidya Jogis, who worked as snake charmers and medicine-men of snake poison, other medicine-men known as Bej-Sajaliyā, Baniya goldsmiths, potters of two classes - the Kumārs who used the wheel and the Hira-Kumārs, who worked with the two hands alone; the blacksmith; the Mukhis, who made lime by burning snail shells, fishermen; the washermen; the Teli - oilmen; the silk-rearing Jogis; the confectioner Sālai caste; etc. These professionals were attached to particular castes, which they could not ordinarily change. The Tāti, weavers, and their leaders, known as Marals, had to weave - as being in the employ of the king or as a general profession; The Tātis of the Sualkuchi village find special mention. There were Tātis who plied the profession independently. Govinda Tāti, for example, wove cloth for people on payment (*banāc*). The Padhiyās wove variety of warm cloth (*padhi*, *sisiri padhi*). There were sixty Padhiyā families. at one time at Heremda, and we know the holy man, **Padhiyā Mādhava Ātai**<sup>14</sup>. There were other professional people -fodder gatherers for elephants, for horses, mahouts or elephant keepers, drummers of large-size drums (*bardhuliyā*), carpenters, shopkeepers, hawkers, reapers, sugar makers, etc. Some of the technical hands were in the direct employ of the Government - whether it is only cutters of thatch for houses, or Māji boatmen, or Jolās (*juḷāhā*). Tailoring was a novel profession, and we find the mention of tailor employed by the Koc king alone. Tailored cloth was not the common wear of the people - high or low - in those times. Rich merchants like Bhavānanda Sāud (later, **Nārāyanadās Thākura Ātā**) or Ghāghari Māji, the Khāud Jamidar (*Sādhu Jamindār*), Hari Sardār were a rare specimen. Fishing on a large scale and

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<sup>14</sup> §448

hunting were pleasant games of the well-to-do.

Both the Koc and Ahom states had their money currency; Koc (Narayani or Narengi) coins were particularly prized even outside the Koc states. But in out-of-the way areas, where coins and cowries were rare a sort of barter was practised. The coins were issued in different denominations - a rupee (takā, rup), half a rupee, a quarter rupee, half a quarter rupee and an anna. Smaller than an anna were karā or kadā and kari or kadi. One rupee could buy 120 padhis; Sankaradeva once placed half-a-rupee as the price of a deer and a quarter rupee for a peacock. There are in this work rare pictures of an Assamese living house and masonry buildings.

Different kinds of dress including varieties of silk and ornaments worn by men and women are mentioned. It is interesting to note that officers and rich people put on pag-jemā, a pāgri and coat, while the monks, cloistered in the Sattras, went out begging with but a small dhoti scarcely coming down to the knees and other torn clothes and a bag - which picture reminds one of the Buddhist bhikkhus with their civara. Rice was the staple food of this region, while fish is to be found in plenty in the rivers and swampy area, and the taking of fish was not a taboo even with monks so long as they could avoid killing with their own hands. Milk and milk products were to be had in abundance. The Brahmaputra provided the route for small and large boats of traders in rice, arecanut, etc., and such other rare commodities as black pepper, silk, warm cloths and ivory available in the Ahom state. The merchandise boats sometimes offered themselves as conveyance to long-way travellers on payment (cukāni). In the midst of the abundance of crop in a country with a very rich alluvial soil there were visitations of famines and droughts. A variety of mild slavery was prevalent in the country and some of the monks in Sankaradeva's and Madhavadeva's Sattras were previously bonded labourers.

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