

Sankaradeva and the Great Age in Literature and Fine Arts

Maheswar Neog

The Efflorescence of a Great Literature:-

There was the efflorescence of a great literature in the wake of the Sankaradeva Movement of Assam. **Sankaradeva** and **Madhavadeva** themselves composed a good number of songs, dramas, verse narratives and other types of literature, wherein they expounded and elaborated the teachings of the faith they sought to propagate. A host of poets, writers and scholars like **Ananta Kandali, Rama Sarasvati, Vaikunthanatha Kaviratna, Sridhara Kandali, Gopaladeva of Bhavanipur, Ramacharana Thakur, Daityari Thakur, Gopalacharana Dvija**, flocked under the banner of bhakti, and formed into a vigorous literary movement.

It was the age of one ideal, that of bhakti; of one God, **Visnu-Krsna**; of one leadership, that of **Sankaradeva**; of one book, the *Bhagavata-purana*. All other types of matter, almost invariably taken from some Visnuite text, were brought under the dictates of the *Bhagavata-purana*. The Vaisnava writers' adherence to the sanction at scriptural authority amounted to limitation upon their creative ability and a curb upon their poetic genius. Nonetheless, the literary output of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva alone is considerable, and is characterised by a rare power of rendering the spirit of the original in unimpaired beauty and by occasional flights of creative imagination. Their literary works acted as the chief machinery of propaganda of the faith, and afforded both enlightenment and pleasure to the people.

Sankaradeva is said to have rendered eight out of the twelve books of the *Bhagavata-purana*, and this was done at the teeth of much opposition. It was

Ramananda of Northern India, we might remember, who mooted the idea of preaching in a modern Indian language. As a legacy from the Assamese poets preceding him, he (Sankaradeva) received a literary form of language with much poise and beauty, as also a few verse-forms. The immediately preceding period of Assamese literature exhibited a zeal for story-telling, and the two Indian Epics and some tracts from the *puranas* were done into the language. But this period hardly represents a literary movement, a movement with a definite ideal. The age of Sankaradeva marks a literary and cultural resurgence.

In His early works *Hariscandra-upakhyana* and *Rukmini-harana*, Sankaradeva exhibits the same narrative zeal as was evident in the preceding period of Assamese poetry. In his renderings from the *Bhagavata-purana* and other *puranas* no particular attention is paid to literary form, and in places remain 'formless fermenting verbiage', but the teaching of bhakti therein is not to be missed. The *Bhakti-pradipa* denounces the worship of other deities in preference to Krsna-bhakti. Each of the 25 sections of the *Kirtana-ghosa*, the most popular and important of Sankaradeva's works, contains several *kirtana* songs with refrains, goes to relate a story or expound a topic. The *Anadi-patana* is an account of cosmology and cosmogony, philosophy and theology. *Gunamala*, a tiny work of six *kirtanas* of jingling verses, is a remarkable feat of mental speed and brevity of expression.

Some of the writings of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are complementary in character. Madhavadeva rendered the *Balakanda*, while Sankaradeva makes an adaptation of the final *kanda* of the *Ramayana*, divesting it of all intervening episodes, and added them to the central four books translated by the predecessor, **Madhava Kandali**.

Sankaradeva composed 34 songs, later known as *bargita*, Madhavadeva complementing them with 157 of his compositions. Sankaradeva's songs sing of the futility of human efforts, and urges upon listeners the need for bhakti; some of them are prayer songs, pure and simple, and didactic verses. Madhavadeva's songs breathe an

open-air atmosphere, and excel in the description of **Krsna**'s childhood and the bringing out of the eternal mother in **Yasoda**.

Both these Saints wrote a number of songs called *bhatima* (panegyrics) in praise of the worshipful Lord, Sankaradeva making two in praise of King Naranarayana and Madhavadeva one to his guru.

The dramas (*anka, nata* or *nataka*, popularly *ankiya nata*) of both are a type by themselves, and do not follow any model, Sanskrit, Prakrit or otherwise. There are no act or scene divisions in them. The *Sutradhara*, taken from the classical drama, is the central character, conducting the whole action with songs, dances and explanatory commentary. The plays are in an artificial literary dialect, used in the *bargita* and *bhatima* songs also, later known as *Brajawali-bhasa* or *Brajabuli* with a queer mixture of Assamese, Maithili and Hindi and a tincture of other elements. A like idiom was used by the Vaisnava lyricists of Bengal and Orissa perhaps a little later. Sankaradeva has left us six *ankas*, *Patniprasada*, *Kalidamana*, *Keligopala*, *Rukminiharana*, *Parijataharana* and *Ramavijaya*.

The younger poet differs from his Master in his dramatic technique just a little, his playlets (*jhumura*) being more operatic in pattern. As in His lyrics so in his plays he is pre-occupied with the Krsna of Vrindavana more than anything else. He wrote *Arjunabhanjana*, *Chordhara*, *Pimparaguchuwa*, *Bhumilutiwa* and *Bhojanavyavahara*, four others, *Bhusanaharana*, *Rasajhumura* and *Kotora-khelowa*, being also ascribed to him. He rendered only a small part of the **Tenth Book** of the *Bhagavata-purana* describing Yudhisthira's *rajasuya*. But the greatest contribution of this saint-poet to Assamese poetry and thought is the *Nama-ghosa*, which excels in giving lucid and musical expression to his inner experience as well.

The literature that was now born in the wake of the Vaisnava movement included many translations and adaptations from the two Epics, the *Bhagavadgita*, the *Bhagavata* and other *puranas*, and the *Gita-govinda*. A rich biographical literature, giving detailed

accounts of the movement centering around the activities of the Masters, soon had its growth. In the Assamese versions of the Mahabharata, particularly by **Rama Sarasvati**, a large mass of new matter has been trust upon the original. Sarasvati's *Bhima-charita* (The Exploits of Bhima) and **Sridhara Kandali's** *Kankhowa* (The Ear-eater) have an independent story construction, perhaps inspired by folk form and content.

After Assamese *Brajabuli* prose of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva came the rhythmic prose of **Vaikunthanatha Kaviratna** in his *Bhagavata-katha* (c. 1594-96) and *Gitakatha* (c.1597-98) and of **Gopalacharana Dvija** in his *Bhaktiratnakara-katha* (c.1600), in which the two writers adopted the literary language of the poets. A more real prose with a dignified tone is that of the anonymous *Vaisnava-charitas*, the vogue of which started about the same time as the chronicles of the Ahoms in a realistic prose of everyday use. In point of date this growth of a prose literature in the eastern-most member of modern Indo-Aryan languages is very remarkable indeed.

In Assam, in certain Vaisnava circles, no **Sattra** abbot could justify his appointment without writing a drama in the style of the Masters. This gave rise to a strong theatre movement, although the performance of a drama of the Masters was prized everywhere the most. Numerous songs in the style of *bargita* and *Namaghosa* also came to be composed sometimes merely as a work of routine by the divines. For the most part, of course, the dramas and songs of the post-Sankaradeva period do not have any outstanding merit to commend themselves. The ideals of Vaisnava poetry were so universally acknowledged that the Sakta literature of the 18th and 19th centuries and even the political annals of the Ahoms and the Koches came to be modeled on that poetry.

The Tradition of Classical Music:-

The emotionalism of Bhakti inspired poets all over India to lyricism and the emphasis on prayer as the chief mode of worship patronised popular music. It has been marked that the Bhakti Movement promoted the culture of the dhrupada style of singing in particular in many parts of the country. In Assam too Neo-Vaisnavism brought in its

train a wide culture of music. The Vaisnava music of Assam is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety.

Among the different forms of this music, introduced by **Sankaradeva** himself, the two tuned to classical Indian ragas (melody-modes) are *bargita*, and *ankiya gita* or songs of the *ankas* (drama). The name of the raga in these two types is indicated at the top of the text. In all the *ankiya gitas* and only three *bargitas*, *talas* (rhythm) are also named. A *bargita* does not always have to keep time in its singing. When an individual bhakta pours forth his devotion in public or in the domestic temple in the measures of a *bargita*, his singing is not generally controlled by the time beats. At other times, especially in congregations *tala* is maintained in the performance of *bargitas*, like the *tevaram* of South India (7th-9th century).

There are generally some particular *talas* attached to particular ragas so much so that people would refer to the *belowara* melody-mode as *rupaka belowara*, because it is commonly timed to the *rupaka* taka. On the other hand, we get instances of the application of quite a few *talas* in the course of the singing of one song in one raga. At the end of the second line of each of the songs, the syllable '**dhrum**' is placed, which indicates that the first two lines constitute the dhruva or refrain, to be repeated in the singing of the succeeding verses, called *pada*. In the last couplet of the *pada* the name of the writer occurs.

Some people have, almost aimlessly, attempted to categorise this raga music of Assam, some trying to identify it with prabandha-sangita, others with dhrupad, while still others would like to reserve it as a category by itself. As in sangita-sastras, the prabandha-gitas, of which we scarcely get a specimen today, consist of several parts like udgraha, dhruva, melapaka, antara and abhoga. In some Sattras the alapa or anibaddha part of raga songs is called *ugar*, which some seek to identify with udgraha. The character '*dhrum*' attached to the burthen is, again, supposed to hark back to the dhruva part of prabandha. But all this leaves much ground for consideration.

On the other hand, the early history of the dhrupad school refers to the reign of Mansimha Tomar, a contemporary of Akbar. The technique of this type, moreover, does not apply to the raga music of Assam. In what relation this music stands to the Hindustani or Karnataka styles is yet to be seen. Apparently, there are names of ragas common to all these schools, or common to at least two of them. A *bargita* in *dhanasri* may look like bhimpalasi of Northern India and abheri of the South. The Assamese *kalyana* may correspond to suddh kalyan of the North. But all these await the investigation of the expert for the final analysis.

In the full-scale execution of a *bargita* or *ankiya gita* there are the usual two parts of *raga alapa*, or *anibaddha* part and the *gita* or *nibaddha* part. In the *alapa*, popularly known as *raga diya* (the giving of the raga, that is, its basic form) or *raga tana* (the extension of the raga), words like **Rama, Hari, Govinda**, and not the soft syllables, are used. It is generally divided into four parts, which do not have any particular names except the third, known as *tolani* (the raising of the voice to a higher pitch). These four parts may perhaps be compared to the four parts of a classical *alapa*, corresponding to *asthayi*, *antara*, *sanchari* and *abhoga*. The singing of the text then follows, and this is timed to a *tala*. A *tala* has two parts, *mul bajana* or *ga-man* (the main part) and *ghat* (sharp extension of the main pattern of the *tala*). The *ga-man* is played on the *khol* or *mridanga* and cymbals as the text of the song is sung. When the singer is in rest at intervals, the drummers play the intricate patterns of *ghats*.

From quite early times in the history of Indian music attempts were made to visualise the melody-modes in the form of persons. This tendency to deification of ragas took definite shape in the 16th century, and were particularly popularised by the *ragamala* paintings of Northern India. In Assam we have such visualisation of ragas in the form of *raga malita* (small poems giving the mythological origin of a raga).

Indian musicians and theorists have ascribed different melodies severally to the eight watches (*prahara*) of the day. Opinion, however, is at variance in regard to the assignment of ragas to the different *praharas*. The *Sattria* musicians have also made such

assignments in their own way. Purvi or Puravi, for example, which is very generally known as an evening melody, is placed by these musicians in the early dawn.

No scientific treatise on the music of Assam has so far been available. A fragmentary manuscript, *Vadya-pradipa*, dealing with *talas*, has been discovered, and edited by the present writer.

The Tradition of Classical Dancing:-

Sankaradeva, who refers to his father **Kusumavara** as a gandharva incarnate, has also left a rich legacy of a style of classical Indian dancing. This school has some features in common with the Manipuri style, recognised as one of the all-Indian classical schools, and one could surmise the impact of the **Sattria school** on the Manipuri rather than the reverse, as the former is the style to have evolved and established itself earlier, for the Manipuris had their Vaisnavism, with which their classical dancing is associated, only in the 18th century.

It is not known what elements contributed to the evolution of the *Sattria* style. The dances, inspite of all the neglect with which it is received by the moderns, still possess a number of *hastas* (hand gestures), intricate and developed choreographic patterns, distinctive costumes and a variety of masks. The music mostly depends upon the *khol* or *mridanga*, various forms of cymbals, supporting *raga* and other songs. No woman dancer or actress is allowed in this school, there being no order of nuns in the Sattras. Even in the village performances the women roles are played by boys.

The Sattria dances mainly centre around the *anka dramas* of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. In their performances these as well as other Vaisnava dramas are nothing but dance and music. The master of the show, that is, the *sutradhara/sutradhari*, the hero, that is, **Krsna or Rama** and the women roles, that is, the **Vrindavana gopis**, provide the class types of the dance performance, while other notable dance features are

the war dances and the dance accompanying the preliminary music called *dhemali* (perhaps a clever translation of the Sanskrit term *purvaranga*).

The Assam School of Painting:-

One of the many forms in which the Vaisnava Renaissance of India manifested itself is the art of painting. Painters were employed in the work of illuminating Vaisnava and other texts like **Tulsidasa's** *Ramacharitamanas*, **Jayadeva's** *Gita-govinda*, the old Gujarati *Vasantavilasa*, etc. Painters turned prolific with such subjects as the amours of Krsna and Radha. The ***Bhagavata-purana***, whether in the original Sanskrit, or in annotated or translated form, came in for illumination in different regions of India. A profusely illustrated copy of the purana, furnished with the ***Bhavartha-dipika***, was prepared in 1705 Sambat/1648 A.D. at Udaipurnagar. This is preserved in the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute at Poona, which possesses another finely illustrated manuscript in Persian, dated 1909 Sambat, giving a prose summary of the purana. The most absorbing part of the whole purana, the ***Tenth Skandha***, found special favour with the artists. A Gujarati verse-rendering by **Bhalana** with 17th century miniatures, and another copy of this ***Skandha*** with notes in Old Gujarati (1611 A.D.) with 200 miniatures have been noticed (N.I.A., 1,4).

In Assam also Vaisnavism brought in the practice of illuminating the holy books with small illustrative paintings. **Sankaradeva** is also believed to have been a painter. On one occasion he is said to have painted on *tulapat* or ginned cotton paper scenes of '***seven Vaikunthas***'. On another he painted with vermilion and yellow arsenic the picture of an elephant, and pasted it on a wooden book-case to be presented to his royal patron, **Naranarayana**. He also had scenes of **Krsna's** life in **Vrindavana** woven into a sheet of cloth 180 feet long with a caption for each miniature.

The illustrations in a copy of Sankaradeva's rendering of the first half of the ***Tenth Skandha*** of the ***Bhagavata-purana*** found in the **Bali-Sattra** of the Bardowa group, have been reproduced in print in a recent publication, ***Chitra-Bhagavata***. The

original copy bore the date 1461 Saka/1539 A.D., which seems to be too early; the work may suitably date from the late 17th century. The technique and finish of the work exhibit strong all-India affiliations, although here and there local conventions are naturally to be expected. There is some amount of convention and stylisation, which, of course, counts for a limitation on the art. The figures are mostly in profile. Physiology is not much heeded to, and physiognomy scarcely shines bright. There is rhythm in the charming scenes of musical and dancing performances, which also exhibit some hastas or mudras. Movement of groups is dynamically depicted. Landscape or any other background in perspective is scarcely or never attempted. Successive scenes are flatly brought on the same plane in arched or zigzag panels. Representations of pouring rain water, rivers and lakes are of a conventional type. Mountains look like cross-sections of them as in geological diagrams.

The conventions of angularity in figure drawing, fish-shaped eyes, arched eyebrows, pointed nose and sloping forehead, as Dr Moti Chandra points out, speak of an ancient tradition, and “the lyrical draughtsmanship, simple composition, dramatic narration and splendid colours” give the Bhagavata illustrations a charm which distinguished them from similar Bhagavata paintings from Udaipur and elsewhere.

It is evident that these paintings were done in some Sattrā, most probably in the Bali-Sattrā, where the original manuscript was preserved. There is a copy of the original purana with **Sridhara’s commentary**, which has illustrated margins, in the Karchung-Sattrā in Nowgong; a copy of *Sribhagavata-matsya-charita* by **Nityananda Kayastha** of Mayamara Sattrā (1644-50), of which the wooden covers and some extra folios are furnished with paintings of several of the ten incarnations of Visnu and other figures, was found in the Dinjay-Sattrā; a copy of **Ramananda Kayastha’s Kumara-harana** is preserved in the Bareghar-Sattrā. It is thus seen that Assam Vaisnavism developed a school of painting of its own; and this art was later patronized by the Ahom monarchs and Koch chiefs of the 17th and 18th centuries.

In some Sattras were to be seen mural paintings and wood-carvings of some beauty and with folk-art elements in them. The **Barpeta-Sattra Kirtana-griha**, which has now been demolished, was decorated with many finely engraved and painted wooden panels, depicting scenes from religious texts. Barpeta also saw the growth of the art of ivory carving. Painting also were provided on wooden posts and post-plates, book-rests, raised trays used for the purpose of making offerings (*sarai*), and pleasure-boats.

The Vaisnava Renaissance thus reached out to all fields of cultured and developed life in Assam, enriched them, and brought about altogether a unifying and glorifying vitality to this part of the great **Bharata-varsha**.

[Reproduced from *Mahapurusa Jyoti*, Journal of the Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Vol. III, 2000,
Bhaba Prasad Chaliha (ed)]