

**The *Eka-sarana* Dharma of Sankaradeva:**  
**The Greatest Expression of Assamese Spiritual Outlook**

**Suniti Kumar Chatterji**

The greatest name in early Assamese literature is that of **Sankaradeva**, and he has left his stamp on Assamese literature and culture, on Assamese religion and way of life. He was a poet and saint, religious teacher and social reformer all in one, and his influence on Assamese life and literature is comparable to that of Tulasidasa for the people of the Upper Gangetic Valley (speakers of Braj and other Western Hindi, of Awadhi and other Kosali dialects, and even the Bhojpuri, Magadhi and Maithil speakers). Sankaradeva is said to have lived for the uncommon span of 120 years: Assamese tradition places his birth in the year 1449 A.D., and his death in 1568 A.D. (Similarly, another great saint and mystic and poet of Medieval India, Kabir, is said to have lived also for 120 years - 1398 to 1518 A.D.). He became a widower four years after his marriage in 1473 at the age of 23, and he had a daughter by this marriage whom he married off at proper age (His son-in-law was later beheaded by the order of a persecuting Ahom king). Then in 1483 A.D, in his 34<sup>th</sup> year, he started on a 12 years' grand tour of all the holy places of Hindudom in North India. After having visited Puri, Gaya, Sitakunda (near Munger), Banaras, Prayaga or Allahabad, Ayodhya, Brindavan and Mathura, Dwaraka, Badarikasrama and Varahakunda (?), he returned home after 12 years and then married a second time. He had three sons by this marriage.

Sankaradeva was well-educated in Sanskrit, and he composed one important work in the sacred language, the *Bhakti-ratnakara*, which was translated into Assamese verse by Ramacarana Thakura, a younger contemporary of Sankaradeva. He raised Assamese literature to a very high level of excellence by his songs and hymns and his dramas and works on Vaishnava religion and practice. Before his time, the religious life in Assam

appears to have been at a very low ebb. The people, Brahmans and the masses, were mostly Saktas and their religion was largely an attempt to propitiate the dread Mother Goddess by offering sacrifices of animals, and sometimes of human beings to her. There was very little of the spiritual in these cults and practices which were based on the Sakta *Tantras*. Sankaradeva brought to the people of Assam the message of faith in the One Lord, who was Vishnu. He was uncompromisingly monotheistic, arguing that since Vishnu was All-God, there was no point in offering special worship to the other manifestations of the Divinity which were conceived as the various gods and goddesses of Hinduism. From this, the doctrine that he preached was called the ***Eka-sarana Dharma*** - “the religion of taking refuge with the One God only.”

Naturally this went counter to the spirit of traditional Brahmanism based on the notions of caste and of worship through the various manifestations of the Deity. Sankaradeva preached also the equality of men before God, and abjured the idea of special privileges for Brahmans. Himself a non-Brahman, being born into a respectable Sudra family, he started the innovation of giving special spiritual ministrations to Brahmans also, and this scandalized the orthodox. The hostility of the Brahmans, and the indifference of the Ahom kings and sometimes their cruelty due to their fear of revolutionary doctrines upsetting the equilibrium of the state –Sankaradeva’s own son-in-law was beheaded at the order of the Ahom king Su-hung-mung - made him leave his homeland near the town of Nowgong within Ahom territory and seek asylum with the Koch Bihar king Naranarayana who was a rival of the Ahom king and was one of the greatest rulers in Eastern India - quite a worthy contemporary of great Mogul emperor Akbar - his vast territory in Eastern India embracing the greater part of North Bengal, Western Assam, East Bengal including Tippera and probably as far as Arracan, making him worthy of being designated as an Emperor of Eastern India.

Sankaradeva was enabled to preach the new faith he had established for himself and for earnest seekers in his province, basing it on the philosophical doctrines of the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana* as its scriptures, on the new interpretation of the **Name of God** (*nama*) and singing His praise (*kirttana*) in congregational worship, and

finally on an absolute and complete surrender of oneself to the will of the Lord. This was certainly a purer and a more spiritual form of religion than what the Sakta cults with their cruelty of bloodshed and the semi Hinduised animistic religion of Mongoloid masses could offer. Besides, it had behind it not only the force of the Ancient Scriptures like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, but was in line with the religious movements that were going strong over the greater part of North India - movements which had both sail and ballast, in having elements both from the ancient *Bhakti* philosophy centering round the worship of Vishnu (particularly in his two incarnations of Rama and Krishna) and from the Sufistic notions and practices which combined with the old Hindu worship of *Nirguna* or attributeless Deity and gave rise to the various monotheistic and reforming schools of neo-Hinduism, like the *Sant cults* of Kabir and others, and Sikhism of Guru Nanak.

Sankaradeva founded the *Sattra* or Monastery at Patbausi near Barpeta to be the centre of his missionary work and a more important centre for the faith was set up at Barpeta by his disciple Madhavadeva. Sankaradeva was not a celibate himself and he wanted men and women to live normal lives. He was a Sudra householder, but his greatest disciple who took over the leadership of his followers was also Kayastha like his master and he remained a celibate all his life - **Madhavadeva** (1489-1596).

Sankaradeva found in the Koch king Naranarayana and his brother Sukladhvaja (alias Cila Ray) good friends and patrons - Cila Ray in fact married a niece of Sankaradeva. After establishing his mission and his reformed faith, when very old, in 1552 he undertook another pilgrimage, both to Puri and to religious centres in North India. It is not likely that during his first pilgrimage he met the Bengal reformer Chaitanya, whose position in Bengal was analogous to that of Sankaradeva in Assam; Chaitanya had not yet taken to the saffron garb of the Hindu monk. It is also just possible that Sankaradeva met Kabir, but there is no positive proof.

There are points of agreement between the *Eka-sarana Dharma* of Sankaradeva

on the one hand and contemporary Vaishnavism of South India as well as the North Indian *Sant* Schools or sects. It is quite remarkable how Sankaradeva's *Eka-sarana* faith concentrated on the *dasya* aspect of devotion to God, which conceived of man's relationship to God as that of a faithful slave to his Master. According to the Bengal Vaishnava tradition, Chaitanya's *Bhakti* or faith in God was on the basis of another kind of relationship - that of love - the *madhura-bhava* or self-forgetting love of a married woman (*parakiya* or "another man's wife") for a lover which would impel her in her abandon of intense attachment to make light of everything that a good wife holds dear in life. These are of course figures of speech or examples to indicate the type of personal relationship favoured by the devotee towards his God. God was worshipped as a personal deity in His essential nature as the Lord of the Universe, and there was no insistence on His dual nature as His *Sakti* or Energy, or Power, which makes His Godhead effective in the Universe. Poetry and Mythology have conceived the Godhead in Its essential nature as *Purusa* or the Male, and the Energy or Might of the Godhead as *Sakti* or *Prakriti*, the Force which is also Matter, as the Female Complement or Counterpart of the Male as His Wife. The *Eka-sarana* faith worships only Vishnu, either as Vishnu or through His incarnations Krishna or Rama, acknowledging of course the figure of Sri or Sita, but never thinking of *Sakti* aspect as inseparable and worthy of the same honour or worship as the essential *Purusa* aspect of the Divinity. The amoral and antisocial ideal of the figure of the *parakiya* has always had the risk of bringing in eroticism and even moral turpitude and this was carefully avoided by Sankaradeva.

During his long life, there were six great contemporaries of **Sankaradeva** in the religious world of India - **Chaitanya** of Bengal (1485-1533), **Vallabhacharya** of Andhra and Vrajamandala (1479-1531), **Kabir** of Banaras (1398-1518), **Nanak** of the Punjab (1469-1539) and **Tulasidasa** in the United Provinces (? 1523-1623). Sankaradeva's *Eka-sarana Dharma* or *Mahapurusa* Sect as it is also called agreed more with the robust and manly path favoured by Kabir and Nanak and later by Tulasidasa: it was the path of a man's straightforward faith in his Master, without his assuming the nature of a woman. It was also democratic in its nature, inculcating communal worship with as simple a ritual as possible.

The *Eka-sarana Dharma* of Sankaradeva deserved to be better known in other parts of India, but each area developed its own form of a common pan-Indian Vaishnava religion of faith in a loving God, and this, coupled with Assam's isolation, probably prevented a wider spread of the *Eka-sarana* faith in lands outside Assam.

**Sankaradeva**, as many competent authorities in Assam and Assamese life have said, brought Assam a new life, letters and a state. He gave to Assam a new discipline of faith in a single Divinity, and helped Assam to break away with a past with its complicated esoteric doctrines and its unmeaning practices, and gave to the people something simple and straightforward divested of all questionable associations or implications. He was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing in a purer spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest India has produced, and he deserves to be mentioned with Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Basavappa, Ramananda, Kabir, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Tulasidasa. He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of Medieval India as a whole shone upon the life of Assam.

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**[Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, world famous linguist, formerly Khaira Professor of Indian Linguistics and Phonetics, Calcutta University and India's National Professor of Humanities. The current piece is reproduced from *Sankaradeva: Studies in Culture* (Bhaba Prasad Chaliha ed.), Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed., 1978, 2nd Ed., 1998]**