

The Greatness of Sri Sankaradeva

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Sri Sankaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.), to every Assamese, is the *Mahapurusha*, literally, the Great One. This appellation is generally not given to any other Vaishnava reformer in Assam, except in the case of Sri Madhavadeva, the chief disciple and right-hand man of Sri Sankaradeva. Thus, the neo-Vaishnavism he propagated has come to be popularly known as *Mahapurushiya dharma* also. This phenomenon needs some explanation, if not examination, at least for those who are not conversant with the cultural life of Assam. The moot question will be: Wherein lies his Greatness?

Any Guru, at any time, commands a mass appeal. Sri Sankaradeva is no exception. The Vaishnava sect he built up is by far the largest religious group in Assam. Naturally he is held in great veneration and even awe, in this part of the country. To his followers, in towns and villages, he is the Great One without question. But that kind of reverence may be described by others as mere sectarian view. Yet, his followers have attributed to him a greatness which he really possessed. We enumerate below those qualities of his that go to make him a Great One.

As Dr. Banikanta Kakati has said, Sri Sankaradeva's first and foremost contribution to the people of Assam in the 15th century was the fact that he found for them, confused as they were at that time, the chief deity to worship from among a host of gods and goddesses. In a way, Vishnu worship was nothing new, for He could be traced to the Vedic times. Also, neo-Vaishnavism was only a revivalist movement, believed to have originated in the South and subsequently spread to the North, starting about the 12th century. There are many evidences to show that Vishnu was a presiding deity in ancient Assam much before Sankaradeva's time. He took it upon himself to bring the new movement from the North to the land of his birth. But in doing so he showed his

independence and originality which constitute one of his major contributions to the cultural life of Assam. Simple, unlettered villagers were the vast majority of the population then, as even today, and they hardly knew what the scriptures said and the knowledgeable priests often tended to cheat or confuse for their own benefit. Then, besides Vishnu there were Siva and Devi who were worshipped in a variety of forms and ramifications, which are still extant, let alone innumerable local deities to suit simple beliefs of simple village folk, which are also to this day considerably influencing them.

Sri Sankaradeva showed these people that **Sri Krishna**, as depicted in the *Bhagavata-purana*, was the greatest among all the gods, and that all other gods, including Brahma and Maheswara, were subservient to Him. He wholeheartedly went ahead to prove his point by writing books in the local language, Asamiya, using classical Vaishnava themes, holding religious congregations and prayers, applying the performing arts and many other things to propagate his tenets. He naturally met with resistance, particularly from the reigning priesthood, and many a time was harassed by royal courts and other hostile people. But by and by people began to emulate his teachings and thus swell the numbers in his religious assemblies. For them he devised a very simple method of worship; to utter and listen to the **Name of God**; no priest and costly preparations were necessary. He enjoined upon his followers not to bow to any other god than **Sri Krishna**, not to look at an idol, nor to partake of offerings meant for those other deities. Go to the *Namghar* (prayer hall), sit in the congregation, sing the Name of God with fellow *bhaktas* (devotees) and bow to the Sacred Book placed at the head of the assembly, that is all. Offerings are there, of course, consisting of gram, other pulses, rice, all softened in water, not cooked, all of which do not cost much.

One historical reason behind the revivalist Vaishnava movement was to protect Hinduism from the deep inroads by other religions. Centuries ago Buddhism had given it a jolt, but later Buddhism left the borders of India. Yet, the fate of Hinduism was no better. Hindus, whose numbers were growing with the passages of time, could not find clear-cut paths, and the simple common folk did not know the Sanskrit sastras. Then, Islam appeared in India and began to spread rapidly, aided by the rulers. Islam proved

much more liberal and so attracted many Hindus from the so-called low strata of society, thereby showing the weakness inherent in the ancient Hindu faith, which had been losing followers to the other faith. Neo Vaishnavism was much simpler than the rigid paths of the past and thus devised to halt the rapid outflow of its followers. In Assam, Sri Sankaradeva organized his religious system in such a way that no distinction between man and man was allowed while joining his Nama-dharma. Besides Hindus of Aryan origin, a large number of Mongoloid tribes have been inhabiting the hills and plains in Assam adding up to the population. Sankaradeva embraced all these people in his fold. Muslims were also welcome in his faith. If he was aware of the historical necessity of the revivalist movement we have no written evidence to show. But it is a fact that he served that purpose by inviting those tribals who, as they lived a primitive life, had no organized religion as such. Absence of caste feelings here is also attributed to his liberal approach to religious reforms.

No less important is Sankaradeva's contributions to literature and several other fine arts. In this regard he was a great innovator who made many successful experiments. Admittedly, he inherited a well-developed language from his predecessors, whom he recognized in glowing terms; also, all Vaishnava writings were religious in nature and propagandistic in tone. Yet, he used literature in such a way as to sweep the land, brushing aside all other literary approaches. It is to his credit that he used literature to good advantage and made his religious reforms wide-spread. He built up a vast storehouse of literature to constitute the most important chapter in the past Assamese literature. He not only wielded a facile pen himself, but inspired a band of competent scholar-poets to do likewise, and they, it must be said, in turn made independent experiments in forms and thus added considerably to the literary kaleidoscope that dazzled one and all.

This literature was mainly translation and adaptation from the Sanskrit texts. Sri Sankaradeva was himself a great scholar and composed Sanskrit verses. He also compiled religious texts with extracts from other Sanskrit sources, later rendered into the local language, for the benefit of his followers. Naturally, as a religious preceptor he

went for religious texts instead of well-known Sanskrit poets like Kalidasa, Bhababhuti and others. It is also to be admitted that *Bhakti* (devotion) was his main inspiration in writing books as against *rasa* (sentiment), which according to classical Indian tradition, mainly constituted the stuff of literature. Yet, the *kavyas* and plays, based on religious themes and written with an aim to propagate, contain most of the nine *rasas*, used in such a subtle way as to give a stamp to his writings to make them as standard a literature as any. His *Rukmini-harana* (kavya) and *Rama-Vijaya* (play) may be cited as good examples where he has made successful use of the erotic and heroic sentiments. **Madhavadeva**, **Ananta Kandali** and **Rama Saraswati**, among his more prominent followers, also used in their own writings the humorous, erotic and heroic sentiments in the same way. Of course, all their sentiments were engaged to serve the ultimate end of Bhakti. It may be said that the nine classical sentiments were propounded long before the Bhakti movement began to inspire vast literatures in Indian languages; or, it is claimed, Bhakti also would have been considered another sentiment. It is interesting to note that in Assam Bhakti has long been a *rasa* whenever Vaishnava texts get a mention.

Two important points are to be noted here. First, Sri Sankaradeva initiated a literary movement, along with his religious reforms, that proved a tremendous trendsetter for about two subsequent centuries and inspired a host of poets who took to writing in that trend while making a variety of experiments, such as Madhavadeva's beautiful *Bargits* (Great Songs) on **child Krishna's** popular pranks, Rama Saraswati's *Badhakavyas*, based on Vanaparva of the Mahabharata, something like verse romances but with the difference that these verse prototypes of the modern novel were Bhakti literature, pure and simple, and Bhattadeva's prose renderings of the *Bhagavata-Purana* and the *Gita*.

Second, this new literature he brought to the heart of the people, whether they knew the three R's or not. This was possible because of the religious nature of it and the novel, pleasant manner in which it was written. Books were read out and explained by those who were competent in congregations where others who mostly included unlettered village folk, intently listened. Sankaradeva translated several cantos of the *Bhagavata*,

and his *Kirtana-ghosa*, based on the *Bhagavata*, is the principal religious text used in all formal prayers. Madhavadeva's *Namaghosha* is by far the most scholarly text to propound his Guru's precepts, bearing the poet's depth and erudition. Rama Saraswati rendered the Mahabharata into Assamese almost single-handed. These books were thus read out in assemblies and the listeners in course of time could memorize most of them.

We come across recorded stories about how people were attracted by the Great One's writings: - two travelers, passing through a forest, abruptly stopped to listen to a *Bargit* by Sankaradeva which a couple of fire-wood gatherers were singing, and asked them to show the way to the Guru's abode; an old woman refused to serve meals to her husband if the latter, who was out every evening to join the congregations, could not bring home at least a few verses for her. Even today these great books are having sway over the devotees. A modern writer has said that there is hardly a home in Assam where there is no *Kirtana-ghosa*. This may be somewhat hyperbolic, but the idea of popularity behind it is to be noted. Even with the spread of literacy we have not been able to bring books to the door of the common man of our time. Sankaradeva's achievement in this regard is certainly great.

In fine arts also Sri Sankaradeva provided a great leadership. He made many successful innovations also in the field of art. The *Sattras* or Vaishnava monasteries, scattered all over Assam, are the repositories of cultural activities. These monasteries have been all the five centuries the mainstay of the movement. They have been keeping the flag of the faith flying and the flame of its culture burning. Every village under them has been given sustenance by them. Bargits and one-act plays, initiated by Sankaradeva, have been the principal source of these cultural pursuits. He certainly used them for the same religious propagation. But then he gave Assam's culture a deeper classical basis with them and attuned the common man's artistic experiences to India's traditional past. His One Act plays were perhaps modeled on classical *rupakas* like the *Utsristikanka*, but he gave them a shape entirely his own, deviating from any kind of *rupaka*. His plays, and those written by his followers, known variously as *Anka*, *Nata*, *Yatra*, and *Jhumura*, are a kind of dance-drama of today. A performance of one such play is called *bhaona*, where

the artists, more particularly the Sutradhara, are required to dance according to well-known rules and sing songs in different *ragas*. A *bhaona* performance is at once a great entertainment and source of education for the village folk. The *bhaona*, performed in village *Namghars* and *Sattras* premises on festive occasions, has helped to evolve the system of *Sattriya Nritya*, which today has been given the stamp of classical dance on the lines of other Indian dance systems. The *Bargits* (Great Song), also initiated by Sankaradeva, are a kind of spiritual music based on *ragas*, meant to be used as prayer songs in the Vaishnava religious system. Both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva have composed a large number of *Bargits*, popularly believed to be “twelve score”. Sankaradeva chose Vaishnava principles as his theme and Madhavadeva concentrated more on **child Krishna**’s activities in Brajadhama, which provided great delight to listeners. Thus both *bhaona* and *Bargit* have provided a continuous link of Assam’s classical pursuits with the traditional Indian system. The musical innovation, through practice and performance in *Sattras* and *Namghars*, has reached the common man giving him the pleasures of a classical art. To this day *Bargits* have been inspiring unlettered village poets to compose folksongs on those very themes. In his plays and songs, Sankaradeva used the Brajabuli language, though in all other verse works he used the then standard Assamese language. Of course, he gave a liberal sprinkling of the local tongue in his Brajabuli. It is in his plays that Assamese prose has been used for the first time, thus showing the way to others in prose writing. He is also the first to write plays in Assamese, maybe it was a Brajabuli version. He also acted in some of his plays and thus gave a lead in how to produce a *bhaona*. As the late Kaliram Medhi has shown, he was in all probability influenced by the folk performing arts of his native land in evolving his distinctive one-act plays. Thus he was responsible for a great musical school which he built up by dint of his creative genius and which has given the Assamese people today a tradition of which they can be really proud.

Sri Sankaradeva was also a competent painter. It is recorded by his contemporaries that he himself painted the *pats* (scenes) of the seven Vaikunthas as a part of the production of his first play, *Cihna-yatra*, and himself acted in the performance. It is also well-known how he got a potter from Kapilimukh in Nowgong district, his own place of

birth, to make a suitable kind of *khol*, a drum invariably used in Sattriya functions and music. Many old manuscripts have come to us illuminated in the way Sankaradeva showed, the kind of book illustration not seen elsewhere. The Sattras kept this art alive and even today devotees visiting the Sattras can be seen carrying away pictures as holy mementos. The painting art spread beyond the confines of the monasteries. Books on themes other than Vaishnava and also on secular themes were also illuminated. In a *bhaona* the artists themselves and village artisans make the necessary wigs, masks and all other paraphernalia with simple material easily available. In Sattras and Namghars one can see wooden idols and other designs carved and painted by local artists. In many a big monastery regular training is imparted to young boys who go there to live as inmates, in *Sattriya Nritya* and all other branches of Vaishnava music. All these have been instilling finer senses in those who practise them and through them the villagers also enjoy these cultural pursuits. This is a living art even today and we can trace the source to the one and only **Sri Sankaradeva**.

I think the above is sufficient to show why Sri Sankaradeva is a **Mahapurusha**. His chief disciple Sri Madhavadeva described his Guru in a song thus: “[Victory to Guru Sankara,] the One who has no parallel”. This was the ungrudgingly paid tribute by a disciple who whole-heartedly served his master, and so may be considered an exaggeration. But to us also he appears to be a perfect man, an ideal man. Events and achievements of his life sufficiently prove this. He went to the *tol* for studies only at the age of twelve and in a few years mastered all the necessary sastras, confounding his teacher, Mahendra Kandali, and fellow pupils alike. Just after he was able to master the alphabet he composed a poem. As a young man he was physically so strong that he could control a huge bull that was terrorizing the neighborhood. He swam across the mighty river Brahmaputra fearlessly when it was flooded in a rainy season. When he chose to lead his people he gave them a new faith, easy to follow, yet entirely satisfying, for he could support his tenets with extracts from the scriptures. He confronted erudite pundits who challenged him to debates on the sastras and defeated them to win laurels from kings and veneration from the people. He gave his countrymen a new religion, a new culture, a new literature - we may say, a new life. To posterity, to us, he gives immense

sustenance to live a distinctive life, which fact I have tried to prove in the foregoing lines.

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