

The Poetry of Sankaradeva

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The following is an extract from Upendranath Sarma's 'The Poetry of Sankaradeva' (Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, September, 2000), an appreciation of the Literature of Sankaradeva. For more on the topic, see, e.g.: -

<http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/Dasama.htm>

<http://www.tributetosankaradeva.org/lit.htm>

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Sankaradeva is one of the greatest poets of India and one of her greatest reformers. He was a versatile genius. He was poet, playwright, composer, singer, choreographer, dancer, painter, instrumentalist and actor. Like Goethe (1749-1832), he was also an administrator, for he had to lead his people, the *bāra bhuyāns* and their dependents, in times of stress and strain.

Sankaradeva's reputation as a poet is often overshadowed by his greatness as a preacher and a religious reformer. His propagation of the *Bhāgavati* Vaisnava religion took deep roots in Assam, and transformed the Assamese society as a whole. As a social reformer, in Eastern India, his position is comparable to Martin Luther's (1483-1564) in Germany. Like Luther again, he incurred the wrath of the orthodox, for his translations from the sacred texts. The guilt of translating the *Dasama* has since become proverbial.

For art's sake alone, Sankaradeva would not write a single line. Yet, he remains the greatest man of letters that Assam has ever produced and one of the greatest in India. His position is similar to that of George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) who, though a propagator of ideas, was an artist of no mean order.

Yet, paradoxically, it is Sankaradeva's dedication of his art to the cause of Vaisnavism that has richly enhanced its strength and beauty. It has created the sweet, new style (*dolce stil novo*) that has captivated the hearts of millions. The art critic, Eric Newton has told us that the greatest periods of art are those in which it is harnessed to a great cause. It is eminently true of the art of the Reformer-Poet of Assam and it is at the root of the great efflorescence of literature, dance, drama and music in the period of the Vaisnava renaissance of medieval India.

The central experience behind Sankaradeva's poetry is the incarnation of **Visnu** as **Krsna**. This is the pivotal theme of the resurgent Vaisnava literature of India as a whole. The incarnation was an act of compassion like Christ's which had been the motive

force of the great art and literature of the European Middle Ages and after. Sankaradeva celebrates the incarnated Krsna in most of his works. The greatness of his poetry hinges on this double vision – Krsna’s Divine and His human nature.

Sankaradeva belonged to an age of story-tellers; yet no one has so far surpassed him as a narrative poet. He excelled as a writer of verse-tales with a spiritual significance based on the life and exploits of the **Lord Krsna**. Composed to be sung as *kirttanas*, they move in an easy and limpid flow of rhythm. They are also full of picturesque and dramatic qualities. The language is simple and colloquial, a fit vehicle for the dissemination of bhakti.

Sankaradeva was a precocious genius. He composed the long, narrative poem *Hariscandra upākhyāna* in his teens. It is full of sumptuous imagery and effusive language but, in the dramatic conflict of opposites and in the depiction of the pathetic, it gives indications of greater things to come.

Sankaradeva’s narrative poetry, however, reaches a new dimension in [his translation of the Dasama](#), the Tenth Book of the *Bhāgavata*. The *Bhāgavata* had, for the Vaisnava poets, the authority of the scriptures and there was very little scope for invention. Yet, like Chaucer’s (1340-1400), Sankaradeva’s poetry should be read as original poetry, though comparison between the Sanskrit and the Assamese texts is likely to remain a thrilling experience for students of comparative literature. The *Dasama* contains the miracles and exploits of the **child Krsna**. Sankaradeva’s superb narrative skill is deployed in his delineation of the childish pranks and youthful escapades of Lord Krsna. The visualization of the eternal child Krsna and the eternal mother, Yasoda, is superb. Some of the young tyrant’s scenes with Yasoda display a descriptive and pictorial power equal to Spenser’s (1532-1599). The interpenetration of the divine and the human is nowhere shown in greater relief. The child Krsna holds the same place in the hearts of the Assamese Vaisnava poets as Radha and Krsna in the works of Vidyapati and Candidas. The harmonious, filial relation between Krsna and Yasoda is comparable to such masterpieces of the renaissance art as Raphael’s (1483-1520) *Madonna of the Pomegranates*.

Sankaradeva’s mastery of *mimesis* reaches a new dimension in [the episode of the govardhana-dhārana](#). The deluge of rain and the plight of the cowherds remind us of the scene in *King Lear* where, the old king bides ‘the pelting of the pitiless storm’. As Krsna uproots the Govardhana hill and holds it as an umbrella over the heads of his people, the spiritual is made concrete and the literal and the figural representation become identical. Such transfigurations are everywhere present in the works of Sankaradeva. His depiction of *Rāsakridā* should also be read with this insight in view. Sankaradeva’s aim like Milton’s was to justify the ways of God to man. So, it would be wrong to suppose that he let himself go in a riot of senses in his erotic descriptions as it was wrongly supposed that Spenser had done in ‘*The Bower of Acrasia*’. The erotic is sublimated and subsumed under the eternal compassion of the God-head. The mass of details of erotic love piled up here has a spiritual motivation.

Sankaradeva's depiction here should be experienced in terms of the concept of *Figura* where a set of circumstances or things stand for something more sublime. Eroticism of the *Rāsa* assumes a new significance through the interpenetration of a higher order, but the picture itself remains autonomous. The poet's firm rendition of the secular serves as a spring-board for the leap into the eternal.

[Sankaradeva's *Bargits*](#) are some of the most sublime devotional songs of medieval India. The tunes and rhythms of these songs are set in the *dhrupada* tradition and are fixed for all times. They are sung in the same tune and rhythms as in the lifetime of the Saint without conscious variation. Their survival in this pristine form is really surprising. Sankaradeva was a master composer who set the tunes of the *Bargits* himself and these tunes have survived the onslaught of time and have haunted people's minds for half a millennium. The carefully chosen words, the stately rhythms and deep-set imagery set lyrics apart in the Sankarite canon. The lyrics strike a subjective note, full of yearning for a world beyond the mundane world beset with sins and temptations. These songs remind us of the songs of Kabir (15th C) and Guru Nanak (1469-1539). In depth of feeling and structural ordinance they are comparable to the spiritual lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) enshrined in the *Gitanjali*.

Sankaradeva created [a unique dance-drama or opera, known as the *Ankiyā Nāt*](#), a composite art-form with *slokas*, *bhatimās*, dances, songs and dialogues, contributing to create a form of superhuman loveliness. The early specimens of dramatic prose embedded in these plays are remarkable for their intimate, colloquial tone, expressive style, and adroit rhythms. Sankaradeva's handling of *brajāvali* in this kind of poetic drama is hardly paralleled elsewhere in India. But, the songs accompanying the dancing of the *Sutradhāra* expresses, through their haunting melodies, the subtle nuances of feelings generated in the hearts of the characters in situations charged with emotion.

Sankaradeva continued the tradition of his greatest predecessor Madhava Kandali whose translation of the *Ramayana* is the oldest among North Indian transcreations. Madhava Kandali had translated only the five *Kāndas* of the Valmiki *Ramayana*. Sankaradeva supplies portions of the *Uttarakānda*. [His depiction of Sita](#) is superb tribute to Indian womanhood. The scene of Sita's *pātālpravesa*, is matchless in the grandeur of conception and sublimity of execution.

A scholar-poet, Sankaradeva had behind him the whole tradition of poetical art from Kalidasa to Madhava Kandali. Sankaradeva had an intimate knowledge of the rhetoricians. His description of Kṛṣṇa and the heroines are conventional in an exalted sense. They are described with the help of recurrent figures. Teeth are like pearls or the pomegranate seeds, nails like the crescent moon, and hands like the stalk of the lotus. The cultivation of the rhetorical topics was central to the Sanskrit Middle Ages. Sankaradeva made full use of these resources; for he knew that his art must competently cope with the sublime topics he was trying to present mimetically. Sankaradeva manipulates the conception of the *rasa* with great sensitivity. Like Bhavabhūti, he had a partiality for the *karuṇa rasa* which he utilizes in a deft manner in his depiction of Sita's *pātālpravesa* and of the anguish of the Gopi when Kṛṣṇa is out of sight. Sankaradeva was an adept in the

depiction of the *sānta rasa* that subsumed the *bhakti* and *vātsalya* under it. The heroic (*vira rasa*) is seen at its best in a marching song like *suna suna re sura bairi pramānā* and portions of the *Prahlāda-charita* (in Kirttana Ghosā).

Sankaradeva was one of the greatest masters of the Assamese language. He had an extensive vocabulary and he could shape and manipulate words at his own sweet will. The efflorescence of the classical renaissance of England and the Vaisnava renaissance of Assam had one thing in common. They were ages of translations and of extensive borrowals. Innumerable words were absorbed into the language from various sources. Sankaradeva was a tri-lingual writer and he could write excellent poetry and prose in Sanskrit, Brajabuli and Assamese. He indulged in colloquialisms and neologisms. He also coined extensively. No word was considered unclean by him. He had, at his disposal, a vast amount of proverbial lore. His use of proverbs and colloquialisms is Chaucerian.

The great romantic poet of Assam, Jatindranath Duwara (1892-1964) has written eloquently about the impact of Sri Sankaradeva on Assamese life and society in his famous *Sri Sri Sankaradeva*: -

Thou didst make to flow the current of devotion
And gavest Assam piety, wisdom and language,
And gavest her a new birth;
Who can dare to write your life, O Divine One
The whole of Assam being co-extensive with thy life

The poet has not exaggerated. Sankaradeva's Life and Works are indeed co-extensive with the life of Assam. He brought the heterogeneous elements of his Eastern sub-continent and bound them, under the fold of the *Eka Sarana Nāma Dharma*. One of the Greatest Preachers of all times, he changed the patterns of the cultural life of Assam. With indomitable zeal, he made his religion into a cohesive force, and moulded the culture, language and literature of Assam to further the cause of *bhakti*.

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