

THE SARVAGUNAKARA AS A MARTIAL ARTIST

In honor of the Great Srimanta Sankardeva, the Sarvagunakara

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I was having an interesting discussion with a close friend of mine. We were trying to figure out if there was any one in this world, with all great qualities. There was only one name that stood tall without any competitors far and wide. The name of Srimanta Sankardeva, known as the “*Sarvagunakar*” i.e. the person with all great qualities to the level of perfection.

So if that was true, how about Martial Arts? Somehow, we came to a point when I was asked to share my thoughts on Srimanta Sankardeva as a martial artist. Obviously, I may become the first person to think in that line. I have known him to be a great social reformer and probably the greatest Guru the world has ever known. A reformer, whose impact is still felt in Eastern India. All one needs to do is to keep eyes open, with an unbiased mind. I compare his impact on this place of earth with the impact of sun and rain on a fertile piece of land.

Uncountable books have been written on him by great scholars. They have however still not been able to complete the description of his greatness. Hence, let me not get myself entangled in that and stick to the request made by my dear friend.

To do this and for the benefit of those who may not have practiced martial arts themselves, let us first see what an ideal martial artist does. He trains his mind and body in such a way that he becomes an invincible weapon. He also develops great abilities making him powerful enough to protect himself and also lead an attack should the need arise. When we think of great martial artists, names like Masutatsu Oyama (who can kill a bull with a strike; wrote over 80 books; 100 men Kumite i.e. fight; and also founded Kyokushinkai), Bruce Lee (who is famous for one inch punch; two finger push up; unstoppable punch and founder of Jeet Kun Do), etc. comes to our mind. What we find common in them is that they have trained their mind and body to such a level, that they could do things which may seem impossible to others.

Now, it may seem one sided, comparing Sankardeva to the likes of Masutatsu Oyama and Bruce Lee. But if my description of *Sarvagunakar* is correct Sankardeva has to be perfect even in martial arts.

Now for those, who may not know much about Srimanta Sankardeva, he was born in the family of Baro Bhuyan (regional rulers). Hence he received training in martial arts, in addition to the regular curricula of studies. It is also recorded in the *Guru Caritas* (the biographies of Sankardeva) that the Bhuyans were experts in both warfare and scripture (“*astra sastra saastrata barai paargata*”).

He had the ability to remain underwater for hours. His mastery in yoga may have helped him in this. Anybody who practiced martial arts will surely know the importance of breath control. Every move is empowered with the correct use of our breath. However in the case of Sankardeva he seemed to have taken it to the level of perfection.

SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA VS THE HUGE FIERCE OX

At Botodrova (District Nagaon, Assam), lived Sankardeva’s teacher Mahendra Kandali. People rushed to his ashram to take his help and advice in controlling a fierce wild ox. The ox was huge and feared nothing. It had also killed a lot of people and destroyed lot of crops and plantations. After listening to their complaints with attention, he said that this is a task fit for Srimanta Sankardeva. He sent a message for Sankardeva. Getting this message from his Guru, Sankardeva reached the ashram in no time. Mahendra Kandali described the situation and that [successful completion of] this [task] will be Sankardev`’s *Guru Dakshina* to him.

Sankardeva modestly replied that he would fulfill his guru’s wish at the earliest. He set off immediately, in the trail of the fierce ox. He took with him a pupil of his by the name of Paramananda Atoi. It did not take long to find the beast, as if it was waiting for Sankardeva. As they were walking through a little path, out of the woods came the huge fierce ox. Seeing this, Sankardeva pointed Purnananda to a nearby tree and asked him to climb it for his safety. Purnananda rushed towards the tree and climbed it as told. Purnananda was indeed the chosen one to witness this great contest.

The ox came in like a rocket propelled towards a target. There was a trail of dust as it came running towards Sankardeva. Its horns were fierce and were rather like two pointed daggers. They were so sharp that they were described to be sharp enough to pierce a fly should it sit on its pointed end. In no time it was close enough to pierce Sankardeva. Sankardeva who was waiting patiently for the animal to reach striking distance caught hold of both its horns and stopped its charge.

The fierce ox seemed to have found its match. The tussle that followed was so agonizing for the fierce animal that it began to defecate. Seeing that, Sankardeva felt sorry for the animal. I am yet to come across any literature mentioning Sankardeva taking the life of a living being. It is said he saw God in the heart of all living beings. Coming back to the fierce ox, which made the attack to harm Sankardeva, it was now desperate to escape from the grasp of Sankardeva. It started mooing like a calf calling its mother. But

Sankardeva had to teach it a lesson. He then pushed the ox towards a huge canal without much water. The ox fell into the canal, like a diver diving into the pool from a diving board. For a while the ox stayed still, as if it was surprised to be alive. Soon after, it ran back to the woods from where it had appeared. This time with even greater speed, never to return.

SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA VS THE ANGRY ARMED MOB

Sankardeva was having some discussions with his followers at a place called Bordowa (District Nagaon, Assam). They started to complain how some people always created trouble for them. These tormentors included people from different tribes like Dofolas, Mech, Sungi and others (although saying that some from the same tribes are faithful disciples of Sankardeva). Sankardeva is renowned for keeping his disciples happy. He suggested that they all travel by boat to the north of Brahmaputra, to Bholukakati and Kumurakuta. He however decided to stay back and face them. It gradually got dark. As expected, the angry armed mob reached the place. After searching the whole place and not finding anyone except Sankardeva, all their anger and frustration turned towards him. Sankardeva, on the other hand, remained calm. Without wasting any time the mob started the attack with the intention of finishing off the strong but calm person in front of them. Even though he was surrounded by these strong and angry men armed with various sharp weapons, Sankardeva was not keen to use fatal blows as he could see God in the soul of all living beings. But Sankardeva was so fast and powerful that by the time they realized what was happening they were flying in all directions, on being hit with blows. They could see Sankardeva overpowering them in no time and leaving the place. They were however not happy to let this lone unarmed person leave without a scratch and followed Sankardeva.

The timing and place was not the best for escaping a chase. There was a very dense forest ahead of them with full of blood thirsty animals, insects, etc. Further ahead were hills and mountains. And after that was the Brahmaputra which unlike the one we have today was several times deeper and the current was several times faster. It was also infested with giant tortoises, giant cat fishes and crocodiles. They all had a great appetite for human flesh.

Thus began the chase. Sankardeva was running through the dense forest, at a lightning speed and the armed mob trying to keep up the pace. Finally they came across a huge mountain by the name of Japorisil (somewhere in current Bura Pahar). Sankardeva sprinted towards the summit followed by the army of angry men. Soon he had the view of the Brahmaputra. However to reach the flooded river he had to jump at least 30-40 feet. It is said, experts make a feat look simple. Under the blanket of darkness and with the mob surrounding him from all sides, Sankardeva decided to take the jump which could have been a world record today. However on that occasion there was no second

chance and a failure could prove fatal. The darkness was not helpful either. Sankardeva took the jump. He made the jump look as simple as taking a 4-5 feet jump. So the mob followed him. However none of them could clear the hurdle. They landed on the hard rocks and casualty after casualty fell into the river. Soon they became food for the ever hungry creatures described above.

However as I have mentioned earlier, the Brahmaputra was not an easy river to swim, specially taking into account the blanket of darkness, the river current and the infestation of these hungry creatures.

Sankardeva was also a master swimmer. He pushed aside the creatures that tried to attack him and reached the other side. On that side of the river the followers were waiting eagerly. They were delighted to see Sankardeva reaching them unharmed.

SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA VS THE MIGHTY BRAHMAPUTRA

It is not uncommon to hear about great fights and combats taking place on land, but I am yet to come across one taking place in water or under water.

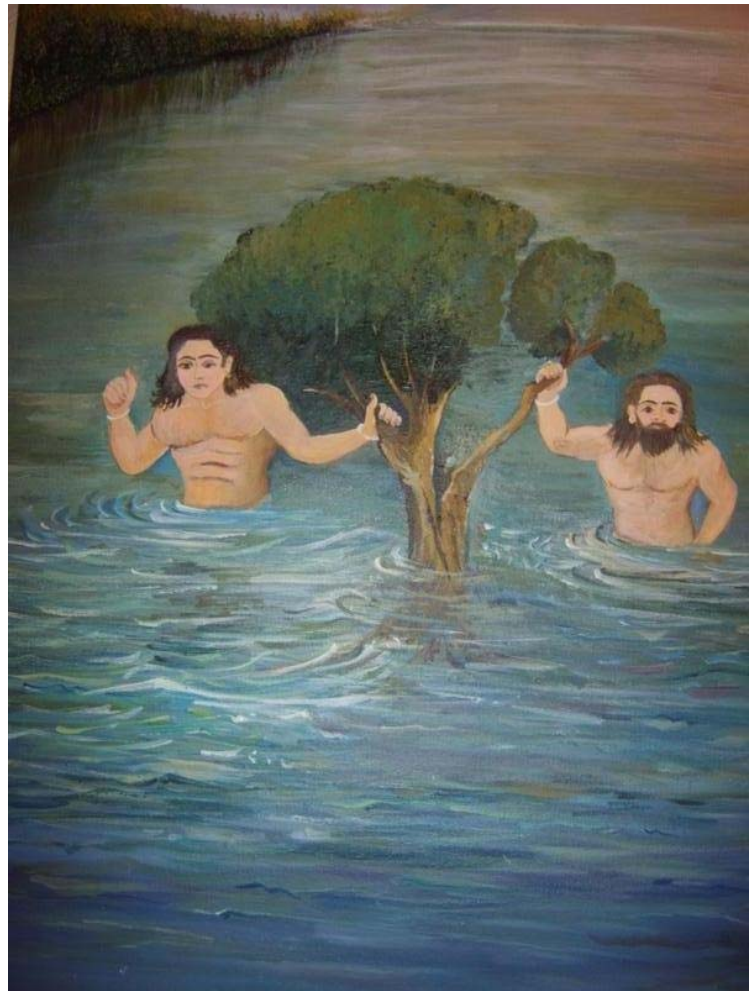
The Brahmaputra was not the place one would recommend to have a dip. When flooded its power seems to have no limits. For it, uprooting a tree was like pulling out a hair from its follicle with a pair of tweezers. Brahmaputra had already known Sankardeva on many occasions such as when he managed to swim across it with ease even at its spate. However it had not come face to face with Sankardeva as in a contest till this fine day.

It was a day after a very heavy downpour. The mighty Brahmaputra was in spate. The sky still seems unsatisfied and was about to come down any moment with bolt and thunder. Sankardeva was walking along the bank of Brahmaputra with a few of his disciples. Suddenly he seemed to be interested about something being carried in haste by the currents of Brahmaputra. With a smile he said that this is a special tree and that he needs to get it before it gets too far. This scared the followers as no one wanted their beloved Guru Sankardeva to swim in this dangerous river at this dangerous time. Once Sankardeva makes up his mind, who can stop him? He advised his followers to wait for him near the bank while he gets the tree.

He plunged into the deep, fast and turbulent river. Soon Sankardeva reached the tree. It seemed like he was having a combat with an invisible giant. Brahmaputra attacked Sankardeva with whips of water, its current and whirlpool. On occasions it dipped the tree for a long time, hoping Sankardeva will let go the tree. It seemed like two masters fighting for a trophy. This fight went on for hours. For the audience watching the bout from the bank, it was a match evenly poised. It seemed the rain god forgot to rain while watching the contest. Gradually Sankardeva managed to get the upper hand. He seemed to be successful in getting the tree nearer towards the bank. But when he gets a meter

closer to the river bank Brahma Putra pulls it a meter towards its main stream. Had there been a referee, the bout would have probably been called a draw. But in reality and in bouts like this, there must be a winner. So the match went on.

Finally came the moment of truth. Brahma Putra realized Sankardeva was no ordinary human. It appeared before him with folded hands and explained that this is not an ordinary tree. It was Brahma Putra's annual homage to Lord Jagannath's temple at Puri (in Orissa). However in admiration of Sankardeva's feat, it split the tree into two and gave a sizable part to Sankardeva. It is also said that Brahma Putra became a devotee of Sankardeva after that day.



SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA VS THE WHITE ELEPHANT

Above painting: 'Sankardeva and Brahma Putra', oil on canvas, by Mabegum Pasa

It was during the reign of Ahom king also locally known as Khura Raja. Messengers brought the news that there was a majestic white elephant in the forest of Majuli (District Jorhat, Assam; the world's largest river island), who leads a strong herd. The king was informed that he would look majestic when he rides it and that no other king had such an elephant in their palace.

A huge enclosure was made and many crops like sugarcane, banana, etc. were planted in the enclosure. It had four exits and the king ordered his toughest men to guard them. But it is not easy to get men who would stand in front of a herd of wild elephants. In the meantime the king was informed that Sankardeva is a strong man and also an expert in martial arts. His Bhuyan guards were also very strong and the perfect solution for this problem. On the request of the king, Sankardeva agreed. Sankardeva and his guards were given the task of guarding the north exit. However he also took his prime disciple Madhavdev along with Harideva.



Above: Majuli is still a paradise on earth. A place where Srimanta Sankardeva can be felt, even in the air

The herd of elephants along with their leader, the white one, were being chased into the enclosure by men with fire, drums, trumpets and noise. Soon the herd realized that they were trapped. Sankardeva not only had humans as his followers but also animals. It seemed the white elephant made a prayer to Sankardeva and in return Sankardeva asked it to use his northern exit to escape. Madhavdev was surprised at this. He realized that the king is going to send for Sankardeva any moment but Sankardeva did not seem to be concerned and waited to face the king's army. Here again it becomes clear that Sankardeva could face the king's army if need arose. Sankardeva always keeps the request of his devotees. Even on this occasion Sankardeva kept the request of leaving the place, after repeated persuasion from his pupil Madhavdeva.

There are many more instances where one can find the qualities of the best martial artist in Sankardeva. However it is best to follow it in his biographies (*Guru Charit*). There is also a wealth of resource online and particularly the website www.tributetosankardeva.org is something I strongly recommend.