

Carit Puthi

The Carit Puthi of Assam constitutes a remarkable legacy of the Bhakti movement initiated by Sankardeva. Carit Puthi literally means narration of biographies of Vaishnavite Guru of Assam. Most of the Vaishnavite scriptures of Assam are in poetic verses. However, Carit Puthi is one of the earliest forms of scriptures written in prose form. These are written during 17th Century in various Sattra and are a part of Sattra Tradition.

Generally there are two sets of Carit Puthi as enumerated by Dr. Maheswar Neog. One set belonged to earlier writers like Daitary Thakur (Sankardeva-Madhavdeva Iswarar Carit), Bhushan Dwij (Sankardeva Carit), Aniruddha Das (Guru Varnana), Ramanada Dwij (Sankardeva Carit) and Baikuntha Dwij (Sankar Madhav Puroshttam). The later period is identified with the writings of Ramcaran Thakur(Sankar Carit, Bardowa Carit, Katha Guru Carit and Guru Carit Katha).

In the modern time out of the Carit Puthi mentioned above, there are two main publications. One is 'Katha Guru Carit' compiled by Upendra Chandra Lekharu and the other is 'Bordowa Guru Carit' published in 'Banhi' of Lakhsminath Bezbarua and written by Puvaram Mahanta of Khotora Sattra, Mongoldoi which was later on compiled by Dr. Maheswar Neog.

There are other versions of Carit Puthi which are published, 'Sattra Samprada' of Govinda Das & 'Sat Sampradayar Katha' in the name of Bhattadeva. The Carit Puthi of Lesakaniya Govinda Ata is also published by Khotora Sattra. 'Santawali Katha' written by Dwarka Nath Dwij is also located and published by Mr. Surya Hazarika and as 'Santawali Saar' by Sh. Prabhat Chandra Mahanta of Koronga, Jorhat which created certain degree of controversies regarding its contents.

The 'Katha Guru Carit' & 'Bordowa Guru Carit' are voluminous and written over the decades and hence contain traits of socio, economic and cultural life of Assamese society during 16th to 18th Century. 'Katha Guru Carit' is the biographical record of twenty five Vaishnava saints including life of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and their main disciples and are part of Assamese important as historical texts.

The first form of biography in Assamese was the Carit or the lives of the Vaishnava saints. After Sankardeva passed away, Madhavdeva used to recite about holiness of his Guru after the evening prayer and thus started a tradition to discuss the events and life of Guru in the congregation of Bhaktas (Disciples) which was simultaneously written by one of them. Thus, the Carit Puthi is not the one written by one person sitting alone in a corner

allowing his imagination and personal belief getting entwined into it. These Carit Puthi were written simultaneously with the discussion in the congregation and jotted down only after conscientious finality. From the late sixteenth century, there emerged a written tradition through the Carit to render devotion to the Vaishnava saints in and around the ambience of Sattra. Although it is expected that in order to show the Godliness of the saints, supernatural elements or exaggerated events were instilled in them, the commonality of events and the simplicity of the tale tell between different author at different times provides authenticity to the Carit writings of Vaishnavism in Assam.

The presence of folklore and mythology to establish Guru as the avatar of Vishnu is more prominent in the Puthi written in the later period which can be attributed to efforts of ardent devotees to prevent the influence of forces trying to malign the teachings of Sankardeva and Madhavdeva.

Carit Puthi is utilized as a medium to spread Vaishnavism through the stories of the Vaishnava gurus. Therefore, Assamese Carit is considered as hagiographies like their medieval European counterparts.

"The Guru Carita Katha is free from the kinds of shortcomings that most of the hagiographies generally have. Behind the artificially created feeling for the saints, the presentation is more towards truth. An attempt to understand the narrator's motive and his attachment with the society in presenting his subject thus shows the place of the Caritas in between hagiography and history". Refer to "Arani Saikia 'Published in Indian Journal Of Applied Research ' Volume : 3, Issue : 8, Aug 2013".

In the context of Assam, from the thirteenth century, the Ahom introduced the tradition of recording Buranjis which were chronicles centering round the Ahom royalty and the Ahom capital. But they did not have the detail accounts of individual lives. The Ahom tradition of chronicle writing translated from the Tai-Ahom language to Assamese.

Unlike the Buranjis, the Carit Puthi recorded the life stories of the Vaishnava saints. Madhavdeva was the earliest exponent of the Carit Puthi who imbibed the life of Sankardeva after him. Then on began the two parallel traditions of memorizing the life and achievements of Vaishnava leaders and devotees of prominence, one through oral presentations, the other in written form. Chanting of these sacred texts took the form of performance. They were the glorified accounts of a number of Vaishnava saints.

The 'Katha Guru Carit' is one such biographical work which covers the lives of twenty five Vaishnava saints, more particularly Sankardeva. Scholars are not unanimous regarding its date and author as it had no mention of it. It has been written in prose and the Assamese prose was then at its initial stage of development. There were no particular format of writing but more or less it covered day to day life of Mahapurush. No doubt, these Carit Puthi were produced with a bigger aim of celebrating the traits of Vaishnavite movement. Carit Puthi is invaluable source of history on the basis of which the modern literature is built up in Assam.