

## Vaishnavism in Assam

During 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries AD in India there was a plexus of forces that led to the development of new dimensions in Hinduism. One of the dimensions was founded on the liberal doctrine of Bhakti basically simplifying the Hindu philosophy and religious practices from complex Sanskrit tradition to easily comprehensible vernacular languages. It was a progressive and democratic movement which laid emphasis on the unity of the Godhead, stood against excessive ritualism, preached a faith based on constant devotion, fought against caste prejudices and stressed on the equality of man. Several saints of great endowments appeared in various provinces to carry the gospels of the new faith to the masses by rendering the Sanskrit Puranas into regional languages. Of these saints, Ramananda, a Brahmana of Allahabad, was the most impressive figure and occupied the first place at that time (1400-1470 A.D.). He worshipped Rama and preached his doctrine in Hindi. Kabir (1440-1470 A.D.) was one of his chief disciples. Another eminent leader of the movement was Vallabhacharya (1479-1531 A.D.), a Brahmana of the Telugu country. He worshipped Krishna and propagated his doctrine in the south. In Maharashtra the religion of Bhakti was preached by Namadeva (1400-1430 A.D.) who was a tailor by caste. In Bengal arose the notable saint Chaitanya (1485-1533 A. D.), born of a learned Brahmana family of Nadia. In Assam appeared the great Guru Sankardeva (1449-1569 A.D.), a Kayasth by caste, who shaped the religious, social, cultural, and literary life of the people of the province for ages to come. At the time of his appearance, Assam was an ensemble of independent principalities on the political plane. The *Chutiyas* ruled over the eastern-most region of the country while the South-East was under the *Kachari*. West of the *Chutiyas* and of the *Kacharis* on the South were the domains of a clan called Bhuyan. To the extreme west was situated the kingdom of *Kamata*, which later on came to be known as Cooch Behar when it came under the domination of the Koch kings. The rest of the Brahmaputra Valley was ruled by the Ahom. Thus, contending political forces was working to divide the Assamese people from one another. Further, Assam happened to be a happy home of different races and tribes. The beliefs, cults and institutions of these diverse people were absorbed in the prevailing Hindu religion and formed the system of Tantric. Tantrism consisting of elaborate esoteric rituals, magic, mantras, sorcery and

sacrifices that was practiced in Assam in the centuries preceding Sankardeva. In such an age of political fragmentation and religious degeneration, Sankardeva became a beacon light and cementing force. With an evolving religion and a common national language and literature, he carved out a way for the political, cultural, spiritual and linguistic growth of Assam. The patronage received from some of the rulers of these states greatly advanced the cause of the new faith. Although primarily a religious movement, it led on to manifold expressions in art and literature. The Koch rulers patronized scholars to translate the Mahabharata and the Puranas. The Ahom kings also greatly encouraged literary activities.

Swami Vivekananda said, the basis of all religions of the world is the Philosophy, Mythology and the Rituals. The Life of the Guru is the Mythology part without which the essence of a religion cannot be understood.

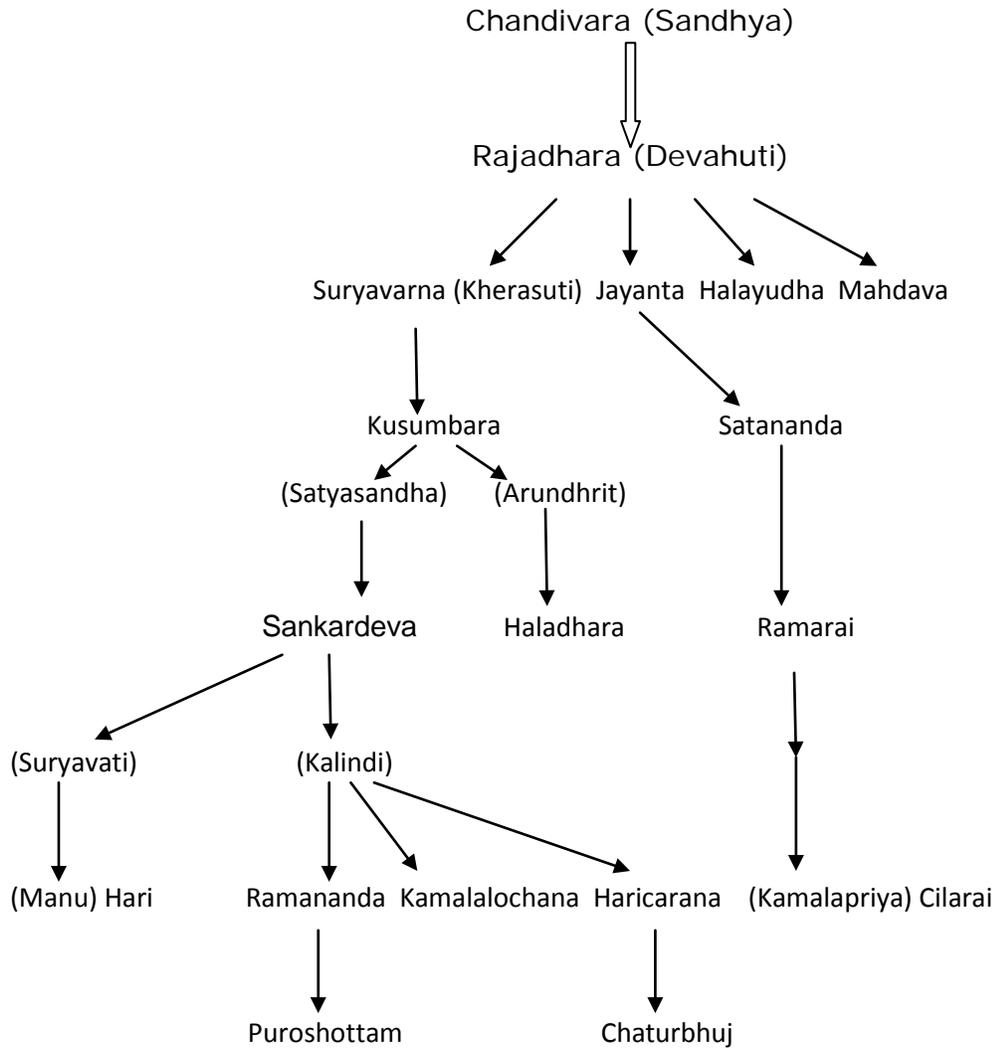
### **Life of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva.**

The source of knowledge regarding life of Mahapurush Sankardeva is the tradition of narrations of his life in prayer services after the death of Sankardeva. The ritual was started by his disciple Madhavdeva. The subsequent gurus of Vaishnavite movement had written down about the life and philosophy of Sankardeva that came to be known as Guru Carita. In fact it has become a practice that was followed by his apostles, and in due course of time a large body of biographical literature was created which depicted the socio-cultural life of Assam. The biographies are generally noted by two groups of followers. A group led by Daityari Thakur, Bhusan Dwija, Ramananda Dwija and Vaikuntha Dwija written the biographies as Carita Puthi. In the later period, the biographies were known as *Guruvarnana* (Aniruddha Das), *Katha-guru-carits*, *Bardowa-carit*, *Sankardev caritra* (from Barpeta), the *Saru-svarga-khanda* and *Bar-svarga-khanda* (Sarvabhauma). There is not much variation about the life of Mahapurush as described in these biographies which proves the authenticity of the date and events mentioned about Srimanta Sankardeva.

In general, all biographies consider Sankardeva as an incarnation of Vishnu. The late biographies differ from the early group to some extent on the count that the second

group ascribe supernatural feats to Sankardeva and describe miraculous events. The minor differential issues like whether Sankardeva met Sri Chaitanya in Bengal or not are only the expression of humongous faith and love of the authors to Guru.

### Family tree of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva



### Give Link to Family Tree

The divine lineage of Sankardeva has been greatly researched and documented by Dr. Maheswar Neog, one of the ace authority of literature and history of Assam. He linked the origin of the family to divine incarnation for several generations. He noted that

historically known Chandibar was born and settled at Kamatpur (Present day Coach Bihar) at the time of king Durlabhanarayana (Who ruled the kingdom between Kartoya river in the west and Bornadi river in the east during 13<sup>th</sup> Century AD). King Durlabhanarayana brought seven families of Kayastha (Including Chandibar) and seven families of Brahmans from Kanauj (Gaur). They were settled later on in Kamrupa where Chandibar was made Xiromoni (Chief) Bhuyan. Bhuyan is a title given to the land owners which was prevalent even in other parts of the country. This clan is also called Baro Bhuyan (Not necessarily twelve). Because of harassment from Bhutiyas from Bhutan, Chandibar with his clan moved to northern bank of the river Brahmaputra (in Rowta and Xingori of present day Bodo Land area of Assam). Chandibar died and his son Rajdhar (The great grandfather of Sankardeva) became the chief who later on shifted to Alipukhuri.

Sankardeva was born into the Xiromani Baro Bhuyan family (father Kusumbar and mother Satyasandha) at Alipukhuri near Bordowa in present-day Nagaon district in 1449 AD. Kusumbar and Satyasandha did not have any child for a very long time of married life. Sankar was born only after they performed rituals before Deity Shiv in Xingori temple. The Baro-Bhuyans were independent landlords in Assam. In the Varna system of Hinduism, Sankardeva belonged to Khsatriyas (Kayasth) . His forefathers happened to be believer in *Karma Kanda* of Vedas (Including animal Sacrifice) and basically worshiper of many Gods. Because of death of his parents in the early age of 7, Sankardeva was cared during the childhood by his grandmother Khersuti.

During childhood days he was a free kid playing with his friends with great vigor. It is said that he swam across the mighty Brahmaputra and controlled a raving bull. However, his grandmother took him to school (Called *Toal*) ran by Sanskrit Pandit Mahendra Kandali at the age of 12. In the beginning of school life he wrote his first verses *karatala-kamala*. The complete poem was written without using other vowels except *a*. He stayed at the *Toal* during his teens, and studied Sanskrit grammar and Indian scriptures. His first work, *Harishchandra upakhyan*, was created while at the *Toal*. It is believed that during his stay at *Toal*, he was covered by a serpent protecting him from afternoon sun rays.

Sankardeva stayed in the *Toal* till 1465 AD (about four years of education) and mastered the major scriptures of Hinduism. After the school, he joined his society to attend to his responsibilities as the head of the Bhuyan Clan. He came to be known as the *Dekagiri* among his subjects and admirers. He shifted his residence from Alipukhuri to Bordowa which is also in Nagaon district of Assam. He married to Suryavati during his early 20s and after three years of marriage, had a daughter named Manu. Nine months after the birth of his daughter, his wife passed away.

Sankardeva led the life of a clan head for some years (about 16 Years) till marriage of his daughter (at her age of 12 or 13) to another scion of Bhuyan clan whose name was Hari. After the marriage he handed over his responsibilities towards household activities to Hari and responsibilities towards his clan to grand uncles Jayanta and Madhav and started his pilgrimage in the year of 1481 at the age of 32. He was accompanied by seventeen others including his friend and associate Ramaram and his teacher Mahendra Kandali. During 12 years of pilgrimage, Sankardeva travelled major places of Bhakti Movement. He visited the centers of Bhakti Movement of that time Puri, Gaya, Ayodhya, Sitakunda, Vrindavan, Mathura, and Badrinath or Badarikashrama in the North as well as Dwaraka in the West and even Rameswram at the southern most point of India. His stay in Jagannath Temple at Puri was for a longer period where he met various scholars from all over the country. The exchange of knowledge and scriptures at Puri had been great contribution in concretizing the philosophical founding of Neo Vaishnavism in Assam. At Badrikashram <sup>1</sup> in 1488, he composed his first Borgeet *mana meri ram charanahi lagu* in Brajavali <sup>2</sup> language. After returning from pilgrimage, he has to go back to Alipukhuri again as his family has shifted from Bardowa to Alipukhuri.

After return from pilgrimage, at the insistence of his elders, Sankardeva took up the leadership of Bhuyan clan partially (responsibility of a hundred families -*gomastha*) that too delegated to Hari. However at the insistence of his grandmother, he married Kalindi at the age of 54. He had three sons from this marriage. Kalindi lived for 142 years. He also moved back to Bordowa and constructed a prayer hall (*Devagriha*) in 1498 AD on the original site of his parental house where he could meet people, discuss religious

matters and hold prayers and spread the traits of Bhakti Movement. This *Devagriha* was not called Naamghar as it was known subsequently. For a detailed discussion on Naamghar see Sattra Section.

The foundation of Ek- Xarana Naam Dharma was laid when Sanskrit Scholar Pandit Jagadis Mishra came from Tirhut ( Mithila in Bihar) via Jagannatha Temple in Puri and met Sankardeva at Bardowa where Mishra brought a copy of Bhagavata Purana along with *Bhavartha-dipika* of Sridhara Swami and recited Bhagavata Purana to Sankardeva. Datyari Thakur one of the biographer of writes: "Sankardeva listened with rapt attention to the exposition by Jagadish Mishra and realized that the *Bhagavata* was a scripture without parallel, a scripture that determined Krishna as the only God, *naam* as the real dharma, and *aikantika-Xarana* and *sat-sanga* as the indispensable elements of the faith. Sankardeva was already into the Bhakti Movement after the pilgrimage. He wrote *Bhakti pradipa* and *Rukmini harana* and also began composing the *Kirttana ghosha*". Thus, Ek-Xarana Naam Dharma started blooming under the leadership of Guru Sankardeva.

Pandit Jagadish Mishra died one year after the recitation of the Bhagavata Purana. On the basis of Bhagavata Purana and its commentary *Bhavartha-dipika*, Sankardeva created a dance-drama called *Cihna yatra*, for which he painted the *Sapta Vaikuntha* (seven heavens), guided the making of musical instruments and played the instruments himself. Realization of Bhagawata Purana and creation of Cinha Yatra was the beginning of his preaching of Vaishnavite philosophy to the people of Assam.

Some of the first to be initiated (Xaran) into this religion was the wife of Jayanta-dalai, a leper named Hariram (later Tulasiram), Ramaram his associate and his Guru Mahendra Kandali. Ananta Kandali, a profound scholar of Sanskrit also became his disciple during this time.

In 1516 AD, Sankardeva had to shift from Bordowa due to pressure from Koch king Viswa Singha and regular conflicts with Kachari Kingdom. In this situation, spiritual

development was not possible and hence Sankardeva and his associates crossed the Brahmaputra river and settled first at Xingori and finally at Rowta (In present day Darrang District of Assam) in the North bank of the river Brahmaputra. The dominance of Bhuyan clan in Bordowa and Alipukhuri area came to an end after this change of seat of power. However, even in Rowta he could not stay longer as Viswa Singha advanced towards Rowta, Then Sankardeva moved to Gangmau (In Behali area of present day Sonitpur District of Assam) which was a part of Ahom Kingdom. He stayed for five years at Gangmau where eldest son of Sankardeva named Ramananda was born. At Gangmau, he wrote the drama *Patniprasad*. In Gangmau, along with other Vaishnavite like Ananta Kandali he translated the entire Bhagavada Purana from Sanskrit to simple Assamese language for better understanding of common people. Translation of Sanskrit scriptures to vernacular languages so that it can be easily understood by common people was one of the greatest methods adopted by Vaishnavite movement of that period.

The aggression of Viswa Singha continued and reached Ahom Kingdom where Bhuyan clan was in the fore front. The Bhuyan fought for the Ahom where the Koch king was defeated. However, Sankardeva and his associates were not in a position to continue the conflict with Koch King and at the same time to pursue the religious zeal of Bhakti. The whole clan again moved to the East and settled in a place named Dhuwahat which was located in the largest river island of the world 'Majuli'. (The place is also referred as Belaguri).The island is in the midst of mighty Brahmaputra. Like Lord Krishna shifted to Dwarka, in the middle of the ocean to avoid onslaught of Jarasandha, Sankardeva also selected this place for peaceful environment for religious propagation. Dhuwahat was a place near present day Ahatguri that was washed away by the Brahmaputra in 1913. At Dhuwahat, Sankardeva received the royal support for his clan from Ahom King in terms of land and money. Some of the Bhuyan also received royal title and employment. Hari, son-in-law of Sankardeva became "Saikia", and his cousin Jagatananda, grandson of Jayanta received the title of 'Ramarai'.

Another landmark event for Neo Vaishnavite Movement in Assam took place at Dhuwahat where Sankardeva met his spiritual successor Madhavdeva. Madhavdeva was a believer in *Karma Kanda* including animal sacrifice before the deity (such believer is termed as Xakta). He met his brother-in-law Ramadas, while taking a goat for sacrifice before Goddess and thus got into a religious argument with Ramadas who had recently converted to Vaishnavism. Ramadas was earlier known as Gayapani who married Madhavdeva's sister before Madhavdeva met Sankardeva. Ramadas took him to Sankardeva, who, after a long debate, convinced him of the power and the efficacy of *Ek-xarana*. This event is termed as "Moni- Kanchan Yog" to emphasize the meeting of a great soul with the incarnation of Vishnu. The Madhavdeva was main force behind spreading of Vaishnavism as well as ionic establishment of the great faith. Sankardeva lived 16 years at Dhuwahat where many prominent followers joined him in spreading the Bhakti movement. He also wrote Kirtana Ghosa and Borgeets during this period. The spiritual life of common people started getting better and better under him with royal patronage of Ahom king till the relation with Ahom king became tense.

The popularity of Ek-xarana Naam Dharma and the conversion of people from Vedic rituals as well as tribal way of life alarmed the priestly Brahmins who reacted with anger and hostility. Sankardeva tried to diffuse their hostility by meeting them at the house of his relative Budha-Khan and asking his Brahmin antagonists to install a wooden idol of Jagannath, called Madan-Mohan, at his religious seat. However, the priests were not satisfied and complained to the Ahom king Suhungmuhung (1497–1539), who summoned Sankardeva to his court for a debate with them. Sankardeva was able to convince the king that he was not a religious rebel and a threat to the social order. Accordingly the charges against him were dropped. The hostility, nevertheless, continued.

Though the position of the Bhuyan in the Ahom kingdom was established, the relationship gradually deteriorated. At the same time, relationship with Koch King started improving. Sometime in the 1540s during the reign of Suklengmung (1539–1552) a royal officer visited the region for an elephant capturing expedition. Hari was not

available and furthermore, elephants escaped through a barrier managed by the Bhuyan. The officer took grave offence in this dereliction of duty and arrested Hari as well as Madhavdeva. Later on Hari was executed at Garhgaon, the capital of Ahom Kingdom near present day Sivasagar and Madhavdeva was released as he was not married. Madhavdeva returned to Dhuwahat after a year. Everyone in Dhuwahat came to know about death of Hari only after Madhavdeva narrated the incident. The loss of his Son-in-Law was an indication of intolerance of Ahom King towards Spiritual movement and hence, Sankardeva with his followers left Dhuwahat and proceeded to Koch kingdom. The advancement of Koch towards Ahom via North Bank of Brahmaputra was an advantage to the shifting. Koch army set up their garrison in Narayanpur which is closer to Majuli and helped Sankardeva just to cross the river towards north. The shifting was necessary to avoid confrontation with the mighty King that would have been detrimental to the development of spiritual pursuit. Sankardeva already heard about spiritual lenience of King Naranarayana which attracted him towards peace. He was already at the age of 95 and decided to spread Bhakti in Kamrupa rather than fighting in Majuli. Sankardeva left the idol of Jagannatha hanging on a tree when he left Dhuwahat which was rescued years later by his disciple Banxigopaldeva who installed the idol at Deberapar-Sattra of Majuli.

After the death of Viswa Singha, who was inimical to the Bhuyan, and the rise of Naranarayana (1540), the Koch-Bhuyan relationship improved somewhat. Sankardeva and his followers reached Kapalabari in Koch kingdom in later part of 1540 and put up there. At that time, the entire area after west of Kollong tributary in Nowgaon District of today to North Bengal was Koch Kingdom. But the water was very alkaline in Kapalabari. Several members including Madhavdeva's mother Manorama died there. Sankardeva and his group moved to Sunpora in 1541. At Sunpora (near Barpeta in Kamrupa), Sankardeva initiated (Xaran) to Bhavananda, a rich trader who had extensive business interest in the Garo and Bhutan hills besides Kamrupa. Sankardeva named him as Narayan who was known as Narayan Thakur or Thakur Ata. Narayana Thakur later settled at Janiya near Barpeta and took to agriculture. Sankardeva and his man found great protection and support from him.

Sankardeva stayed in Sunpora only for six months or one year after which he moved to Kumarkuchi or Kumarpara, a nearby area where also he stayed for one year and then moved to Patbausi in 1546 AD at the age of 97. All the places wherever he stayed became seat of religious discourse (later termed as Sattras) where he left one of his disciples to continue the daily rituals of Ek-xaran Naam Dharma. Sankardeva settled at Patbausi (near Barpeta) in the Koch Kingdom and constructed a *Kirttanghar* (house of prayer) with Carihati and all other prominent structure of a Naamghar. Some of the people he initiated here are Chakrapani Dwija and Sarvabhaum Bhattacharya, Brahmins; Govinda, a Garo; Jayaram, a Bhutia; Madhai, a Jaintia; Jatiram, an ascetic; and Murari, a Koch. Damodardeva, a Brahmin, was also initiated by Sankardeva. Damodardeva was entrusted by Sankardeva to initiate Brahmin disciples. A Sattras was also constructed for Damodardeva at Patbausi itself. Meeting of Damodardeva was one of the important events in Neo Vaishnavite movement of Assam. Later Damodardeva became the founder of the Brahma Sanghati, another sect who believed in worship of Lord Krishna's idol. Assamese Scholar Lakshminath Bezbaruah observed that Sankardeva never established any Sattras with idol worship of Lord Krishna. These are developments of later years when there were differences amongst his main disciples. He always respected and considered the Brahmins at higher level and not inclined to give Xaran or the initiation process. This particular issue has taken a big toll in the development of Assamese society under Neo Vaishnavite movement.

From Patbausi, Sankardeva left for second pilgrimage in 1550 with a large team of 117 disciples that included Madhavdeva, Ramrai, Ramaram, Thakur Ata and others. Thakur Ata had to return after just one day's journey. Madhavdeva had to take entire responsibility of logistics. During this pilgrimage, Sankardeva visited Bhakta Kabir's Math and Jagannath Puri. There is difference amongst biographers about meeting Chaitanya Mahaprabhu by Sankardeva, during this visit that was not recorded properly. He wanted to visit Vrindavana as well, but his wife Kalindi was apprehensive about his return from Vrindavana once he reaches there. Therefore she put the responsibility on Madhavdeva to stop Sankardeva from going to Vrindavana. Sankardeva was old and dependent on Madhavdeva. Hence, he did not proceed to Vrindavana. Sankardeva and the group returned to Patbausi within six months. Before he went for pilgrimage, Cilarai

(Suklodhwaj), the general of the Koch army and brother of Koch King Naranarayana married Bhubeneswari, the daughter of Sankardeva's cousin Ramarai.

After he returned from second pilgrimage, Ramarai and other disciples again wanted to visit Gaya, Kaxi, and Vrindavana. Sankardeva did not say anything but composed a Borgeet, "*Nahi Nahi Ramaya Bine tapa Karak ko*". Ramarai changed his mind after knowing about the Borgeet and realized that Pilgrimage is only a hard work; Ek-xaran Bhakti is the real path to eternal peace.

Stay in Patbausi was approximately 18 years wherein major part of his spiritual work was completed. During this period he internalized and summarized 17 scriptures and also completed the Kirttana ghosa. He also translated 5 parts Bhagavata Purana in Assamese poetic form. 'Anadi Patan', 'Nimi Navasiddha Sanbad' and 'Balisalan' were created.

In Koch Kingdom also, Sankardeva had to face the challenge of priestly class as Ek-xaran Naam has ruled out the necessity of idol worship, Vedic complex rituals which was the source of income, inequality in the society and exploitation of poor and uneducated people by the Brahmin class. On hearing complaints repeatedly that Sankardeva was corrupting the minds of the people by spreading a new religion, immediately after the second pilgrimage, Naranarayana, the Koch king, ordered the arrest of Sankardeva. Cilarai immediately dispatched eight of his own soldiers ordering them to travel non-stop and reached Patbausi. They were instructed to arrest Sankardeva on orders of the Yuvraj' on a drummed up pretext, before the King's men reached there. The King's men could not arrest Sankardeva, as he was already under arrest of the Yuvraj Chilarai. Sankardeva was brought safely to the Prince's Garden Palace where he was received with great honor. Cilarai then pleaded the King to give an audience to Sankardeva before condemning him. The King agreed to do so.

In the court of Naranarayana, as he moved up the steps to the throne, Sankardeva sang his Sanskrit *totaka* hymn, composed extempore, to Lord Krishna, now known as Totaya—*madhu daanava daarana deva varam* and as he sat down, he sang a Borgeet *narayana kahe bhakati karu tera*.

During the open debate on Hindu religion, Sankardeva defeated the priests. Naranarayana was highly influenced by the knowledge, saintly aura and magnanimous presence of Sankardeva and appointed him as *Gomasta* of Barpeta region. Land was allotted to him near Koch Behar in Bheladanga for setting up a Sattrā which was later known as Madhupur Sattrā. Naranarayana issued Declaration permitting the free propagation of spiritual way of living and teaching to Sankardeva. The King even expressed his willingness to obtain Xaran and become disciple of Sankardeva, but Sankardeva refused to make him disciple on the ground that it will not be possible for the King to follow the religious and ethical code.

It was The Great Warrior Cilarai, who not only saved Sankardeva from certain death, but it was only due to his Royal Patronage that Sankardeva was able to establish the Ek –xaran- Naam- Dharma in Assam and bring about his cultural renaissance. Cilarai built a garden house for Sankardeva and his followers to stay at Patbausi. Sankardeva shuttled between Koch Behar and Patbausi. During his visits to the Koch Behar royal court, Sankardeva often regaled Prince Cilarai with descriptions of the fun-filled childhood days of the young Krishna in Vrindavana. The prince was enthralled, and wished to experience more deeply the Lord's pastimes, so Sankardeva agreed to have the narrative inscribed on cloth in pictorial form.

He engaged the weavers of Tantikuchi, near Barpeta, to weave a forty-yard long tapestry panel depicting Krishna's early life in Vrindavana. Sankardeva provided the designs to be woven, chose the various colors of thread to be used, and personally supervised the weaving. It took about a year to complete and deriving its name from its theme, came to be known as the Vrindavani Vastra. It was presented to Cilarai and Naranarayana, who were both overwhelmed with the presentation. Sankardeva also initiated a Muslim tailor from Koch Behar who came to Patbausi with him.

The King held religious discourse and discussion in his court between the priests and Sankardeva. King Naranarayana once asked the court poets to give him, in one day, a condensed version of the entire twelve cantos of the Bhagavata Purana. When all Pundits said it was not possible to do so in such a short time, Sankardeva took up the

challenge and accomplished the feat in one night and prepared the '*Gunamala*' Puthi which is the summary of Bhagawata.

After he had condensed the substance of the twelve cantos of the Bhagavata Purana into a small booklet, he put it into a small wooden box. Then over this, he painted with hengul-haital (yellow and red) an elephant squeezed inside a circle. He called it "*Bhurukaat Haathi*" meaning an elephant squeezed into a lime-pot! This scripture was Gunamala. This Puthi (the religious books are called Puthi in Assamese language with respect) is placed in the sanctum sanatorium (main Alter) of Naam Ghar, the prayer hall, instead of idol and worshiped as the Chaitanya. In some of the Sattras idol of Lord Krishna is also kept on the left hand side of the main alter.

Sankardeva in gratitude penned three panegyrics (called Bhatima in Assamese) in praise of the King Naranarayana. The association of Sankardeva with Naranarayana and Cilarai marked the Golden Era of Assamese Renaissance. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva freely propagated *Ek-Xarana Dharma* with their Royal patronage. Sankardeva stayed in this kingdom for more than 20 years till his *Maha Prayan* in 1568.

He made arrangements with Madhavdeva and Thakur Ata and gave them various instructions at Patbausi and left the place for the last time. He set up his home at Madhupur Sattras. In 1568, after leading a most eventful life dedicated to enlightening humanity; the Mahapurush breathed his last – after four months of his last stay at Bheladanga– at the remarkable age of 120 years.

### **Main tenets of teaching of Sankardeva.**

The seed of democracy, especially in the fields of religion, society and culture in Assam was first sown by Sankardeva. With the healthy fresh air of Neo-Vaishnavism, Sankardeva purified the minds of the people and given dignity and meaning to individual life. He gave Assam a catholicity of outlook and a loving and liberal religion, a religion unburdened with rituals, ceremonies, and superstitions that had characterized the time. Writings of Sankardeva emphasized on the ethical aspects of religion underlining the fact that religion and morality is

inter-connected. With apt illustrations from the epics and the Puranas he extolled and elaborated the merits of such virtues as *satya* (truth), *daya or kripa* (mercy), *dana* (charity), *ahimsa* (non-injury), *ksama* (forgiveness), *anasuya* (absence of envy), *dhriti* (patience), *sraddha* (respect) and *dama*, control of senses. In his teachings, the vices that lead to misery, destruction and to unspiritual life are enumerated as follows: *kama*, sensual pleasure, *krodha*, anger, *lobha*, desire, *moha*, delusion, *mana*, pride, *matsarya* or *asuya*, envy and jealousy. These ethical virtues did no doubt determine the behavior of good people (*sadacara*) but they also greatly added a fresh fragrance to social amity, friendliness and human relations.

Further, Sankardeva did not confine himself only to preaching the Bhakti path and upholding the ethical virtues but established at the same time a new social order in Assam by removing superstitions, corruption, ignorance, untouchability, inequalities between man and man, and other social evils. Not merely this, he gave the regenerated Assamese people literature, drama, poetry, songs, dance and music, which have attained the status of a distinct school, and entwined the community with unity and oneness.

The Guru attempted to wipe out untouchability and to establish equal rights of all castes and communities. What has today been embodied in the Constitution of independent India through the lifelong endeavors of Mahatma Gandhi was in effect introduced in Assam five hundred years ago by Mahapurush Sankardeva. He raised the erstwhile socially down-trodden communities to the level of the higher castes by installing them as *Bhakat* (devotees) and *Mahantas* (noble men). By dint of his unassailable reasoning and apt references to the scriptures he also succeeded in getting his noble doctrine recognized and accepted by the Brahmins and other higher classes who were hostile to these reforms at the beginning and thus forged a liberal democratic social order.

The message Sankardeva was primarily expressed through his Bhakti religion where he stressed that the realization of God was not the monopoly of a limited few but within the reach of all those who strove for it. The Naamghar, the most important institution which Sankardeva gave to Assam is even today run on the democratic principle, all villagers having a voice and hand in its management. Not only are its doors open to all, but all villagers, irrespective of their

caste and race, are allowed to participate in its cultural activities which adorn and ennoble life. It is a common practice in the Naamghar to recognize individual ability and talent disregarding other considerations. A man is preferred as a *Sutradhara* to enact the Ankiya play or as *Gayan* or *Bayan* to conduct congregational music is because of his attainments in the respective spheres and not for his social status.

Another far-reaching contribution of Sankardeva towards democracy was breaking the seal of classical learning and making available its literature to the unlettered masses. The good and noble abstract ideas engulfed in the Sanskrit language were unveiled through concrete form of *akhyanas* (stories), *kavyas* (verses), and Ankiya plays so that the common man might apprehend them. The effect of these cultural entertainments is profound even today on the mind of the village people in spite of the modern cinema and audio-visual attractions.

Although, in his major writings, Sankardeva used the language spoken by common people instead of Vedic language, there is no place for colloquial expressions with rude taste in these writings. With a simple medium of communication, he gave the people the very best in Indian thought and literature. His Borgeets are sung today by unlettered people to classical tunes, Ankiya-Bhaona are danced and performed by villagers according to the orthodox Natyashastra style. That's why Lakhsminath Bezbaruah commented, "Illiterate Assamese people are not uneducated."

Sankardeva collected the villagers at the Naamghar did not leave room to while away their leisure in hearing idle gossips or ephemeral talks but to listen to good poetry, ennobling music as well as to participate in philosophical and religious discussions. All these activities raised no doubt the level of social ethics and culture, widened the intellectual and imaginative horizon of the common mind.

The conception of India as one country was already available in Hindu religious scriptures as well as in the spiritual minds of common people. Sankardeva wanted the people to feel proud of being born in this holy country of Bharatavarsha, as this country provides an immense opportunity for development of man's moral and spiritual potentialities. Repeatedly

he emphasized the glorious and spiritual experiences of India. In many of his verses he spoke of the great heritage of this ancient country Bharatavarsha.

Sankardeva widened the geographical outlook of the Assamese people by his travel from Kamarupa to Kanya Kumarika and linked up Assam with the rest of India in diverse ways : linguistic, cultural, religious. In his hymns and dramas he employed Brajavali which came to be understood all over Northern India as a national language; the Sattras and the Naamghars were patterned to a certain extent after the monastic establishments of the South. Some of his literary and artistic expressions were suggested by the Alwar saints, Kabir, Vidyapati and other saint-poets of India. In this way, Sankardeva broke the insularity and isolation of Assam and led the way to Indian feeling and to the unity of India. *(This part of the article is heavily borrowed from the preface of the Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua's book).*

### **The Medium of Communication adopted by Sankardeva.**

The whole gamut of medium of communication adopted by Sankardeva can be enumerated as below:

Ankiya Naat or Bhaona which are play on stories of Mahabharata and Ramayana

Songs consists of Borgeet, Bhatima, Totay

Kirttana which are combination of prayer accompanied by musical instruments with Hindustani Classical music.

Puthi or the Spiritual literatures based on Sanskrit scriptures

Most of the present day scholars and writers including Dr. Maheswar Neog consider the creation of the Puthi as a part of Assamese literature. There is no doubt Vaishnavite writings have humungous contribution towards growth and development of Assamese literature. But the purpose of these creations was not literary. The main theme is the spiritual teaching. While analyzing and praising the literary beauty of the creation, generally, the spiritual theme is left out. Hence, it is more desirable to study them and comment upon them as spiritual tools rather than artistic or literary piece.

Sankardeva completed his rendering of the Bhagavata Purana. He composed the Kirttana Ghosha and further translated the last canto (*Uttara Kanda*) and instructed Madhavdeva to translate first canto of the Ramayana (*Adi Kanda*) the portions that were left undone by Madhav Kandali. He wrote six plays: *Cinha Yatra* is not traceable, *Rukmini harana*, *Parijata harana*, *Keligopala*, *Kalidamana* and *Ramvijoy*. Another play written at Patbausi, *Kansa Vadha*, is lost. At Patbausi, he had lent his Borgeets numbering around 240 to Kamala Gayan. But unfortunately, Gayan's house was gutted and most of the Borgeets were lost. No Borgeets were written by him after that. The creation of Puthi and the other medium were at different level at different points of his life time. Most of the Puthi were written on the basis of Bhagawata Purana.

### **Kavyas:**

Harishcandra-Upakhyana ( Markendya Purana)

Rukmini-harana-kavya (mixed with Bhagavata elements, not influenced by commentary of Sridhara Swami)

Ajamil – Upakhyana

Amrita – Manthan

Bali Chalana

Kamajaya or Rasakrida

Gopi- udhhava – Sambada

Kurukshetra Yatra

Krishna-prayana-pandava-niryana

Kirttana Ghosa.

### **Theological Works (Works on Bhakti Theory)**

Bhakti-pradip (Garuda Purana)

Anadi Patana

Nimi-navasiddha-sambad

Gunamala

## Bhakti-ratnakar

### Translation

Bhagawata Book VI ( Ajamila- upakhyana part), Book VIII ( Amrita – manthana Part), Book I, Book II, Book III, Book VII( Bali Chalana Part), Book X (adi Part), Book XI, Book XII

Uttarakanda Ramayana supplemental to Madhav Kandali's Sapta Kanda Ramayana

### Lyrics

Borgeet, composed 240, but only 34 exist now

Totaya,

Bhatima : three types Deva Bhatima, Naat Bhatima and Raj Bhatima

There are 145 lyrics spread over six Ankiya Bhaona. Some of the songs in Ankiya Naat are without classical Raga and Tala. They are called Capaya and Payara.

### Drama (Ankia Naat)

*(Vipra)-patni-prasad* (Ankia Naat)

*Kali-daman*

*Keli-gopal*

*Rukmini-haran*

*Parijat-haran*

*Ram-vijay*

Three Naat not traceable : Cihna Yatra, Janma-jatra, Kangsa-badha

**Visual Art :** Sapta vaikuntha – part of the Cihna yatra production, does not exist today.

Vrindavani Vastra

Sattriya Dance is a classical Hindustani Dance propagated by Sankardeva.

His language is lucid, his verses lilting, and he infused *bhakti* into everything he wrote. His magnum opus is his Kirtana Ghosa, a work so popular that even today it is found in many household in Assam. It contains narrative verses glorifying Krishna meant for community singing. It is a *bhakti kayva* par excellence, written in a lively and simple language, it delights the young with true poetic beauty and elderly people find religious instruction and wisdom.

His translation of the *Bhagavata* is actually a trans-creation, because he translates not just the words but the idiom and the physiognomy too. He has adapted the original text to the local land and people and most importantly for the purpose of Bhakti. Portions of the original were left out or elaborated where appropriate. Sankardeva was the fountainhead of the [Ankiya naat](#), a form of one-act play. His *Cihna Yatra* is regarded as one of the first open-air theatrical performances in the world. *Cihna yatra* was probably a dance drama and no text of that show is available today. Innovations like the presence of a *Sutradhara* (narrator) on the stage, use of masks etc., were used other eminent playwrights.

**Philosophical traits of Neo- Vaishnavism of Sankardeva.**

Bhakti Movement of Sankardeva is based on Ek-xaran of Srimadbhagavad Gita, nine forms of Bhakti and *Satsang* of Srimadbhagvata Purana and Naam from Padma Purana. The philosophical adaptation is from 'Vedanta' school propagated by Badranarayana Vyasa through Madbhagavata Purana, in the form of Brahmasutra. The Vedanta school of Vyasa led to several sects of Vaishnavism based on Advaita, Visitadwaita, Dvaita-Advaita and pure Dvaita philosophy. In modern times, Vedanta school was established by Sankaracharya (788-820 A.D.) through Advaita form based on *Maya*. In 12<sup>th</sup> Century, Ramanucharya, established Vaistadvaita school. Vallabhacharya started pure Dvaita school, although he was younger to Sankardeva in age. Sankardeva was not influenced by the propagation of Sankaracharya, although he quoted slokas from Sankaracharya's teachings. Sankardeva never promoted knowledge of Brahma as the sole criterion for Nirvana.

Like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Bengal, Srimanta Sankardeva also did not feel it necessary to follow any particular commentary of Vedanta school. For them Srimad Bhagavata Puran itself is a great commentary of Vedanta. Even today the people of Assam never felt the necessity of another 'Bhashya'/Commentry on Vedanta philosophy. The religion propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva was for spiritual peace and social development of Assamese people.

The scriptures (*Puthi*) of Vaishnavism in Assam were prepared for understanding of common people where no special discussion on philosophy was emphasized. The philosophy of Vedanta creates a lot of debate and discussion. Therefore, avoiding these controversies, Sankardeva propagated Bhakti on the basis of Upanishad. The impact of Vedanta Sutra is indirect in this Bhakti movement. The maximum influence is from commentary of Sridhar Swamy (*Bhavarth Deepika*). Sridharswamy was Mahanta in Govardhana math of Puri. Since, Sridharswamy was from the school of Sankaracharya, his commentary is Advaitya. However, strictness of his Advaitya philosophy is diluted by Bhakti when he worshiped Narsingha Avatar of Vishnu. This Bhakti emotion mixed with Advaitya philosophy is the basis of Sankardeva's Vaishnavism. At the same time Sankardeva did not follow the commentary of Sridhar Swamy. Sankhya philosophy and Rajyoga of Srimadbhagavata Parana is only reflected

in the Bhakti stream. In the translation of Bhagavata 3<sup>rd</sup> Skandha, Srimanta Sankardeva explained Sankhya philosophy through Kapil (avatar, not Kapil Muni / Rishi) but in the form of Bhakti which is applied to praise Iswara and against the Sankhya of Kapil Rishi which is non-believer of Iswara.

Rajyoga of Patanjali is mentioned in 11<sup>th</sup> Skandha of Bhagavata describing *yam*, *Niyam*, and more than 700 million *Nadi* (The nerves), six *chakras* and *Kundalini* power. Sankardeva compared the entire universe with pottery manufactured from soil.

*“Tumi Karya Karana Samaste Carachar.*

*Subarna Kundale yen nuhi Bhinnatar”.*

Srimanta Sankardeva also explained *Maya* as the one that covers truth and shows untruth as truth. The universe and its creation, all *Jivatma*, is *Asat* which are *Asanta* (unholy) and *Asatya* (Not True). Although, these are born out of *Sat* (truth) and reflected as true creativity or karma of Parambrahma, they are *Asat*. The Brahma and *Jivatma* are one like fire and its offshoots. But what Srimanta Sankardeva propagated is that although, at philosophical level, there is no difference between Iswara and *Jivatma*, as the creation of Iswara, to some extent *Jivatma* is separate from Iswara and ruled by Iswara. Thus, here Sankardeva for Limited purpose accepted *Dvaitya* to important Bhakti as a way to *Nirvana*. Sankardeva written

*Yadyapi Tomata Kori Jiva Nohe Bhinna’*

*Tothapito Bhailo Prabhu Tomar Adhin.*

Again in Kurukshetra kavya Sankardeva written as below,

*Taju anxa purusha tahar maya anxa!*

*Svatta, Raja, Tama tini Guna tan Banxa”*

*Tar Lavalesxe Howe Sristi Stithi Laya.*

*Triguna Maya* (Svatta, Raja, Tama) is the power of eternal *Purusha* and born out of *Purusha*. This power is the *Prakriti* and the *Iswara* created 24 elements (*Tatva*) with

this *Prakriti* for his game of creation. The universe is created out of these 24 elements, out of which mind is the reflection of Iswara. The Jivatma gets mixed up with this mind and thus fall into tendencies and karma. Vice and Virtue as well as bindings of Karma generates from there tendencies. That leads Jivatma falls into the Cycles of birth and death. This continues till the God destroys the entire universe. During the time of 'Praloya', the complete obliteration of the cosmos, the physical body of the Jivatma is destroyed and the ether body remains inert with the God (*HiranyaGarbha*). To get rid of the cycle of birth and death, Sankarcharya prescribed *Nirvana* through knowledge of Brahma. Sridhar Swami preached achieving knowledge through Bhakti and through knowledge to get *Nirvana*. On the other hand, the Vaishnava Gurus practiced to establish Supremacy of Bhakti over *Gyan Yoga* and *Karma Kanda* of Vedas. For this, Srimanta Sankardeva propagated **nine forms of Bhakti** which are Shraavan, Kirttana, Smarana, Padasevan, Archan, Bandan, Dashya, Sakhitva, and Atma Nivedana. Out of these nine forms, importance is given to Shraavan and Kirttana and hence the religion of Sankardeva is known as Naam Dharma. Jivatma is sleeping is *Maya*. When Jivatma wakes up there will be no separate identity. Therefore, worshiping other Gods except 'Narayana' amounts to worship of Non-Living things. Srimanta Sankardeva urged for worship of Lord Sri Krishna with Shraavan and Kirttana. However, keeping the traits of Avatarabad, Ram is also included in the Naam Dharma – which is Ram – Krishna.

Sankardeva considered rare combination of four aspects as the basis for Nirvana – Dark Age (Kali Yuga), the human life, the name of God and birth in Bharatvarsa.

Although, the revolutionary change of Neo-Vaishnavism was felt all over the country during 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century, Neo-Vaishnavism of Sankardeva was not influenced by such discourses in other parts of the country. The impetus of a new religion came from prevailing inequality and exploitation of masses in the name of Tantric Practices and other religion of 15<sup>th</sup> century Assam. This part of the country never had the perils of Mohammedan invasions and thus, the Bhakti movement in Assam is not as a result of resistance to Islamisation.

The non existence of caste system is a notable feature in Bhakti movement of Sankardeva. In appointment of functionaries in Sattras, caste is not an issue. The

Naamacharya can be from any caste. Similarly, the Deuri (Person who distributes Prasad offerings), artists in Ankiya Naat, Gayan- Bayan are selected on the basis of religious attainment and the aptitude of the person concerned rather than his caste background.

Exaltation of 'Bhakti' is the main theme with Lord Sri Krishna is the Supreme Being of adoration. There is no place for *karma Kanda* (Vedic Rituals like Homa, Yoga) for common followers - who should engage only in Shraavan and Kirttana of Hari Naam. However, for those Vaishnavite who are undeviatingly attached to Sri Krishna (with 14 *Prasanga Naam*), there is no prescription. For real Bhakta, even the salvation (Nirvana) is not the goal. A real Bhakta wants to be engaged in Bhakti keeping his individual identity.

Worship of other Gods and Goddesses even consuming the offerings to them are sternly forbidden. The Bhakta are supposed to take only those items that can be offered to God.

Idol worship is not prescribed by Srimanta Sankardeva. The idol of Jagannatha in Dhuwahat was put up only as decoy to the hostile priests. Later on when Sankardeva initiated Damodardeva, the placing of idol of Lord Sri Krishna started in some Sattras. The disciples of Sankardeva started placing idols for various other reasons. Probably, it was not the purpose of Sankardeva to preach that idols should be eliminated. There is no place for such extreme views in the Bhakti preaching of Sankardeva. For him Bhakti and Bhakta (the devotees) is the supreme for Satsangh. However, if someone is enlightened to the level of *Nirguna* Bhakti, for him existence of idol or not is immaterial. Idol in this case is energized 'Chaitanya' and the Bhakta is also at the level of 'Chaitanya'. If someone is not at the level of 'Chaitanya', he is not supposed to practice idol worship. Because, for him it becomes an unnecessary complicated ritual having no effective impact and maybe even a distraction in his spiritual pursuit that may result due to unavoidable show off to other Bhakta. Thus, a Bhakta has to be careful before practicing idol worship of even Lord Sri Krishna, there is definitely no scope for worshipping idols of other Gods or Goddesses.

Vaishnavism in Northern India mainly follows the worship of Radha-Krishna and Ram-Sita. Sankardeva did not create the illusion of Radha or Sita and worshiped only the Parama Purusha. The *dhyana* (Meditation) image is only that of Lord Krishna. Instead of love between Radha and Krishna, Sankardeva emphasized on servitude and childlike clean emotions so that the chance of going astray is minimal and the image of Param Purusha is easier to comprehend. On this issue, Dr. Sunit Kumar Chatterji remarked that *“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 Sankardeva”* (Dr. S.K. Chatterjee, *The place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*. P 70).

Thus, by avoiding the argumentative ways of philosophy and complexities of Vedic rituals, Sankardeva preached the simple ways of spiritual life based on Naam dharma and popularized the way through literary and cultural Manifestations.

### **Foot Note.**

1. The *Badrinath* area is referred to as *Badari* or *Badarikaashram* ( ) in Hindu scriptures. It is a place sacred to [Vishnu](#), particularly in Vishnu's dual form of [Nara-Narayana](#). Thus, in the [Mahabharata](#), Krishna, addressing Arjuna, says, "Thou wast Nara in a former body, and, with Narayana for thy companion, didst perform dreadful austerity at Badari for many myriads of years. Badrinath has an average elevation of 3,100 metres (10,170 feet). It is in the Garhwal [Himalayas](#), on the banks of the [Alaknanda River](#). Badrinath was re-established as a major pilgrimage site by [Adi Shankara](#) in the ninth century.
2. **Brajavali** (Not [Brajabuli](#)) was a literary language used by [Sankardev](#) (1449–1568) for some of his compositions ([Borgeets](#) and [Ankia Naats](#)) in the context of his Vaishnavite religion, [Ekasarana Dharma](#), in [Assam](#). Though similar languages were used in the Vaishnavite contexts in [Odisha](#) and [Bengal](#) too, the

one used in Assam was different, as it was based on [Maithili](#) (and not [Brajbhāsa](#)), to which [Assamese](#) and a sprinkling of Western Hindi was added.<sup>[1]</sup> In general, the vocables and idiomatic expressions of Brajavali were local (Assamese), while the inflectional forms were Maithili,<sup>[2]</sup> easily understood by the people of Assam but which carried the flavor of [Brajbhāsa](#), the language of choice of the [Bhakti](#) poets. The Brajabuli idiom developed in Orissa and Bengal also. But as Dr Sukumar Sen has pointed out "Assamese Brajabuli seems to have developed through direct connection with Mithila" (A History of Brajabuli Literature, Calcutta, 1931 p1). This artificial dialect had Maithili as its basis to which Assamese and a sprinkling of Western Hindi was added.' ([Neog 1980](#), p. 257f) (1980). Dr. Maheswar Neog "Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam". Delhi: Motilal Banarasi Das.

### **3. 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 17<sup>th</sup> Century in various Sattras and are a part of Sattras 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 Ramcharan 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 'Bardowa Guru Carit' published in 'Banhi' of Lakhsminath Bezbarua and written by Puvaram Mahanta of Khotora Sattras, Mongoldoi which was later on compiled by Dr. Maheswar Neog.

There are other versions of Carit Puthi which are published, 'Sattras Samprada' of Govinda Das & 'Sat Sampradaya 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 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> 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.*

This article is compiled by Mr. Hemanta Bijoy Mahanta, Secretary, Asom Sattra Mahasabha New Delhi Chapter for this website on 10.6.2015 with the help of following references.

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