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Goodwill Message

I am delighted to know that Mahāpuruṣajyoti, the annual research journal of Śrīmanata Śāṅkaradeva Saṅgha is ready for publication. The publication has been especially appreciated by the intelligentsia of Assam for its unique contribution to the discourse on Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanata Śāṅkaradeva. Mahāpuruṣajyoti, published once in a year, has been able to offer new directions in the field of scholarship on Mahāpuruṣa Śāṅkaradeva. Mahāpuruṣajyoti is peerless in terms of both the importance and seriousness of the subject matter. Mahāpuruṣajyoti has played a seminal and mention-worthy role in foregrounding the deep theoretical insights of Mahāpuruṣa Śāṅkaradeva's religion and root philosophy before the readers of Assam. Further, the journal has been able to build a critical discourse and conducive atmosphere for research on the immense oeuvre and panoramic vision of the stalwarts of Mahāpuruṣīya theology, which is an especially noteworthy contribution. It is necessary to mention that Mahāpuruṣajyoti has provided an invaluable repository of resource to enthusiasts of Śāṅkaradeva scholarship and research. I am convinced that the present volume shall be able to uphold past glory and create future prospects of ethical values. My best wishes are extended to the esteemed Editor and the writers of this volume.

(Kamalākanta Gogoi)

Padādhikār

Śrīmanata Śāṅkaradeva Saṅgha



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Publisher's Note...

As one of the largest religious, socio-cultural and literary organizations, Śrīmanta Śankaradeva Saṅgha is established with the aim of publicizing and upholding the literature, culture, religion and the high ideals of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śankaradeva worldwide in pure form. The prime objective of the Saṅgha is to promulgate the universal philosophy and the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śankaradeva after analyzing its main essence as well as to facilitate spiritual, social development orienting deeds of human society. In order to materialize the objective, the Saṅgha is always committed to unify human societies across nations, communities and castes propagating the religious and humanitarian ideals of Mahāpuruṣa Śankaradeva and by facilitating the means for devout preservation and proliferation of the Mahāpuruṣiṃyā culture, Śankarī dance-song, art and culture fostered by the Mahāpuruṣa.

In doing so, the Saṅgha always has devotedly concerned with the effort to create a scholarly platform for Śankaradeva Studies across the nation and the world for better understanding and intellectual investigation of the noble philosophy and literature of Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śankaradeva. The MAHĀPURUṢAJYOTI, being a research journal published by the Saṅgha fulfills that urgent need facilitating a podium for scholarly discussion and, in turn, intellectual investigation of the philosophy and literature of Mahāpuruṣa Śankaradeva are incorporating researchers and academicians across the nation. The present issue of the journal is published with various articles on the philosophy, high ideals and various genres of Śankarī literature, which, as I believe will enable new perspectives and ideas for understanding the religious theory and the socio-cultural philosophes of Mahāpuruṣa Śankaradēva. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude and wishes to Shri Narendra Mahela, Editor, MAHĀPURUṢAJYOTI along with the members of the editorial board for editing the current issue of the journal in a scholarly manner.

On this auspicious occasion of the celebration of the 92nd Annual Conference of Śrīmanta Śankaradeva Saṅgha held at Jonai, Assam, the volume is presented to the esteemed readers, especially to the English knowing ones. We hope that all will warmly receive the volume! With cordial regards-

Devotedly-

(Babul Bora)

Chief Secretary

Śrīmanta Śankaradeva Saṅgha

FROM THE DESK OF THE SECRETARY

SĀHITYA ŚĀKHĀ SAMITI

MAHĀPURUṢAJYOTI is a scholarly journal published by *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha* with a noble vision of creating an intellectual platform for scholarly study of Śaṅkaradeva's ideals, literature, culture and philosophy in a global podium. The journal, for the organization, is an erudite means to investigate new insights in the stated areas with novel theoretical paradigm. Right from the time of its publication, the journal has successfully played its role in the arena of new knowledge production in Śaṅkaradeva studies. Now the journal has entered into the academic world and has effectively caught attention of the academicians and researchers in its thrust areas.

The present issue of the journal is published with selected research articles written by promising scholars on multidisciplinary areas of Śaṅkaradeva studies. From the desk of the Secretary, Sāhitya Śākhā Samiti, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the editor Shri Narendra Mahela and the members of the editorial board for their dedicated service towards publication of the journal.

On this auspicious occasion of the celebration of the 92nd *Annual Conference of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha* held at Jonai, Assam, the present volume is presented to the esteemed readers, especially to the English knowing ones. We hope that all will warmly receive the volume. With cordial regards-

Dr. Manash Pratim Borah

Secretary

Sāhitya Śākhā Samiti

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradēva Saṅgha

EDITORIAL

In our present day world, though it is generally claimed that with the help of wisdom derived from the trials and vicissitudes and theorised scientific reality, human being is arriving at the peak of civilization, but yet unevenness is becoming a common scenario in the greater human society. Through the competition of grabbing earthly pleasure and luxury, a smaller part of the society is trying to enter into the palace of imagination, because of which a greater part is in the way to lose fundamental rights. Larger part of the society is suffering from the apprehension of danger of losing their political, social, economic and cultural existence. The consequence is that enmity, malice, hatred, concealed animosity, disparagement and unfriendliness amongst the people of the society are increasing day by day. Thinking, pertaining to the spirit or soul and peace, is lessening. As such in the present day context a system of scientific religious belief made in combination of religion and science is becoming a must to eradicate the inequality and to develop the physical, mental and spiritual relative positions of the common people. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Śaṅgha was established in 1930 A.D. with such aims and objectives by many noble people of the state.

In the midst of the fifteenth century AD, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva appeared in Assam, and throughout his whole life he tried to confer knowledge pertaining to religion amongst the common people which could lead people to the path of liberation from the bondage of the illusive, worldly pleasure and luxury. Following the principle of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and the *Gītā*, he along with his favourite disciple Mādhavadeva and others, propagated *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma* as the means of liberation from the illusive world. Through the propagation of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and his devotees could bring renaissance in Assam and thereby formed a greater society having aesthetic feelings.

During the long ninety two years of its existence, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Śaṅgha, a socio-religio-cultural-democratic

organization which was established with the aims to disseminate and preserve the ideology, religious belief, literature, culture etc of Śaṅkaradeva, has been implementing different plans and programmes for human welfare as well as to establish the ideology of Śaṅkaradeva all over India and elsewhere. Keeping in view the aims and objectives, the Saṅgha, along with other plans and programmes, has been taking a task of large number of publications including monthly papers, books and journals, translated versions of Śaṅkaradeva's original works into different languages. *Mahāpuruṣajyoti*, an annual research oriented journal, is also one of the publications for the propagation of the ideologies of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva.

I take immense pleasure to bring out this XXIInd issue of the journal in the 92nd Annual Session of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha to be held at Paramānanda Ātā Samnvoi Kṣetra, Seren Pathār, Cimen Capari of the District of Jonai.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to all the scholars who have contributed with their papers. I extend my gratitude to the respected members of the Sāhitya Śākhā Samiti of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha and the members of the editorial board for their valued cooperation. I especially extend my sincere thanks to Shri Mrinal Kumar Baruah and Dr. Manash Pratim Borah, president and secretary respectively of the 'Sāhitya Śākhā Samiti of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha' for their valuable suggestions which I got at the time of necessities. I offer my thanks to Shri Debajit Bora, the proprietor of Jeet Print-soft, Dibrugarh, and the employees who have helped to bring out the journal in time.

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MAHĀPURUṢAJYOTI

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Disclaimer: *The opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors concerned, not of the editor or the Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Saṅgha in general.*

THE THEATRE OF ŚRĪMANTA ŚAṄKARADEVA

Dr. Pona Mahanta

The history of regular Assamese drama and theatre began with Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568 AD). He wrote and produced plays nearly five centuries ago when classical Sanskrit drama was at low ebb and when Shakespeare was not even born. It is to be noted that except *Bhakti-ratnākara*, written in Sanskrit, the other works in the Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva cannon were intended for all sections of the people, including the lowest of the low. In the prevailing social hierarchy, the vast majority of people were unlettered. This is why Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva laid emphasis on *Śravaṇa and Kīrtana*, that is, listening to the names and praise of the Supreme God being chanted again and again, two activities which can be performed even without the slightest acquaintance with the alphabets of the language in which they were composed. Drama being a visual art had an added advantage as what was there said and done can not only be heard but also seen with eyes. It can be easily imagined how much appealing it is if something visualized in the mind can be seen, supposedly in the real, in actual form through its presentation on stage. That is why Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, whose audience consisted primarily of the unlettered laity, gave importance to writing plays on popular subjects and producing them in a way which he thought, and rightly so, the people would like.

It is a well known fact that like any other part of the world having human habitation, India including this small stretch now called Assam, also abounded in various forms of folk dramatic activities and dances, some of which are still being performed with gusto by

the people. Some such popular institutions of dance, drama and music which have been there in Kām̄rūpa-Assam from times beyond the reach of history are *putalā nāc* (puppet dance), *ojāpāli*, *kuṣān gān*, *bhāri gān*, *deodhani*, *mahkhedā utsav* (ritual driving away of mosquitoes), *garakhīā pūjā* (cowherd worship), *devadāsī dance*, to name only a few out of a multitude. These folk forms of entertainment must have been very dear to the people before and during Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's time. Most of them were cultivators, petty workers and artisans who had no other means of relaxation and refreshment after a day's hard toil. The classical Sanskrit dramas which were beyond the reach of the common man had already played themselves out and what was left of them were nearly forgotten. It was Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva who, in the course of his mission to reorient Assam's social-cultural life, introduced in this far-flung part of Bharata a regular well written drama accompanied by an appropriately thought out and organized stage and auditorium.

Altogether six plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva are now available. These are *Patnī-prasāda*, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, *Kālīya-damana*, *Keli-gopāla*, *Pārijāta-haraṇa* and *Rāma-vijaya*. It is however a matter of interest and curiosity that these full fledged plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva were preceded by a dramatic performance called *Cihna-yātrā* of which no manuscript has been found. In the absence of a text, it is believed that *Cihna-yātrā*, as the name suggests, was a theatrical presentation in signs of painting of the seven *Vaikunṭhas* (abode of lord Viṣṇu) with accompaniment of song, music and dance. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva himself painted the scenes using colours prepared from indigenous materials, played upon drum or *khol*, acted out the role of the *Sūtradhāra* and also of one of the Viṣṇu. It is narrated in the *Kathā Gurucarit*, a prose biography of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, that this dramatic presentation, without elaborate dialogue, put the spectators in such astonishment that everybody looked upon Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva as a God. Even the Brahmins, having seen his divine powers, began to take initiation from him.

It is to be noted that the stage properties employed for this dramatic show were few and simple which included a length of cloth used as a curtain at the time of entrance of the dramatic figures and a canopy (*candratāpa*) hung over the open stage. The precedence given to song, music and dance point to the fact that the first dramatic presentation of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was closer in many respects to some folk dramatic and dance institutions, already mentioned, than to classical Sanskrit drama.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva must have been convinced that such a performance could be most effectively used as a means of propagating the message of *Bhakti* and the principles of his *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* (i.e. complete submission to one supreme being through repeatedly pronouncing His name) among the diverse people of Kāmṛūpa-Assam of his time who were caught in a labyrinth of cults and faiths over-laden with rituals. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's next step was naturally to write plays with characters like Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, gods and goddesses, human beings and demons and *asuras* would not only just appear but also, talk elaborately and banter like they do in real life. While choosing the themes for his plays, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva appears to have had two main considerations—the dramatic qualities of the theme in question and its potentialities for driving home to the audience the intended message. This would ensure to the audience the expected entertainment while conveying to them at the same time the principles of complete submission to Kṛṣṇa, the God incarnate in human form. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva believed that this would pave the way to achieving unity and brotherhood among the people, then divided in diverse groups and sects, as all of them would believe in and worship on one and only one God, the creator and cause of all living beings.

Cihna-yātrā experience undoubtedly convinced Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva that this could be done most effectively by dramatizing episodes from the life of Kṛṣṇa or Rāma like it was done in medieval Europe by the church fathers who dramatized selected episodes from

the Bible, from the life of Jesus Christ and from those of some of the saints. Consequently, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva came out with the plays, already mentioned, five of which had for their subject matter Kṛṣṇa stories from the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, while the remaining one, *Rāma-vijaya*, is based on the episodes of *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Two terms are very closely associated with the theatres of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva: *aṅkīyā-nāṭa* and *bhāonā*. The playwright himself, however, has nowhere called his plays *aṅkīyā*; the term he uses to denote these are *yātrā*, *nāṭa* and *nāṭaka*. The word *aṅkīyā* to refer to the plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was used by his biographers probably because these plays had just one *aṅka* or act or no *aṅka* at all also because they were supposed to have some similarities with the Sanskrit *utsṛstikaṅka*, a kind of one-act play. The original word might have been *aṅka* which, in course of time, became *aṅkīyā* with the Assamese suffix *-īyā* being tagged to it. It is to be noted that only the plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and those of his chief disciple and successor Mādhavadeva are called *aṅkīyā* although the latter's small plays go by a name of their own, *jhumurā*. Similarly, the term *bhāonā*, derived from *aṅkīyā bhāo* meaning imitation or feigning, is used only to indicate the performance of an *aṅkīyā* play or a play written in imitation of it. The staging of a modern play is not *bhāonā*.

Of the six available plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, *Patnī-prasāda* appears to be the first of chronological order of composition as it bears unmistakable traces of early writing and execution. It is a small play based on a story of the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (chapter 23) written with an avowed purpose—that of demonstrating the futility of elaborate rituals and sacrifices to gods and goddesses and the superiority of *bhakti* to Lord Kṛṣṇa and supreme being in anthropomorphic form. This was undoubtedly an experimental play written after the unexpected success of the painted dramatic performance of *Cihna-yātrā*, with dialogue, though minimal, which Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva felt encouraged to compose after it had been found that even a play without elaborate dialogue

had immense popular appeal. The organization, technique and style of the play unmistakably show that it had been written before the playwright fully developed his dramatic methods. The dialogue is at nascent stage as most of it except the words spoken by Kṛṣṇa and a line or two uttered by Brahmin is spoken collectively or in a group. Even a character of very high status like Balorāma who is constantly in company with Kṛṣṇa is not given any word to speak. All these show that *Patnī-prasāda* is a play with an ‘immature’ dramatic technique. However, the play is not entirely without dramatic qualities. There are few dramatic and even theatrical scenes like the one where Brahmin husbands try in vain to stop their wives from going to visit Kṛṣṇa or another which show a married woman committing suicide because of not being able to see the lord. Such scenes had undoubtedly popular appeal which in turn stood the playwright in good and stead in instilling in the mind of the audience the ultimate message of *bhakti*.

The gradual development of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva’s dramatic technique and style is noticeable in the two other smaller plays, *Keli-gopāla* and *Kālīya-damana* where the central focus is on the youthful Kṛṣṇa. In the former we see the sports and antics of the hero with nearly unscrupulous presentation of the erotic sentiment and sensuality which are given full expression in the songs as well as the prose passages spoken by the *Sūtradhāra*. Such scenes would no doubt appeal to most sections of the audience, but Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was careful to put a stop where he knew he should. So the audience will hear the warnings that the milk-maids have gone too far taking Kṛṣṇa for granted who soon crushes their growing sense of pride and arrogance and teaches them a lesson for their excesses. The maids are castigated, subdued and made to realise that the young Kṛṣṇa they are sporting with is not an ordinary human but the almighty incarnate, and then they start paying obeisance or *bhakti* to him. Although the playwright has not curtailed many details of the story due to the constraints of drama, he has taken care to include the demon *Śaṅkha-cūḍa* episode for the sake of the theatrical effects. The demon who is trying to abduct some of the maids engages in fights

with Kṛṣṇa who first chases him away and ultimately kills him. The other play, *Kālīya-damana*, has such dramatic or melodramatic scenes in plenty. Kṛṣṇa's fight with the great serpent dancing on its hoods; the crying and the sense of awe vented by the *Gopīs* thinking that their beloved would be killed; the lamentation of Kālīya's wives and their prayerful appeals to Kṛṣṇa not to kill their husband; the horrible fire in the forest which Kṛṣṇa gulps to the astonishment of the onlookers - all these and many others undoubtedly add to the play's popular appeal. But the playwright never forgets to deliver the ultimate message. After having shown the toils and adventures of Kṛṣṇa everybody is made to realize that he is not an ordinary mortal but the Supreme Being in anthropomorphic form who is here presented as a symbol of love, equality and brotherhood.

A full-fledged drama, as is well known, must have certain features the chief among them being plot, character and dialogue. The plot or the combination of the episodes has to be an organised whole with a clear-cut beginning, middle and an end. In this respect the plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, particularly the major ones, *Pārijāta-haraṇa*, *Rukminī-haraṇa* and *Rāma-vijaya* are almost like modern drama having definable plots, character and dialogue. It is seen that while choosing the themes for his plays from the numerous stories of the two epics and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva took into consideration the inherent dramatic qualities and appeal of an episode—a prime concern with any serious playwright who wants to amuse and teach at the same time. A close look at the plots of these plays shows that while Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's prime consideration was to impress on the audience the supremacy of lord Kṛṣṇa and to evoke in them a sense of complete submission to him, the playwright particularly saw to it that all this was done in a dramatically appealing way. This is evident in the choice of the stories in the repeated use of songs and orchestral music, in the presentation of the scenes of battle, of love, abduction and elopement, of wedding rituals, of erotic dances, extremely amusing scenes like a saintly priest behaving most unmannerly at the sight of a bridal beauty, erotica in descriptive verses and numerous other theatrical and melodramatic devices.

Briefly speaking so much of freedom is taken in the presentation and graphic description of these scenes and many other pictorial details that these would all be considered taboo in classical drama. This was possible only because Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva acted much outside the confines of classical Sanskrit drama and dramaturgy, but in close proximity with folk dance and dramatic institutions in order to reach to a large range of people without, however, compromising on the principle of dignity and decorum.

According to Indian dramaturgy, the principal objective of a play is the creation of *rasa*, of which nine are noted, which are also believed to be the source of nine sentiments. Although nearly all the sentiments or emotions like *śṛṅgāra*, *vīra*, *hāsyā*, *karuṇā* are present in Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's plays, all these, however, are intended to instil in the audience the sentiment of *bhakti* which pervades not only the plays but all other works of the great master. To give an example, this is how the playwright describes the plight of the lustful kings and princes who suffer because being drowned in carnal desires they are completely bereft of the sentiment of *bhakti*.

The *Sūtradhāra* says:

*Being maddened with lust, the kings give expression to
their carnal desires through various erotic gesture.*

*On seeing this the friends of Rukmiṇī push away some of them,
while they kick some others with their heels and upbraid them.*

*Even then the kings continue to be lascivious
persisting in their infatuation and show of unseemly gesture.*

And at the end of the narration of this erotic scene, the *Sūtradhāra* comments:

*O you members of the audience, look at the pitiable condition of
those who are lustful and devoid of bhakti (devotion) to
Hari(Kṛṣṇa).*

In this way, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, the dramatist, first entertains the audience with thrilling drama and then brings home to them the

professed message –that of complete submission to the almighty represented through Kṛṣṇa.

Three other features that stand out strikingly in the theatre of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva are the preponderance of songs and music, predominance of *Sūtradhāra* and the distinctiveness of the language. The songs and lyrical verses are sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments and are intended, through giving entertainment to the audience, to bring home to them the message inculcated in the plays. Many incidents and situations are suggested through descriptive verses, which are sung to particular tunes, instead of being represented through characters and actions. Even the prose is poetic and it is sung rather than spoken like ordinary speech. A play also contains numbers of Sanskrit verses which themselves may be said to form the skeleton of the plot.

Secondly, the *Sūtradhāra* in the theatre of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, though apparently influenced by the *Sūtradhāra* in Sanskrit drama, is different in many respects from the latter. Unlike in a Sanskrit classical play, the *Sūtradhāra* in an Assamese *aṅkīyā-nāṭa* remains on the stage all through the performance. He sings the *bhaṭimā* or the introductory verses, explains the subject matter of the play and announces the entrance and exit of the principal characters. He also gives the stage directions, suggests incidents and situations which cannot be shown on stage and sings the benedictory verses known as *mukti-maṅgal bhaṭimā*. Thus the *Sūtradhāra* is the central figure in the Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva theatre who is singer, actor and stage director all rolled into one. The expression, *iti sūtra niskrāta*, found in some printed versions of the plays might be a later addition when, in course of time, for various reasons it was becoming practically impossible for the same person to remain on stage acting at a stretch for not less than a couple of hours. Thirdly, the language used in the *aṅkīyā* plays is not the Assamese as it was spoken in those days, but a mixture of Assamese, Maithili and Hindi. This language is known as *Brajāvalī* or *Brajabulī* as it is reminiscent of *Braja*, the region sanctified by the presence of Kṛṣṇa. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva

used this language because this was considered well-suited to glorify the activities of Kṛṣṇa on the stage before the common folk. When Sanskrit would be Greek to them if it were adopted, ordinary day-to-day Assamese would be too mundane for the purpose. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva also must have taken into consideration the fact that such a language would be intelligible not only to the common people of Assam but also to those hailing from other parts of Eastern India.

It has been seen that the theatre of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, like the European drama of the later middle ages, was distinctly a popular institution, meant for the people, performed by the people and enjoyed by the people. In spite of the features that characterize a medieval drama, the plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva reveal certain characters that would make a modern drama. In the first place, we may take the question of conflict which is said to form a cardinal part of drama. "All drama", remarks Allardyce Nicoll, "ultimately arises out of conflict. In tragedy, there is ever a clash between force physical or both. In comedy, there is ever a conflict between personalities, between the sexes or between an individual and society." The conflict may be outer or inner, the latter being chiefly a characteristic of modern drama, particularly of tragic nature.

The plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva are of the nature of comedies as they all have happy endings, and much of the conflict in the plays is of the outer type. Yet one cannot miss inner conflicts in plays like *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* where the conflict in the heroine's mind is subtly brought out. This play is noted for its intense moments as well as clash of personalities and their aims. Kṛṣṇa in this play is very much a human being pining for the heroine as much as she pines for him. Secondly, the characterization in some of the plays may be said to be in advance of the time as some of the characters are so distinctly drawn that they very much look like characters of good modern play. Thirdly, it is noteworthy how Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva creates humour and fun for the satisfaction of the audience without bringing in clownish characters or cheap comic stuff in keeping with the dignified nature of plays. Instances of this are found, among others,

in the unnatural behaviour of even divine and saintly figures like Brahmā and Visvāmitra, acting as wedding priests, when they fell down almost unconscious being charmed by the extraordinary beauty of the brides, *Rukmiṇī* and *Sītā*, in *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* and *Rāma-vijaya*, respectively. The brevity and deftness is noteworthy and also they do not smack of cheap comic jingle.

In view of the times during which Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva planned and developed his theatre, one would not be justified to expect a realistic picture of society or social criticism or subtle study of character like in modern theatre. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's aim was not to hold the mirror up to the society by holding its follies and foibles to ridicule. He, on the other hand, aimed at enlightening the unlettered folk in the teaching of Vaiṣṇavism through the medium of drama which could be profitably used to amuse and to teach at the same time.

Social reform was, however, intended not through satirical portraiture or description but through showing the greatness of that one supreme before whose eyes all men and women were equal. The playwright occasionally hinted, directly or indirectly, at social evils like polygamy as we see in *Pārijāta-haraṇa* where Kṛṣṇa has to try hard to appease the jealous Satyabhāmā, one of his wives, by fetching the *Pārijāta* flower from the garden of Indra. This *Pārijāta* episode also leads to the amusing quarrels between Sachi and Satyabhāmā which comes down to such a low level that it appears to be more than hair-splitting between two rustic shrews. It is difficult to understand why Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva chose to melodramatise the quarrel between these two princely female characters unless it was that he wanted to portray a realistic enough picture of the quarrelsome women of the medieval time and also to provide an extra dose of entertainment to the viewers who were no doubt amused by such boisterous theatricalities. Another interesting hint at social or familial problem is found in *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* where the wishes of Rukmiṇī's old father and king to give his daughter in marriage to Kṛṣṇa are thrown to the wind by his young and arrogant eldest son, Rukma,

who prefers his friend Śísupāl instead for the hand of his sister. The uncomplaining meekness with which the old king yields to the arrogance and haughtiness of his young son remains one of the universal helplessness of the older generation before the younger one. The portrayal of the characters of the lustful kings and princess in *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* and *Rāma-vijaya* is also full of satire and sarcasm through which the playwright expose the hollowness of those in whose hands the responsibilities of ruling and leading people are vested.

The popularity of the theatre of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva soon spread far and wide, in course of time it made its entry into the royal palaces also. Ahom kings and nobles found the plays a welcome means of entertainment and began to invite *Mahantas* from *Śaṅkarī Sattras* to perform plays in the royal places. For instance, it is mentioned in the *Tungkhungia Buraṅī* that at the invitation of king Kamaleswar Simha the *Mahantas* of Bareghar Satra presented the play *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* (1816 AD) and another *sattra* called *Namati Dihing Sattra* enacted a play titled *Akrura-gamana*. These are only some of the available records which, however, speak eloquently about *ankīyā* plays being presented in the royal courts and places from time to time.

The plays of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and their followers continued to be performed and enjoyed with great enthusiasm as the major source of entertainment and education till the middle of the nineteenth century when the socio-political life of the people came under great strains on account of a number of factors. The continued invasion by the Burmese, the devastations caused by the foreign looters and plunderers and subsequent loss of the country's long-cherished freedom caused havoc in all spheres of Assam's life and society. It is difficult to visualise the fate of art and culture and drama and theatre under such extremely hostile circumstances. With the changes in the political scenario, changes in the socio-cultural life of the people, however slow, became inevitable affecting, among other things, drama and theatre also.

But the theatre of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, despite situation unfavourable for the pursuit of art and literature arising from time to time, continued to be active, though not entirely unaffected, by the socio-political happenings, even in the nineteenth century when the gradual spread of English education and western thoughts and ideas began to work changes in practically all spheres of life and society. With English literature came the new drama and theatre which was based on Shakespeare from far of land, not our very own Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva as evidenced in the increasing cry for ‘theatre’ i.e. performance of romantic-sentimental-mythological plays on stage in imitation of the European model. But this craze for what came from beyond the seas could not altogether dampen the people’s love and reverence for the age-old *aṅkīyā-nāṭa* and *bhāonā* which continued to enjoy their quiet life in the countryside where the vast majority of the people lived. The present picture, however, is much happier as *bhāonā* is now performed, not only in the village, *thāns* and *sattras* but also in the urban centres on specific occasions, and even *bhāonā* competitions are held from time to time. In fact, in recent years there appears to be a distinct revival of interest in the theatre of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and thus two main streams of dramatic activities go on side by side—*bhāonā* of the earlier plays and performance of modern social realistic plays on proscenium stage and also through other experimental means. Although there have been certain peripheral changes in the plays in the former genre introduced by later imitators of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, like an increasing use of prose, introduction of characters like clowns and jesters, violence, sentimentalism and myriad other materials of popular comedy, the fundamental features like mythological subject-matter and the exhortation of the sentiment of *bhakti* persist as before.

The theatre of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva had another particular quality, that of its being able to establish a close rapport with the audience, a quality which is greatly sought-after by present-day playwrights, directors and other theatre artists. Plays are now being written and produced where elements and technique of *aṅkīyā-nāṭas* are effectively made use of and to which all sections of the audience

appear to respond positively. All this shows that the founder father of Assamese drama and theatre is still a living force whose presence is felt pervading not only drama and theatre but also most other spheres of Assam's socio-cultural life.

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ŚAṆKARADEVA'S AṆKIYĀ NĀṬA : TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Dr. Madan Sarma

(i) Śaṅkaradeva and Assamese Drama

The Vaiṣṇavite or Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement brought about religious reform and social transformation in medieval India. In the Northern part of the country the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement was led by Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568 AD), an outstanding poet, an erudite scholar, a social reformer and great humanist. He was ably supported by his most notable disciple Mādhavadeva (1489-1596), a great scholar and poet. They and their disciples spread the message of *bhakti* or devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa (the incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu) and suggested simple and uncomplicated rituals like the chanting of *Hari-nāma* as means of attaining salvation or spiritual bliss.

According to Maheswar Neog :

The Sankaradeva school of Vaiṣṇavism has a monotheistic doctrine as its central religious tenet. It enjoins the worship of one Supreme Deity, that is Viṣṇu, especially in the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, and interdicts its followers from the worship of any other god or goddess^[i].

Śaṅkaradeva's teachings of broad humanism, religious tolerance and democratic values have permeated the religious, social, cultural and literary life of Assam. His teachings, preaching and creative literary activities eventually led to cultural resurgence and ushered in an era of creativity and religious tolerance. Apart from translating and adapting Sanskrit texts into the language of the people and making them accessible (through reciting and singing), Śaṅkaradeva created new literary and artistic genres such as *bargūt* (great songs;

devotional, *rāga-based* songs), *aṅkīyā-nāṭa* (one-act play), and a dance form with a wide repertoire known as *satrīyā* dance (recognized since 2000 as a classical Indian dance genre). Unlike most of the Vaiṣṇava saints and *gurus* of the medieval period of Śaṅkaradeva displays remarkable creativity and ingenuity in the use of all possible types of media for spreading the message of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* (worship of one God by chanting the name of the Lord) in Assam: verses which could be recited and sung easily, devotional songs *bargīts*, dance and poetic drama known as *aṅkīyā-nāṭa*. He encouraged people of all castes and creeds to assemble in the *nāmghar* (village prayer halls cum community centres) for religious and social interaction and for staging the *aṅkīyā-nāṭa* or *bhāonā*.

Śaṅkaradeva's magnum opus *Kīrtana* displays his remarkable ability to express serious religious concepts and high philosophical thoughts in simple language. Lakshminath Bezbaroa who wrote extensively and incisively on Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva and played an important role in establishing the centrality of Śaṅkaradeva in Assamese social-cultural life asserts that Śaṅkaradeva's verses from *Kīrtana* are embedded in the consciousness of the ordinary Assamese. He says:

Those who in Assam wish to stay away from this (Śaṅkaradeva's *Kīrtana* and other literary creations) have no other option but to close their eyes and retire to the deep forest to live with the birds and deer; but even when they stay like that they would, perhaps, not be able to help listening to the singing of the sweet melodious verses from the *Kīrtana* by the woodcutters at some distance^[iii].

Śaṅkaradeva used drama as a powerful, means of spreading Vaiṣṇavism and orient people towards *bhakti* (devotion). The originator of drama in Assamese, Śaṅkaradeva, created one of the first plays in a regional Indian language with dramatic dialogue in prose. Śaṅkaradeva's innovation successfully blended religious philosophy with creative use of indigenous, folk dramatic forms, and selected conventions of Sanskrit drama^{[iii],[iv],[v]}.

(ii) Traditional Performing Arts and *Añkīyā Nāṭa*

Śaṅkaradeva might have been inspired by certain forms and genres of performing arts prevalent in Assam during his time^{[vi],[vii]} speaks of the philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva's creative use of indigenous performing art forms including folk dramatic forms while creating the Assamese drama.

It will be pertinent here to take a look at some of the most popular folk performing arts of Assam.

(a) *Putalā nāc* or puppet-show

Puppet-show is one of the earliest performing arts in different cultures. The references to puppet-show in the *Guru-Carit-Kathā*, the biography of Vaiṣṇava saints and *gurus* written in prose in seventeenth century, clearly show that puppetry was a popular art form in the fifteenth century. Usually two types of puppet-shows were prevalent. In the first type, puppets made of *kuhilā* (wood-cork) or some variety of soft wood are manipulated by the *sūtradhāra* (one who pulls the strings and controls the show) from behind a black screen with the help of strings attached to them. In the other type, shadows of puppets are projected on the screen in front. The troupe or *putalā nāc* includes singers and musicians. Popular stories from the epics, the *Purāṇas* and even folk tales are narrated with the help of dialogues and movements.

(b). *Ojā-pālī*

A troupe of *ojā-pālī* performers consists of *Ojā* (the master or expert) who is an expert vocalist and narrator, and five or six *pālīs* (assistants) who are competent singers. The chief among them is *dāinā* (meaning right) *pālī* who exchanges dialogues with the *Ojā*, often playfully contests some of the latter's interpretations and occasionally comments on contemporary events. At times he regales the audience with his playfulness and witty comments.

An *ojā-pālī performance* is marked by choral singing and rhythmic body movements. The *Ojā* narrates the story by singing and

using gestures and *mudrās*, some of which might have been derived from Tantric texts. He also moves about the arena with eye-catching rhythmic steps. As the *Ojā* sings a strain the *pālīs* take it up and repeat it. Their singing is accompanied by clapping a small cymbals and marking of time with careful foot movement. The *Ojā* puts on a light long coat, *dhoti* with the flowing ends tucked in front and a cotton wrapper placed round the waist with the ends hanging in front.

Usually an *ojā-pālī* performance takes place during the worship of the snake goddess Manasā and also during certain festivals. In course of time two distinct forms of *ojā-pālī* emerged: *Sukanānnī Ojā* and *Vyāhar/Vīyāhar Ojā* in lower Assam. The *Sukanānnī* (from the name of the poet Sukavi Narayandeva who composed *Padma-purāna*) *Ojā* mostly narrates the story of the birth of Manasā and the story of the merchant Cāndasadāgar, his son Lakhindar and daughter-in-law Beula.

The *Vyāhar/Vīyāhar Ojā* (from Vyasa the compiler of *Mahābhārata*) is connected with the Vaiṣṇava tradition. The *Vyāhar/Vīyāhar ojā* usually narrates the story of the epics.

(c). *Dhulīā Bhāorīyā or Dhulīā*

Dhulīā is another folk performing art which was very popular in lower Assam, especially in the district of Kāmṛūp. Here the performers are drummers who perform during popular festivals and in early times during weddings too. A *dhulīā* troupe may consist of twenty or more drummers who play on huge drums and clap cymbals. In a traditional performance the *dhulīās* usually begin by singing, accompanied by beating of drums and clapping of cymbals. Some members of the team perform acrobatics. Sometimes they stage short plays based on mythological stories. They also stage skits or satirical plays on contemporary social issues. Skits may not be based on any written text but may be result of impromptu innovation. The *dhulīās* and *bhāirās* (*bhāorīyās/actors*) often innovate to dramatic situations.

(d). *Khulīā Bhāorīyā*

Some practitioners trace the origin of the *Khulīā Bhāorīyā* to *Vīyāhar Ojā-pālī*^[viii]. The leader of the troupe is called *Oja/Ojha*. In this form of performing art small drums, *khols* and cymbals are used. The *Oja* conducts the performance and guides the other members including the main singer *bāyan*, the drummers or *khulīyās*, the cymbal players or *tālis* and the actors are *bhāorīyās*. The *khulīyās'* dramatic performance is based on the episodes from the two epics.

(e). *Kuṣān-gān and Bhārī-gān*

Kuṣān-gān and Bhārī-gān are two popular forms of folk drama prevailing in the Goalpara region in lower Assam. In both the themes of the folk plays are drawn from the two epics. A *Kuṣān-gān* troupe consists of a conductor or leader called *gīdāl* or *moula*, a *dovarī* who exchanges dialogues with the leader and the assistants, a number of musicians and a few dancing boys called *cheṅgrā* or *chokrā*. The musical instruments used by the troupe are *khol* (drum), cymbals and one-stringed instrumental *benā*.

The *Bhārī-gān* troupe is led by *mul* and his associates are called *pālīs/pāilās*. They too use such musical instruments as *khol* and cymbal. Music and dance are common features in these two arts forms.

Some of these indigenous folk dramatic forms may have contributed to the emergence of drama proper in Assamese. According to Kaliram Medhi “...the ultimate source of the Assamese drama, divested of the outward form, is in all probability the choral performance of the Assamese *ojā-pālī*”^[ix]. Medhi, however, points out that Śaṅkaradeva utilized the Sanskrit dramatic tradition too.^[x]

(iii) - *Aṅkīyā Nāṭa*

According to the narrator of *Guru-Carit-Kathā/Kathā-gurucarit* and Daityari Thakur’s biography of Śaṅkaradeva, Śaṅkaradeva wrote and staged *Cihna-yātrā*, a play, much before he began composing any of his full length plays or *nāṭas* presumably

without any dialogue but with *rāga*-based songs, instrumental music and dance. He even used painted scene showing seven *Vaikuṅṭhas* (heavens). The spectacular impact of *Cihna-yātrā* (as reported in *Guru-Carit-Kathā*) on the illiterate audience encouraged the saint-poet to write, eventually, six plays between 1518 and 1568. The plays are: *Kālīya-damana* (subjugation of the serpent Kālī by Lord *Kṛṣṇa*, 1518), *Patnī-prasāda* (favour of wives, 1521), *Keli gopāla* (*Kṛṣṇa*'s *Rāsa Līlā*, 1540), *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* (abduction of *Rukmiṇī*), *Pārijatā-haraṇa* (stealing of flower *Pārijāta*) and *Rāma-vijaya* (Conquest of *Rāma*).

The term *aṅkīyā nāṭa* refers to the Vaiṣṇava ritual plays written by Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and some of their successors. Śaṅkaradeva himself used the terms *nāṭaka*, *nāṭa*, *līlā* and *yātrā* to refer to the plays. The term *aṅka*, referring to an *aṅka* or *aṅkīyā nāṭa* was presumably used first by Śaṅkaradeva's biographer Daityari Thakur in the saint's biography, written six decades after the passing away of the great saint. Though Sanskrit texts mention *aṅka* as a form of *rupaka*, *aṅkīyā nāṭa* has little in common with Sanskrit *aṅka* as pointed out by a number of scholars including Bapchandra Mahanta^[xi]. However, according to E. Farley Richmond^[xii] *aṅkīyā nāṭa* is the next closest relative to the Sanskrit dramatic tradition after *Kutiyattam*. Scholars like B.K. Barua assert that for the dramatic techniques Śaṅkaradeva was indebted to the Sanskrit theory of drama, especially in the use of *nāṇḍī*, benedictory verses, *bhaṭimās* akin to prologue and epilogue. *Aṅkīyā nāṭa* do not subscribe to certain restrictions imposed by Sanskrit dramatic tradition on showing or enacting certain activities on stage.

Śaṅkaradeva takes liberty to draw features from popular folk performing arts to create highly original plays combining dialogues in prose, dances, songs, masks and Sanskrit verses. The language used in the plays is known as *Brajāvalī*, a literary language containing elements of old Assamese and certain features of some varieties of Prakrit and perhaps Maithili. The tone and texture is, however, unmistakably Assamese. Local proverbs and popular

sayings are creatively embedded in the text. Śaṅkaradeva's respect for folk tradition is evident in the creative use of well-known strain of a *biḥu* song in his play *Keli-gopāla*.^[xiii]

The song from *Keli-gopāla*:

*'The cock crows knowing that the night has ended
He is cursed in the name of their (cowherd women) sons
Today my enemy the night passed so quickly
So my Lord had to desert me.'*

Biḥu song :

*'O, low born cock
I'll kill you with a single blow
Why did you crow before the night was over?
See, my darling has deserted me.'*

However, the reverse might as well be true as lines from Śaṅkaradeva's verses are often adapted by folk singers/composers in their creations.

As one looks at the plays of Śaṅkaradeva as texts, one notices the following features :

1. *Nāṇḍī* : two *ślokas* (verses) in Sanskrit in praise of Lord Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu
2. Sometimes separate *Nāṇḍīgīt* in *Brajāvalī* in praise of Lord Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu /Hari
3. *Bhaṭimā*, often in the form of panegyric, prologue and epilogue.
4. *Sūtradhāra*, though the entry of the *Sūtradhāra* is not clearly indicated in the text. The *Sūtradhāra* of an *āṅkīyā nāṭa* has a much bigger role than that of a Sanskrit drama and is present throughout the performance. He advises/directs actions, advises the audience, leads and assists the singers, sings the *ślokas* and also the *mukti-maṅgal bhaṭimā* (benediction). He intervenes to break the illusion created by the acting, dance, music or spectacle and brings back the audience to reality, reminding them of the divine.

5. Though the *Sūtradhāra* announces the entry of the major actors on the stage the next does not indicate how exactly that entry takes place.

It is important to note that Śaṅkaradeva's plays contain, apparently, the earliest samples of dialogues in prose in any play written in a modern Indian language. Śaṅkaradeva's very first play *Kālīya-damana* (1518) has such exquisite dialogues in rhythmic prose as the following :

Serpent Kālī : O, supreme Lord Kṛṣṇa, please remove this great obstacle of worldly attachment, I humbly request you. O, Lord *Jagannātha*, as I move around I shall go on begging for alms, meditating on your feet and singing the glory of your name, please deliver me.

Kṛṣṇa says : O, serpent king Kālī, don't be scared. With my blessing you have been freed yourself from this world of illusion. Now leaving this lake Yamuna, go with your family to your former abode the island of Ramanaka...

Apart from such dialogues in prose, the play contains excellent lyrics to be sung by the actors themselves. In *Pārijāta-haraṇa* (stealing of the flower *Pārijāta*) Kṛṣṇa's beloved wife Satyabhāmā is heart-broken to hear that Kṛṣṇa had given the rare flower *Pārijāta* to her co-wife Rukmiṇī. She then sings a beautiful lamentation which is a song of *rāga Śrīgāndhār*, set in *jātītāl*:

O, Keṣava (Kṛṣṇa), now have I come to understand you

And know your attitude

O, Kṛṣṇa, unable to see through your deceit

I believed that there was no one as fortunate as I had been

Your style of love is now thoroughly exposed

And I have come to understand your motive

After such humiliation I can't hold onto my life anymore

I have given up hope for life...

(iv) - Performance of the *Nāṭa* or *Bhāonā*

The word *bhāonā* refers to the performance of the plays created by the saints Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. The term is also used for plays based on their models. According to Maheswar Neog the term *bhāonā* “is the same word as in the Sanskrit *bhāvanā* (from *bhābayati*) producing, displaying, manifesting, imagining etc.”^[xiv] Such plays are usually performed on auspicious occasions in a village prayer hall (*nāmghar*), an institution created by Śaṅkaradeva. Since the days of Śaṅkaradeva one-act plays asserting the supremacy of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa and showing his divine sport (*līlā*) have been performed on important religious and festive occasions in the oblong space in the middle of the *nāmghar* or a temporary pavilion with the spectators sitting on mats facing each other with the performers and the sacred text in the centre. “Usually, a single play is staged, and nowhere can one see twenty or more performances at the same time under one roof, except in the Barechahariya drama festival of Jamuguri.”^[xv]

In the *an̄kīyā nāṭa* or *bhāonā* time, distance, and change of scene are indicated by the *Sūtradhāra*’s songs and verse recitation or through the characters’ dialogue.

The text of an *an̄kīyā nāṭa* does not contain much elaborate instruction about many aspects of the actual performance. The text does not specifically mention all the preliminaries (*Pūrvā-raṅga*) before the actual staging of the play. Neither does it spell out the rituals associated with the entire process of selecting text, choosing the actors and musicians and conducting rehearsals. The characters of *bhāonā* enter and exit with stylized gaits set to the appropriate music and *bols* (drum syllables). Experts have identified nine types of dance movements performed in an *an̄kīyā bhāonā*.^[xvi] The explicit written instructions or directions about all these essential features, however, does not cause much problem to the performers as the entire process is guided by the firmly established tradition and as “*bhāonā* is considered an act of piety; it is not mere entertainment for the Vaiṣṇavas”^[xvii]

The *Pūrva-raṅga* (preliminaries) includes the carrying of *agni-gaḍ*, the arch of lights made up of two wooden poles or bamboo sticks joined to form an angle to the acting area, the stretching of a white curtain known as *ār-kāpor*, and the performance of *dhemāli*. Nine small, lighted torches on the *agni-gaḍ* symbolize the nine forms of devotion (*bhakti*). The group of musicians, the *gāyana-bāyanas* - drum and cymbal players and singers - takes their position behind the *ār-kāpor*. As the white curtain or *ār-kāpor* is removed, many devout Vaiṣṇava spectators chant the name of Lord Viṣṇu to signal the transition from the mundane into the spiritual world. The musicians, dressed in white *dhotis* (lower body wrap), shirts and turbans begin the preliminary instrumental music known as *dhemāli* with its elaborate rhythms. Apart from more common *Bar-dhemāli* (major or long preliminary) and *Saru-dhemāli* (minor or short preliminary) some other forms of *dhemāli* are also performed on certain occasions. This entire prelude may be quite elaborate and may last even for two or three hours on rare occasions.

Śaṅkaradeva's genius, his impeccable knowledge of music, rhythm and dance enabled him to incorporate aesthetically pleasing *rāga*-based music and elaborate dance movements in the plays. It is but natural that in the *satras* (monasteries) would go on adding to the musical and dance repertoire to make the performance of *bhāonā* more appealing.

According to Śaṅkaradeva the individual soul is clouded by God's *māyā*, illusion. By worshiping God a true devotee can overcome illusion to understand the ultimate reality. Śaṅkaradeva used drama as a means of "persuading the spectator as he sees into the mystery of the experience to conclude that he too is an actor in a universal play conceived out of God's *māyā*, just as the actors depicting the characters before him are the *māyā* of the playwright"^[xviii] However, as S.N. Sarma observes, the *bhāonā* performance has, of late, "ceased to function as the medium of religious propagation but the utility in giving aesthetic pleasure to villagers has not decreased"^[xix] Today many spectators see that

staging of a *bhāonā* as a social and cultural event more than as a purely religious one.

It is a matter of regret that in recent times there has been a tendency to cosmetically embellish/improve the *bhāonā* performance. One often observes attempts to make the performance spectacular by adding unimaginative lighting, gaudy make up, gorgeous costume, stage props and many features borrowed from the popular genre of roving theatre (*Bhrāmyamān theatre*). Such attempts to make the *bhāonā* more popular among the urban or urbanized middle classes and modern may eventually result in the dilution of the overall standard of the *an̄kīyā nāṭa*.

The practice of staging plays written in *Brajāvālī* should not be discontinued. Experts and performers may identify the most essential or distinctive features of a *bhāonā* and ensure that these are retained in any performance. Some changes such as shortening the duration of the *dhemāli* and avoiding repetitive dance movements may be welcome and effective. More emphasis may be placed on singing the songs (*nāṭar gīt*) correctly and effectively and making the dance movements and gaits of the characters economic and yet aesthetically pleasing.

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AN APOSTLE OF LOVE AND COMPASSION VISITED THIS PLANET WITH A PURPOSE A COMMUNITY OR NATION NEEDS MORE THAN AVERAGE MEN

HEMBHAI

True it is that we could assert our existence and right to privacy by our birth, by our life, by the exuberance of the prime of life.

True it is also that we could fashion a family by owning a speck of land by having a free glancing of the azure sky, or by momentary basking in the sunshine, the moon beam or by enjoying the ripples of the dancing gentle air with emotions— sometimes with sweat, sometimes with tears and blood.

After having all these above mentioned ingredients can we make bold to say with confidence that we could make a community, a nation of human beings?

With these ingredients the birds in the air, the animals in the jungle or the reptiles in the holes could have declared as a community, as a nation! But they could not and cannot.

No doubt, these ingredients are necessary for the sustenance of our brute—lives but these alone cannot claim to make a community or a nation. These are insufficient and impotent.

For this the human being needs a philosophy, an all compassing thought, an innovative idea, a sweet and bearing language with aims and objectives—quite different from the animal kingdom. For, the animals have only three propensities— food, fear and self-propagation (self preservation). Beyond these they die.

Language and culture gradually grew up for centuries silently but steadily with the exuberance of life, with the vocal and silent perseverance of the people living on both the banks of *Lauhitya* - that is *Luit* that is the mighty Brahmaputra, Assamese language, Assamese tradition and Assamese culture.

But many nations with rich and flourishing languages also got their places only in the pages of ancient histories losing their vibrant living identities in the comity of nations today. As an individual life needs a SOMMUM BONUM—the highest aim of life is to make it a living entity by giving a meaning in the struggle for life, so a firm determination of purpose is absolutely necessary for the life of a community, a nation. This purpose will be a LOGO, a DECLARATION, a SYMBOL, a MOTTO, an ENBLEM for solidarity, an organic growth of a nation. The nation which will forget this stark truth that shall be blown away by the pride of sophisticated weapons, uncontrollable burden of power and self—and self-complacency shall have to pay the price of the gradual extinction from the map of the world. There is no dearth of examples of this kind. History is replete with this sort of misfortunes.

A nation lives by the spiritual guidance of great saints and sages, seers and the scientists, religions and literatures, culture and civilizations. They drew out a road map of progress and prosperity, strength and sustainability to her.

The message of such great men is for all the people of the world but it comes through the language of his own—his mother tongue and people of his own community or countrymen.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan once said, “We need not cut down the tree to gather the fruit. In order to perfect human society, it is not necessary for us to destroy the family of the nation.”^[1]

The Assamese community (or nation) with her language, culture and civilization is thrice blessed for all the time to have a seer, saint, a revolutionary *Mahāpuruṣa* under whose leadership a continuous procession of multitudinous people has an organic growth for last five hundred and fifty years—identifying themselves as a strong

nation with all its rainbow specialities. For the last five hundred years it has not been necessitated to remind anybody as to who is that blessed *Mahāpuruṣa* with such divine distinctions. From a first speaking child to an old man in his death bed, from a tomfool to a hair-splitting scholar, from a man of sound health to a lunatic if you ask this question - Who is this *Mahāpuruṣa* –all will tell in equivocal words - ‘Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva’.

To every Assamese person Śaṅkaradeva is the dearest word, most revered sound, most trusted refuge, most vibrant source of inspiration, most enlightening symbol of purity, the last bead last breathe.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was born to a chieftain in the central Assam – Bardowa—Patekibari - in today’s Nagaon district of Assam in the fifteenth century (in 1449) and had his demise in the sixteenth century (in 1569). He lost his mother Satyasandhā only after a few days of his birth and lost his father Kusumbara at the early age of seven. Then the whole responsibility of nurturing him came upon the shoulder of his grandmother - Khersutī which she did very aptly. Up to the age of twelve he did not go to school for his primary studies. It hurt grandma Khersutī very much. After giving him a mild exhortation she took him to Mahendra Kandali’s toll (Village Primary Sanskrit Medium School) who assured her to look after the boy with special care. Young Śaṅkara set out for serious learning. Within the first three days he mastered the consonants and composed a poem of deep spiritual meaning without any vowel:

*karatala kamala kamaladala nayana
bhava dava dahana gahana vana śayana*

.....

This is a wonderful composition of four couplets with so deep meaning relevant and important for the people of all times and all climes.

This composition of a newcomer and young Śaṅkara influenced his *guru* Mahendra Kandali deeply. Another strange thing happened a few days back. The boy Śaṅkara was deeply engrossed in studying

the new-found books. He used to stay back in the school after the end of the daily classes when nobody remains. One day, Śaṅkara fell asleep on his mat. Guru Mahendra Kandali found that he by mistake left a valuable thing back in the school which he must collect immediately. So he ran back to school and saw a scene to his utter surprise that a big cobra was shadowing the sleeping Śaṅkara with its hood against the strong sun-shine coming to his face through the holes of the reed wall, i.e. the cobra was protecting Śaṅkara from scorching sun's heat. This was not an ordinary accidental happening and the *guru* thought that there was something supernatural and divine. So he went back aghast and next day he convened a meeting of the citizens of the area and narrated the story of what he saw yesterday with Śaṅkara and the serpent. The *guru* was of the belief that this boy was not an ordinary one but an extra-ordinary boy with divine endowments. The *guru* told the people in the open meeting that right from that day the boy would not be called a simple 'Śaṅkara' but 'Śaṅkaradeva'. Following the declaration of the *guru* Mahendra Kandali, people at large began to address him as 'Śaṅkaradeva' and revered him as a great man.

Within a very short time Śaṅkaradeva mastered over the Vedas, the *upaniṣadas* and other religious books. At the age of 19, he wrote the drama called *Hariścandra Upākhyāna*.

At the early age he swam across the mighty Brahmaputra when it was in the full spate and came back by swimming. In doing this he caught a river dolphin, showed it to the people and tenderly set the creature free.

Being a son of a chieftain, a king of a small kingdom, he could have been a king, a ruler, but he did not, because he had never aspired for power and pelf. Rather he decided to explore the vast realm of spirituality teemed with universal love for all creatures.

He chooses the pen then the sword to change the society. In the book *Sufism*, Sadia Dehlvi said - 'The ink of a scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr'. Śaṅkaradeva also thought in that way. The 'ink' is the love for God and the experience of the people - which

young Śaṅkaradeva tried to emulate. For that he found three means - self-study, going on in pilgrimage, having the companion of wise men - the sages, holy men. He started these after his first marriage and after the marriage of his of his daughter Manu. This company of pilgrim consisted of 120 devotees. It was a strenuous journey of long twelve years all over India—gathering knowledge and experience on one hand and begging and accepting the blessings of enlightened sages and wise men—on the other. His dearest devotee Mādhavadeva was also accompanied the great master at his second pilgrimage. Thus he and his group gathered experience from vast living Indian panorama and started his own. At the age of 119 he left for heavenly abode.

UNIQUE PHILOSOPHY OF ŚRĪMANTA ŚAṅKARADEVA

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy of life is quite different from those of others in many aspects. His philosophy is not of prattle but of practice, a living philosophy to live that life and walking upon the way. In the centre of the philosophy is the Homo—Homo sapiens. Man—the living Man, the spiritual Man, MAN of KṚṢṂA—the God-head. The Homo—Sapiens— man is the centre of all living things. Now the man is on the cross-road. He can elevate himself to the position of Nārāyaṇa, the God-head or he can degrade himself to the position of a monkey or lesser than that. This human being has the power of self determination. He can make as well as mar his own fate, he can choose his own destination and he can fashion his own fate.

In a pond if you throw a pebble to the centre of water it will first make a commotion of water where the pebble falls—gradually the commotion will make a circle of wave and then it will go round and round extending to its circumference till it reaches the bank. Likewise, in the case of human being also, it extends its existence to encompass all things, all animals, flora and fauna from the demy-gods down to the miniatures of the creation. According to Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, there is universal unity and no duality at all.

yata dekhā śunā save svapna sama /
hari maya dakhi dūra karā mati bhrama //

Whatever duality you see or hear, it is only because of the illusion of the mind—madness in understanding. This ignorance, duality and madness coming out of *māyā* can be dispelled by seeing Hari everywhere, in every creature.

Again he says in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* :

I am eminent in all creatures. So realizing the existence of Viṣṇu in everything and everybody you shred the artificial difference between men and men, male and female, the so-called highest *Brāhmaṇa* and out-caste *Cāṇḍāla*, the donor and the thief. The mean and the enlightened are equal and one and the same. Oh my beloved Uddhava, don't differentiate between these at all and he says -

Kukkua śṛgāla gardabharo ātmā rām /
jāniyā sabāko pari karibā praṇām //

In the core of the heart of a dog, an ass, a fox there sits only Rama. Knowing this, you prostrate to all of them in humility. That is, the manifesting world is also God and the soul of everything is also God and the Absolute Arbiter of Universe is also God. The centrally posited man is the decider as where to and how to proceed on. Thus Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva tries to spiritualize giving a non-dualistic idea of the whole system of universe and its maker, the God.

ĀCĀRYA ŚAṅKAR AND ŚRĪMANTA ŚAṅKARA

Among prominent twelve *ācāryas* who wrote their commentaries on the *Brahma-sūtra* trying to establish their own tenets, Ācārya Śaṅkara was the prominent (788-820 A.D.) among them. Following the tradition of *Varaha Sahodara Vṛtti* and following the *Māndukya Kārikā* of Gaudapāda Śaṅkarācārya started his commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra* by writing a book called *Śāriraka Mimāṃsā*. The *ācārya* was a great intellect with cutting argumentations. Propounding the theory of perfect MONISM or non-dualistic philosophy he declares the - '*brahma satya jagat mithyā, jīvo brahmaiva nāparam*' - i.e. *Brāhmaṇa* is the truth, the world is

nothing but illusions and the *jīva* (or individual soul) is not at all different from the *Brahmaṇa*—*Nirviśeṣadvaita*. The difference between *Brahmaṇa* and the world is seen because of *māyā*. There is nothing except the *Brahma*.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva also professes the non-dualistic monistic philosophy but with a difference.

Though Ācārya Śaṅkara professes the non-dualistic philosophy of *Nirviśeṣadvaita*, not recognizing any entity except *Brahmaṇa*, yet he introduced the *Pañcādevatā Pūjā* in the system of his philosophy. The *Pañcādevatās* are Śaṅkara, Nārāyaṇa, Ravi (the Sun), Gaṇapati and Devi (Sannaragade). Not only he recognised these five gods and goddesses, but also he established a system of worshipping creating a school of thought.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva is quite opposed to the worship of those demy-gods except Nārāyaṇa as one and the same with Kṛṣṇa the God-head.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva had a strong reason to do so. From the time immemorial to his birth in the Prāgjyotiṣpura there had been strong prevalence of idolatry, paganism, totemism, black-magic, mountebanks and what not. Most of the people were taking delight and solace in offering innocent animal sacrifices in front of the demigods and the goddesses and on some subordinate evil spirits ghosts, witches propelled by blind faith, black magic and spelling incantations. Human sacrifice was also rife here and there. Young Śaṅkaradeva avowedly declared war against these evils by bringing in only one God Kṛṣṇa of the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. Rāma, Hari, Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa are only different manifestations of the same Kṛṣṇa in different times, in different epochs depending upon the necessities of the people and societies. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy pursued the great 'One' the *Brahmaṇa* of the Upaniṣadas, Paramātmā of the Yoga system, Paramesvara of the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata*. He is here, everywhere and beyond. His tested and beloved disciple Śrī Mādhavadeva in his book—*Nāma-ghosā* aptly

enunciates the position of Kṛṣṇa in the scheme of creation and beyond.

O Kṛṣṇa, thou art the only conscious entity, eternal truth, most pure, source of all knowledge and unbroken chain of continuity. Except this all other forms are but your playful manifestations fashioned by *māyā* or delusion.

*he kṛṣṇa tumi mātra caitanya svarūpa nitya
satya śuddha jñāna akhaṇḍita |
āvāra jāteka iṭo tomhāra vinoda rūpa
carācara māyāra kalpita ||*

(Nāma-ghosā -73)

So, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva put a strong restraint, a restriction or a taboo against worshipping these demigods who cannot emancipate themselves from the clutches of birth and death or the allurements of *māyā*. He forbade his disciples to bow and serve or enter into their temples, or to see their faces or worship them and accept their *prasāda*, for, that act will be tantamount to the blasphemy and infidelity to Kṛṣṇa the God-head or supreme Brahmaṇa. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's *dharma* does not subscribe to any idolatry, paganism, black magic or demigod eulogizing them in flowery language. His *dharma* is –*Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* - completely different from the Non-dualistic *Nirviśeṣadvaita* of Ācārya Śaṅkara. For that matter, it is also different from the philosophy of Bhāskarācārya's (100 A.D.) *Bhedābhedavāda*, Rāmānujācārya's (1140 A.D.) *Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda*, Madhvācārya's (1238 A.D.) *Dvaitavāda*, Nimbārkaācārya's (later half of 13th century A.D.) *Dvaitādvaitavāda* or Vallabhācārya's (1479-1544 A.D.) *Śuddhādvaitavāda* in many respects. It resembles to the Islamic religion of Md. Payagambar and Sikh Religion as propounded by Guru Nanak.

A CATHOLICITY OF HUMANITY

We have already mentioned that in Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's *dharma* main focus is man without any differentiation of caste, creed, community or language, sex and colour. His one of the main disciples

was Cāndsāi, a Muslim descended. Some of the associates of Śaṅkaradeva were from different tribal communities. Many of them were illiterate, many were women. Because Śaṅkaradeva loved men and service to them was his supreme service, because he exhorted:

viśeṣata manuṣya gaṇat yiṭo nare |
viṣṇu buddhi sarvadāye moka mānya kare ||
īriṣā asūyā ahankāra tiraskāra |
save naṣṭa hoye teve tavaḡsane tāra ||
strī śūdro kare yadi āmata bhakati |
tāhāta kahiba iṭo jñāna mahāmati ||

(*Kīrtan Ghōṣā*)

Śrī Kṛṣṇa advises to his devotee Uddhava:

‘Oh Uddhava, you learn to love all the creatures, among them also, love

specially the human-kind. Regard them to be very Viṣṇu, the God-head itself. There shall be no bar to anybody in consideration of high birth, low birth, sex or colour. Give this message of love and service to all. Then your enmity, zealously, egoism, hatred—all will disappear from you—and you will be a perfect devotee, a real man.’

LIFE AFFIRMATION AND LIFE NEGATION

The philosophies of the world are divided into two camps—one is the camp of life Negation, the other is the life camp life Affirmation.

Life Negation opines that the world is illusive, faulty and ensnaring. All attractions are but a forgery, deception and eye-wash. The more you abstain from these, the more you are safe and sound. Some renounce the world and worldly attraction be a monk or ascetic, go to the hermitage and recluse and practice on pure God and things permanent. Impose all the rules of abstinence drastically to be able to enjoy in the after-world.

The second school of thought says that the things of the world are also true, the fascinating world has also meaning. It is naught for nothing but for something. So eat, drink and make merriment, for, tomorrow you shall die. The discernable world is everything. So the happiness to the greatest number to the greatest degree should be the way of life—so says this camp, the hedonists.

Both are extreme in their uncompromising ways. The world and life in it is neither good nor bad in its entirety. It depends upon how we look at it and how we use our body and worldly things judiciously. So a third force or a camp gradually came into existence.

THE KṚṢṆA CULT OR THE KṚṢṆA CULTURE

The Śrī Kṛṣṇa of *Bhāgavata* and of the *Gītā*, of the *Harivaṁsa*, the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* and the *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa* is the strong expounder and leader of the third force or camp—who never despised this world, this creation or this body as abominable something to be neglected and thrown away. The apparent body, the world has also its own utility as a means for higher realization. This tangible world is a step-ladder for higher out reach. The world with its happenings is a divine play and the body is a means to join the play and realize it in its truest form.

Again a group of western thinkers pass libellous statements that Indian philosophy is a philosophy of Life Negation and World Negations. They are (the Indian Philosophers) escapists. Therefore, they prefer to go to the Himalayas or the forests to escape from the world instead of facing it bravely. Even the great thinkers like Dr. Albert Switzer also hurled the same allegations. This is a serious allegation resulting out of superficial handling of the serious subject. Instead of bogging down in the mire of colour and flesh it is better to have adequate knowledge and impermanency of the outward things and discover the inward reality wrapt by the outwardly scintillating things. Yes, outward things are not real but fake and distorting. Indian philosophy is a penetrating insight into the real things sitting inside. At the same time Indian philosophy does not throw away the outside

things as trash or abominable dirt but regards them as means to get into the ideal inside.

More than that, it is better to see the outward things also as splendour of the spirit inside. The worldly things are not really ‘worldly’ but spiritual in the scheme of things. It depends upon how we look at it in the right perspective.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa comes in this matter. Kṛṣṇa was born in the prison of atrocious demon Kaṁsa. His strong will to live and do well to the world made Him warrior and a lover. His readiness to serve all and love all made Him more attractive and acceptable to all. Without any hesitation everybody could get His things done by Kṛṣṇa, because Śrī Kṛṣṇa was so near and dear to everybody. There was no personal choice to any work. Any work was worship for Him. No sense of high and low. He was a cowherd, He was an errand, He was a singer, a dancer, He was a warrior to subdue the evil demons, He was a protector, and He was a charioteer in the battle of the Mahabharata. He was the singer of the *Gītā* and astute statesman, an undefeated wrestler, an enticing orator known for his bewitching eloquence beaconing the sages, seers and wise with profound philosophies. He is endowed with all human and divine qualities. He embodies all goodness, all truths and all ability to deliver. Finally, He is an incarnations of Truth, Love and Compassion, a paragon of divine beauty who can attract everybody. His relations with men and men, birds and animals, trees and tendrils, mountains and rivers are matchless and unique. He came down to this planet to redeem the world by establishing the eternal principles.

ENTHUSED BY KRṢṂA’S LOVE AND COMPASSION ŚAṂKARADEVA PUTS HIS HEART INTO ACTION

It was right after five thousand years that Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva came to this world. As we mentioned earlier, there was the canonical book which are together called the ‘*Prasthān Traya*’.

The *Upaniṣadas*, the *Brahma-sūtra* and the *Bhāgavad Gītā*—these three together are the proven and established tenets. Śrīmanta

Śaṅkaradeva chalked out another tenet consisting of the *Śrī Viṣṇu Sahasra Nāma*, The *Bhāgavata Mahāpuraṇa* and the *Bhāgavad Gītā*. The *Bhāgavad Gītā* is common to both the canons. He took the essence the *nāma* (the holy name of God) from the *Viṣṇu Sahasra nāma*, the *Ek Śaraṇa* (surrender to only one God—Kṛṣṇa) and from the *Bhāgavata Mahāpuraṇa*—love, service, surrender to Kṛṣṇa the God-head. The company of the holy men is also one of the philosophies of the *Bhāgavata*.

The *Bhāgavad Gītā* taught him the synthesis of *Karma* - the action, *Jñāna* (the knowledge) *Yoga* - the unfaltering communion with the supreme, the *Bhakti* - the unsheathing love of Kṛṣṇa - the supreme, the *Śraddhā* (the unwavering faith in His ability to save the devotee).

If these five qualities are put together then a sure and certain path is made to proceed on to the lotus feet of the Lord Kṛṣṇa which is the fulfilment of all births, all lives. No more prattle but practice is the panacea. To know is to become.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Śrī Śrī Mādhavdeva lived the life of their philosophy as they designed and became successful in that also. But it was not a question of individual emancipation but a question of social upliftment through collective *sadhanā*. Devotee Prahlāda had been the first propagator of collective ascendance. Lord Narasiṃha—the man-lion incarnate asked Prahlāda to take liberation. Prahlāda politely asked the Lord, “My Great Lord, I thank you for the liberation you have kindly granted to me. But my Lord, tell me if the same liberation would be available for my little demon friends with whom I use to frolic, make merriment, try to learn the lore of devotion?”

“Dear Son Prahlāda, they are not eligible to get this boon right now. They will have to do more *Sadhanā* to further purify themselves.”, said Lord Narasiṃha.

“Then my Lord, said Prahlāda. “I also do not want this boon because I do not want to leave them back on the lurch to suffer here.

I will accept liberation only after all the suffering creatures get liberation.” - *Bhāgavat* -7

Spirituality demands a collective liberation of all the suffering people in this sorrowful world. Gautam Buddha was also in a fix as what to do after achieving enlightenment at the age of forty. Whether to accept liberation right now or try to liberate the suffering people as long as he lives. Finally, he decided to serve the people to make them fit to attain liberation.

Now same was the perplexing condition of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva also. Finally, he decided to go to the suffering people to assuage their sorrows and miseries.

THEN, HOW TO START

The American poet Daniel Webster wrote an interesting poem the substance of which goes like this:

To immortalise you:

If you work upon marbles, time will efface it. If you work upon brass, one day it will break down. If you erect a temple it will also crumble down. But if you write something in the heart of a man with true love for God, it will be tablet which will last for all eternity.

Really it is correct. Hundreds of years before Daniel Webster, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva knew this truth. So he did not go to the Himalayas, neither to the deep forests nor to the deserts—the call of the suffering people did not allow him to remain somersaulting in the riches of his father. He came out of his ancestral properties directly going to people. But he went to the mass people—the lowliest and lost.

Now with his companions he became a man of Life Affirmation, loving his people, serving them to better their condition with a flame of Kṛṣṇa lore. Unconditional surrender in the feet of God, incessant and continuously chanting the holy names of God, first loudly - then with lipping voice—and then gradually silent meditation of the soundless name. According to Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, the holy names

of God are the most powerful means to redeem the debased and debauched sinner and the heinous criminal. Because, the holy name of the God will change his heart and clear his perception.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and his loyal devotee Śrī Śrī Mādhavadeva were masters of all the crafts required for a man to be successful in the struggle for life. Their effort was to transfer the skills to the society in order to have better life. Their mission was not only to give them physical comfort but make them efficient in material skills of worldly nature but to take them to transcend and penetrate physically and discover the ‘self’ hidden inside the body. For both of them it was endeavour to transform the whole world into the divine *Līlā* which was so in reality—but because of the delusion we think differently from the self—the Kṛṣṇa the God-head. The world is also no other than God. The world is and the God in transcendence is beyond the world. This is the mystery and inscrutability of God and his creation. This was the mission of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva to understand this mystery.

APPLICATION OF APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGIES

The concept - ‘Appropriate Technology’ is gaining ground all over the world now-a-days. Especially the environmental scientists are very serious about this. In very simple language ‘Appropriate Technology’ means—not using very sophisticated means and material bringing and applying arduously from distant places but using the materials available nearby locality in adequate and apt manner. These are free from pollution and exploitation. This is the demand of the day in the modern day world. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was a visionary and seer. He could distinctly foresee the future hazard of the environmental milieu and its evil effect in the coming human society. So he, with his devotees experimented with locally available, eco-friendly materials from the *nāmghar* (a special kind of temple made of low cost local materials with the common efforts of the local people). The *prasāda* was also prepared from the locally produced, locally available green grams, banana, coconut, other local fruits, raw rice, orange etc. to make it healthy and more *Sattvic*.

Further he taught the devotees how to grow more food and vegetables with effort by applying skilful techniques. He trained the people as how to keep our health sound and sturdy right from defecation, cleansing the lower part after bathing etc. He taught men and women as how to spin in distaff and weave clothes in the handmade handlooms. The *Vṛndāvanī Vastra* which was prepared at his behest and supervision is the glaring example of his love and dexterity for preparing clothes. The *Vṛndāvanī Vastra* is a rare example of his artistic acumen perhaps the first and last production of clothes the world could see it how long and wide. (It is now preserved in the British Museum in London.)

Nāmghar is a unique prayer hall only akin to the structural designs of German Architecture. This *Nāmghar* designed for a village assembly where high and low, old and young, male and female will sit with equal status, give their opinion without fear and favour, the village assembly will hear the cases, if it occurs in the village and pass unanimous decision. There was usually no habit of going to the royal court. It was a *pañcāyat* in a larger sense. Śaṅkaradeva fought against untouchability and high and low concept. So there was unrestricted entrance to all classes of people. There was nothing like ‘outcaste’. Unlike the other religious leaders, Śaṅkaradeva did not sit on pedestal higher than others but on but on mat in the *Nāmghar*. All were equal in status. Just in front of and attached to the *Nāmghar*, there is the maṅikūṭ where a seven stepped SANCTUM SANCTORUM is erected one above the other, all the columns were supported by tortoise, and above it there is an elephant and above it there is a lion. The lion will not be an ordinary lion of the jungle, but special ones devoid of long hairs around his neck. It is *Nām Simha*—laughing after he vanquishes the sins. In the Sanctum Sanctorum - at the apex of the ascendance there shall be no image or idol of any God or Goddesses. There shall be a copy of the *Bhāgavata* or its short essence *GUṆA-MĀLĀ*. What is the meaning of it? Means, not idol worship but worshipping the qualities and greatness of God, worship of knowledge. Not the rituals and ceremonies but the actual *Sadhanā* through the meditation of God’s qualities.

POLITICS IS A GOSPEL OF DEMON

A new phenomenon shakes the entire world today. The world at large is on the crossroad as whether to take recourse to politics or go without it! The question is not one to dismiss it just at a fillip of fingers. The whole world is today influenced by the politics for good or for bad. But thinking people say that politics is doing more harm than good. The root cause of all the evils is no other than politics.

Politics is an art of organizing people and then splitting it into many fragments. It is a panoply enemy of human unity. Histories are replete with the examples of evils done by politics and politicians. The rash competition for political supremacy by using lethal weapons Nuclear, Hydrogen, Atomic, Chemical, Biological, Bacteria weapons through supersonic missiles are a threat to human existence and the existence of this beautiful planet called the Mother Earth.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva could visualize this danger five hundred years ago. So he professed social unity rather than crafty political adroitness and design by narrating the firmness of devotee Prahlāda in refusing the dictates of his atrocious father demon Hiranyakaśipu. The demon was very much upset by his son's wise resolve. The king ordered the two teachers to cleverly ensnare his son with the noose of Varuṇa i.e. the flowery and attractive language of politics. Again the father ordered the teachers to teach Prahlāda the gospel of the demon means political manoeuvring.

varuṇara pāśe bāndhi thaiyo kāl |
āpuni bayasa bhaile buddhi haiba bhāl ||

Śikhāyoka āka rājnīti nirantar ||

Kīrtana-ghoṣā - 351,352

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva did never compromise with any political system or set up. So he had to face many displeasures and sometimes wraths of various kings all through his life. Not *RĀJNĪTI* but *LOKANĪTI*—collective decision by the village assembly in the

nāmghar was his philosophy. That philosophy is to be applied to a family, village, country, alike.

A MATCHLESS PROLIFIC WRITER OF N.E.

Citing the observation of Sadia Dehilvi who wrote on Sufism at the very beginning of this article we submitted that ‘The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr’—Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva wanted to educate and inspire the mass people as well as the intellectuals and scholars. It was possible only by sensitizing the majority of the people through writing lyrics, songs, dramas in a very lucid and heart throbbing language. He composed volumes of books in praise of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa the God-head. His writings could not be surpassed by any writer of N.E. till today. These are read and got down by heart by the common people thence till today. His loyal disciple Śrī Śrī Mādhavadeva formed the foundation of Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophy of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* by writing very important books on the subjects. Their aim was to glorify Bhāratavarṣa by focusing the good in Indian culture and civilization. Their aim was to make one India and one world. So they did not speak of Axom but spoke of Bhāratavarṣa and of innumerable numbers of universes and cosmic worlds. No narrowness and no parochialism are to be found in their writings. So they wrote mixed languages Maithili and *Brajavuli*. They may be considered as greatest unifiers of India. Without reckoning and acknowledging them the concept and existence of North-East India would have been impossible.

GREAT UPLIFTERS OF WOMANKIND

Unlike many other ascetics and preachers Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva gave great respect to womankind. For them both the sexes are equal and honourable. Development of both the groups should be enhanced. Āi Khersutī, Cāndarī Āi, Barābāsī Āi, Rādhikā Śānti Āi, Āi Kanaklatā and a host of others were female spiritual giants and able leaders under the guidance of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Śrī Śrī Mādhavadeva and their immediate disciples. Because of

this honour given to womankind by the great teacher Śaṅkaradeva and his followers there is the tradition of honouring the women even today. The women are respected at par with man. So, there is no dowry system in Assam since his time up till today. The Assamese society is not unhappy if the family is gifted by only daughters and no sons.

In propagating path of love, service, sacrifice, unity, kindness, human values, one God, one humanity Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva had to face fatal oppositions and even sometimes threat to their lives.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's Ashram was attacked and plundered eight times and Śrī Śrī Mādhavadeva for twenty four times. It was not a road of vermilion and golden dust of butterflies strewn with rose petals but a road of thorns often stopped by precipices, jungles and ferocious animals. But they continued their spiritual campaigns unstopped. When opposition and oppressions were growing stronger day by day - they decided to leave Kāmṛūpa, the Prāgjyotiṣpura or Assam to escape from further damage. They with their disciples embarked upon the boats oared in down-stream Brahmaputra and arrived in Koch Behar where great king Naranārāyaṇa was reigning over as his beloved brother Cīlārāya helped. Both of them gave shelter to this group where they remained peacefully creating valuable literatures, spreading the philosophy of love, compassion and complete surrender.

WITH ILL-WILL TO NONE, CHARITY TO ALL

Both of them lived for more than hundred years each. Śrī Śrī Mādhavadeva for 107 years, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva for 119 years with sound health. They were positive with life-affirmation. Throughout their long life they suffered from the envious pedants or ruling potentates - which forced them to leave their motherland forever. But their enlightened souls had no ill-will for anybody. They forgave everybody, showered blessings to all. Nowhere in their ocean like literature had they used a single word expressing displeasure to

anybody but showering blessing to all and sundry. Their way of life was to think good for all, do well for all. They professed non-violence and love in thought, words and deeds.

THE GREAT EXIT

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva lived the life of Śrī Kṛṣṇa with aims and objectives but in a human form and human limitation. Still he had a mind to live the years of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Śrī Kṛṣṇa lived for complete 125 years, with no diseases no symptoms of aging and no cessation of works—*Karma-yoga*. Śaṅkaradeva was incessantly performing *Karma-yoga*.

King Naranārāyaṇa tested all the pundits who used to attend the Royal Court regularly guiding and appeasing the king in time of his need but in vain. Nobody stood up to the mark of being a *guru* (Spiritual guide or preceptor) for him. But Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva rose above the mark, means he was more than the expectation of the king. So, one day, the king Naranārāyaṇa came politely to Śaṅkaradeva and implored to become his spiritual guide of the kind by giving the king ‘ŚARANA’ (a new life in God for emancipation through religious and spiritual practice). Śaṅkaradeva vowed not to give *Śaraṇa* to kings. So he first politely refused to do so but the indomitable insistence of the king Naranārāyaṇa silenced the great soul Śaṅkaradeva. Finally, Guru Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva agreed to bestow him with *Śaraṇa* the next day. He advised him to come after ablution and fasting early morning. King Naranārāyaṇa was so happy to be a disciple of a great *guru*. Satisfied, he went back to his palatial building—promising to come the next morning.

A VERY HEART-BREAKING AND PATHETIC SITUATION

For Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva it was a devil and deep sea situation. He could not displease the king, for the king, gave him shelter, love and respect on one hand and on the other hand compromising with his own philosophy and own way of life so far garnered so sincerely for 119 years. He was in a fix as what to decide. After much

chumming the great *guru* decided to do a novel thing nobody could imagine even in dream.

This great uncompromising *guru* decided to immolate his own body in a novel way by sitting on the trance or concentrating Meditation—*SAMĀDHI* (of the *yogis*). Next day he got up before *BRAHMA MUHŪRTA* - i.e. before 3 A.M. - had his daily bath, chanted the holy names of Lord Kṛṣṇa the God-head, came out to the open space where an aromatic basil tree was standing steadfastly. One of his devotees lighted an earthen lamp and arranged the *guru's* sitting near the basil. The great *guru* put his steps slowly towards the sitting arrangement, sat down slowly and composedly. He chanted the divine names - RĀM - KRSNA - HARI - took his long breathe for sometimes.

*Sounds mingled in the soundless
Everything was over by them
The problem was solved
No compromise, no displeasing
A nocturnal bird flew past flapping
The rest was bemoaning bewailing
From king to the laymen -*

Which can be heard in every heart even today.

By these words a few things told - incomplete, inapt, inarticulate, ineffable.

The premise with which we started our writing remains unanswered. This silence was wilful - deliberate. We concealed the logo or the motto, the emblem, the symbol—the philosophy of a community or a nation. After meandering through mountains - the lush green lands, the prairies of thoughts and ideas we are arriving to the unfurling of the premise.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva in his great *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* and in the 11th *Skandha* of the *Bhāgavata* engraves very boldly and widely the immortal wisdom in the heart of men - ‘*Samasta bhūtake dekhiveka ātmā sama*’

-You discover your soul in every creature. See yourself in the heart of everybody.

A world without disparity, without war, without exploitation is possible only with the feeling of unity based on this principle of spirituality. This is the road-map prepared by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva with multifarious agenda mentioned above.

RECUPLATION

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was not only a man but a God with divine qualities with a mission.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was not only a God but a human being with every concern for humanity.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva did not believe in sword or throne but in the change of men's heart.

He fought against caste and creed, high and outcaste but believed in the unity of humanity.

He liked to cleanse the stools and urines of his devotee all by his own hand.

For him politics is the gospel of demon, instead, *Lokanīti* was the way of life which he professed and nurtured.

He was uncompromising with his philosophy and way of life. He successfully went through the ordeal, sacrificed his life for the cause.

He firmly believed in life affirmation so he showed proficiency almost in all the spheres of life—Arts, cultures, literature, paintings, sculptures, social reforms, drama, music, and dance to the experiment in food.

He was the first in the world to start open air drama enactment—only after his great demise William Shakespeare introduced Open Air Drama in his Stafford-on- Avon.

He was a great champion of unifying India—so he was speaking of Bhāratavarṣa and the Universe.

He never fell ill in his long life of 119 years.

The most important thing, he never declared himself to be the *guru*— but the humble servant of Lord Kṛṣṇa.

He very humbly declared that he was a disciple of the entire world.

So the people of the world will understand his heart and his philosophy of love and compassion and appreciate his mission.

Om Śāntiḥ Śāntiḥ Śāntiḥ

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COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS IN BEZBARUAH'S *TATTVA-KATHĀ*: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Dr. Manash Pratim Borah

*if causation does not really happen, then change is not real and the
world of nature does not exist.*

-Thompson 330

Lakshminath Bezbaruah's *Tattva-kathā* (1992) is an illuminating study of the foundational and elaborative truths about the notions and natures of God and religion into the locus of Vedantic faith. The perimeter of the study extensively encompasses his introspective inquiry regarding the function of such notions in the birth and development of Vaiṣṇavism right from the time of Vedic and Upaniṣdic trends to the time of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva along with what are their maxims and positions in Neo-Vaiṣṇava tradition in filtration. Although the author and the publisher have introduced the book as 'Essays on Vaiṣṇavism', the arguments and the spatial framework incorporated in the book are not at all incarcerated within the boundary of Vaiṣṇavism; a careful move from the reflective level to the introspective level of the book explicitly demonstrates the author's paramount propensity to mapping out the universal and cohesive forces of God and religion in the entire processes of cosmic order to human emancipation in an argumentative manner. It is an epistemic effort of establishing the ontological truths and function of God and religion in the dynamics of social and human aspects through the authority of an assorted number of holly texts and legends. The Vaiṣṇavite or rather to say the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite aspect of the book is sought to be conquered

through systematic foregrounding of the larger precepts of Vedic, Upaniṣadic and other theological doctrines. The allusive and sweeping nature of the book, hence, is largely the result of his insertion of elevated analysis of those holly texts and legends of the larger theological network aiming at accounting the adequacy and efficacy of the notions of God and religion in urgent human needs and activity. In a nutshell, it can be said that in reading the universality and adequacy of the Neo-Vaiṣṇava faiths of Śaṅkaradeva through the Vedic and Upaniṣadic traits, Bezbaruah has sought to utilize the metaphysical and cosmological doctrines in understanding the greater praxis of the processes of creation and structure of the cosmos.

It should be worth mentioning that *Tattva-kathā* was neither published by Bezbaruah himself as a compilation, nor did plan to write a book on that subject. All the eleven articles incorporated in the book were actually compiled by Atul Chandra Hazarika and the volume was published by Assam Sahitya Sabha for the first time. On the other hand, it should also be mentioned that through those eleven articles Bezbaruah has not endeavored to present any specific perspective or philosophical ideology for the sake of understanding Indian metaphysics and Vaiṣṇavism. All the eleven articles of the book are intrinsically linked together by his chief enterprise to engender the notion of *bhakti* as a specific *mārga* to arrive at the ultimate *Brahmaṇa* as well as his effort of excavating the mysteries of the process of creation of the cosmos and the natural world including the world of the humanity. As P.C. Bhuyan remarks in his sophisticated study on Bezbaruah namely *Lakshminath Bezbaruah: Influences of Tradition on his Writings* (1995):

Bezbaruah is not a philosopher. He did not make any endeavour to evolve any abstruse ideas or system. Nevertheless, his literary works, more particularly his *Tattva-kathā* are pointers to the fact that he was steeped in the lore of Hindu philosophy. Keeping aside for the moment the artistic qualities of all his writings we may consider his deep-rooted ideas that give expression to his philosophical convictions. (320)

Hence *Tattva-kathā* is not a book of genuine theological doctrine but an accumulation of authentic appreciation of the long-established theological doctrines. All the articles incorporated in the book are argumentatively engaged with the cosmological arguments about God – as the ultimate *Brahmaṇa* or a posteriori fact of the universe.

Although the book has incorporated eleven highly pensive chapters as a compilation, predominantly there are three vital areas for investigation or rather we can see three basic thematic motives. Firstly, all the articles manifest the writer's constant effort of establishing the pious truth of the abstract philosophies of the ultimate *Brahmaṇa*, along with *Saguṇa* and *Nirguṇa dharma* and the *Nāma-dharma* of Śrī Śaṅkaradeva through the theological and philosophical doctrines of the Vedas, the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata* and the *Kīrtana* and *Nāma-ghoṣā*. This motif of the writer is primarily directed by his aim of revealing the universal traits in Śrī Śaṅkaradeva's *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* within the locus of the larger Vedantic paradigm as a new religious model for social cementing and cultural renaissance in a multi-ethnic, multicultural region. Secondly, most of the chapters of the book have tried to delve into the etymological meaning of the word 'Kṛṣṇa' as an incarnation and also have paid serious attention on the character of Kṛṣṇa and the way to arrive at him through the *bhakti mārga*. In this particular effort, Bezbaruah has put his rigorous critical outlook on the *Rāsa-līlā* and the *Vastra-haraṇa* episodes of the legend of Śrī Kṛṣṇa along with the hidden meanings of the *Kīrtana* and *Nāma-ghoṣā* where the main emphasis is laid upon the unconditional *bhakti* as a definite *mārga* or path to arrive at the ultimate Brahman.

On the other hand, throughout the eleven chapters, Bezbaruah has incessantly put his canny concentration on the spiritual truth and the idealistic meanings of the four holy pillars of the Vedantic philosophy namely the Vedas (all the four Vedas), the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata*, and the *Kīrtana* and *Nāma-ghoṣā* with the intention of evaluating the theological legitimacy of the process of creation of the entire cosmos. It is the third intensive motif of the writer to look into the cosmological arguments regarding the notion and nature of God

as a contingent being who creates the entire universe. Within the structuralist paradigm, the totality of the universe is centered at this ultimate *Brahmaṇa* as the main and only essence of the cosmos. In this sense, *Tattva-kathā* is an elaborative study of the Vedantic philosophy to enter in to a centered universe.

All the three motives in the book are methodically integrated by the writer's emphasis on the *Bhakti Mārga* as the best way to arrive at the *ekam-eva-advītiya Brahmaṇa* —a supreme cause and creator of the cosmos. Apart from these, one of the main intentions of the author is to show how the Vedantic philosophy of the sacrosanct Hindu texts including the *Gītā* and *Śrīmad-bhāgavata* are succinctly reflected by the writings of Śrī Śaṅkaradeva while boosting a new religious trait namely Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in Northeast India. In this present essay, our objective is not to discuss Bezbaruah's account of Śaṅkaradeva or his religious acquaintance with the larger Vedantic premises; rather, we look for his reading of the cosmological truths in Vedantic philosophies right from the time of the Vedas to Śrī Śaṅkaradeva as represented by Bezbaruah. Now the question may come up in the very outset of the essay that why the Kantian concept of cosmological arguments is more significant in *Tattva-kathā* than other fields of philosophical inquiries incorporated in the book! The word 'cosmology' means a definite branch of metaphysics which deals with the entire cosmos as an organized system. And it is needless to say that the book has bluntly integrated both the metaphysical and cosmological fields of philosophical inquiries for understanding the notions and natures of God and religion within the orderly system. But in reading the location of God, religion and human being in the order and structure of the entire cosmos, the cosmological perspectives and arguments are far more dominant and illuminating than the other one. On the other hand, in most of the time Bezbaruah has often incorporated the needful philosophical and theological facts of that mentioned orderly system of the cosmos to facilitate the proof of existence of a contingent being behind the creation of the universe. Even for his basic expedition in situating all the principle *mārgas* especially the *karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti mārgas*

as governing principles or causal grounds in ordering and structuring the natural universe including the human cosmos, the cosmological arguments are less allusive and more practical than the metaphysical one. However, in most of the places, both the perspectives are fused together with great care and for instrumental purposes. His arguments inquire about to constitute the crucial conduit in between the practical human needs and the divine restraints and duty. Hence Bezbaruah considers God or the *Brahmaṇa* as a predicate and religion as a basic and an urgent human need, activity or phenomenon. In the dynamics of human socio-cultural and natural interactions, religion holds the place of the overseer and the supreme emancipator through the mentioned *mārgas*. In the great Indian Philosophical system, the mystics and the metaphysicians have paid their canny concentration in solvating the larger system of the mystical union of the *Jīvātmā* and the *Brahmaṇa* or the physical and the metaphysical through their characteristic dialectical methods but in most of the time arrived at lesser translucent resolutions and anti-monist dualism. Yaimini's *karma mārga*, Kapila's *jñāna mārga* and Patanjali's *yoga mārga* bear the testimony of such traditional doctrines which are directed only towards emancipation and *siddhi* but not towards God. The *Sāṅkhya* system simply inculcates the theory of evolution where the autonomy of the self is more important than imagining the existence of God. But for Bezbaruah, the constructive philosophical or theological doctrine is the one which always endeavors to situate the entire cosmos into the *ekam-eva-advitiya Brahmaṇa* and the *mārga* leading to mingling with that *Brahmaṇa* as the supreme one. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva's doctrines of *bhakti mārga* are the examples of that qualified monism.

The basic tenet of the non-dualist Vedanta philosophy is to situate oneself at the heart of the *nirguṇa Brahmaṇa*. However, the tension between the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa Brahmaṇa* is always apparent in all the devotional writings of all the ages where in many cases both the perspectives are often combined for the sake of better understanding of the *Brahmaṇa*. In the famous essay namely "The

Myth of *Bhakti*: Images of Śiva in Śaiva Poetry”, Rāmānujan remarks about the assortment of both the perspectives in devotional writings. According to Rāmānujan, the major Vaiṣṇava poets do not pay much attention to the mythological Śiva. They are iconoclastic, whereas Śiva is generally aniconic. The binary iconoclastic/aniconic is very useful one as all devotional poetry plays on the tension between iconoclastic and aniconic (*nirguṇa/saguṇa*)—the lord as person and lord as principle. If he were entirely a person, he would not be divine, and if he were entirely a principle, one could not make poems about them. The former attitude makes dualism possible and the latter makes for monism. The Vaiṣṇavas call their attitude a combination of the both- a dualistic monism (a person and principle). *Bhakti* poetry is not possible without the presence of the both. Nevertheless, as Bezbaruah argues, the *nirguṇa Brahmaṇa* is absolutely inclusive and beyond the ordinary human ken in the proper sense of the term; hence the *saguṇa Brahmaṇa* is required. That *nirguṇa Brahmaṇa* is God—the ultimate one; it is the one, which is soundless, formless, colorless, scentless, ultimate, all pervading and self-existent. Creations are its various manifestations and the artifacts of its powers. The *Brahmaṇa* is itself transformed into an iconoclast when the process of creation, ethics and religion are engendered in the natural world. If the *jñāna mārga* leads one to familiarize with that *Brahmaṇa*, the *bhakti mārga* leads the same *jīvatmā* to submit in it. The unconditional submission leads the *jīvātṃā* to emancipation. As he remarks:

The eternal relationship between God and *jīva* is that of *sevyā* and *sevaka*. When *jīva* separates from God, he roams far and wide, contacting various relationships in his worldly life. When at last he comes to recognize his own self, then discarding completely the false and illusory relationships with which he has so long been entangled, he returns to his old relationship with God. (Trans. Bhuyan 319, emph. original)

In other words, *saguṇa Brahmaṇa* is the vision that localizes the translocal divinity for humanity. Hence, Bezbaruah believes that in an age of distraction, worshiping that *Brahmaṇa* through the path of

bhakti is the prime imperative to restrain one from such distractions. The importance of the *bhakti mārṅa* as the paramount way towards attaining the *Brahmaṅa* is best established by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva through the egalitarian philosophy of *ekam-eva-advītiya Brahmaṅa*. Among the nine sacrosanct *bhaktis*, *Sravaṅa* and *Kīrtana* are the ones which do not need any mediator to arrive at the ultimate *Brahmaṅa*. These two are the most democratic and self-governing trails where even the poorest one has the power and right to proceed towards God irrespective of class, gender and race. In order to inculcate the power of *Śravaṅa* and *Kīrtana*, Bezbaruah gives the reference of the Myth of Ajāmīla who is finally emancipated from the sin done to please his prohibited lust through *Hari-nāma*. Even through this myth, he also seeks to differentiate the *nirguṅa* and *saguṅa Brahmaṅa* by bringing the reference of the Vedas and the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Whereas the Vedas inculcates the *saguṅa Brahmaṅa*, the *Bhagavad-gītā* fosters the concept and importance of *nirguṅa Brahmaṅa*. Whereas the Vedas are marked with the constitution of the *jñāna* and *karma mārṅas*, the *upaniṣads* are the culmination of that *jñāna mārṅas*. Hence the *upaniṣadas* are said as the Vedānta.

Both the prominent schools of Indian metaphysical tradition namely the non-dualist schools of Śaṅkarācārya and the *Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda* of Rāmānujācārya are based on the Vedānta philosophy. The basic difference between the two schools is that the first one considers the entire universe as chimera and the other one as true reality and a true evolution of *ekam-eva-advītiya Brahmaṅa*. In other words, the *Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda* of Rāmānujācārya which is thoroughly reflected by Śaṅkaradeva considers the Viṣṇu as the *Brahmaṅa* and is the cause and creator of all. As H.H. Wilson reads in his book namely *A Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus* (1997), that this school of *Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda* of Rāmānujācārya denies the concept of *Nirguna Brahmaṅa*; this school stimulates the view that the *Brahmaṅa* is the cause and the entire cosmos is the effect of that cause (43). The *Gītā* and the *Śrīmadbhāgavata* basically stimulate that view of Vedānta that God is the only reality and the

entire cosmos is his creation. In other words, he is the main cause of creation. As E.L. Miller remarks:

He question, “Where did God come from?” can thus be discarded as ill conceived, because it construes God to be, like other things, the sort of being that can come and go. If God himself can come into being, then he cannot possibly be the cause of things that come into being and would not, therefore, be what the theist means by God. (55, emp. original)

The world itself is real and no one can flee from one’s *karma* and *phala*; the main way to free be from the cycle of birth and pain is the *bhakti mārḡa*. P.C. Bhuyan has espoused the same line of thought in his reading: “... the quintessence of Bezbaruah’s philosophy is that the world is not an illusion but a real entity to human beings. The object of our life is to follow the command of God, to enable it to attain ultimate liberation, which is the *summan bonum* of life through *bhakti*” (321, emphasis original). These two namely *Gītā* and the *Śrīmadbhāgavata* along with other *purāṇas* and holy texts are the scaffoldings of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva’s philosophy of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. The *Gītā* converted the skeptic, nihilist and the *Brahmavādī* thoughts towards God and showed the greater eminence of the *bhakti mārḡa* by conglomerating Patanjali’s *yoga mārḡa*, Vedanta’s *jñāna mārḡa* and *Sāṅkhya’s karma mārḡa*. Śrī Śaṅkaradeva extracted the vital morals of the *Gītā* by creating the faith of *eka-śaraṇa* at *Saguṇa ekam-eva-advītiya Brahmaṇa*. For Bezbaruah the *Brastraharana-akhyana* and the *Rāsa-līlā* are the best examples of the *bhakti mārḡa* relating to the legend of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. Hence it is worth mentioning that the best part of Bezbaruah’s cosmological argument is his effort in centralizing the entire cosmos into the *ekam-eva-advītiya Brahmaṇa*. And in doing so, he has primarily incorporated the ethnics of the Vedas, the *Gītā* and the *Kīrtana* and the *Nāma-ghoṣā* of Śrī Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva respectively.

In his analysis of the Vedas, Bezbaruah opines the view that all the substantial things of living are macrocosmic and always

centralized. The centered *ekam-eva-advītiya Brahmaṇa* i.e. the ultimate one is divided into the two parts namely *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa*. Whereas the ultimate one is gender neutral, the *Sāṅkhya* opines the view that both the *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* are inseparable, ultimate and immortal. *Prakṛti* is unconscious and *Puruṣa* is the consciousness. *Prakṛti* operates the processes of creation, spatial position and continuation of the cosmos in which the *Puruṣa* only holds the place of spectator. In other words, the union of *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* is creation and it is not for own sake but for others. The ‘others’ are involved in the process through use of the creation and seeks for a “personal god” in that “all pervading deity” (Bezbaruah 99). Due to the structuralist chain of the process of creation, any anti-structuralist conception of the *Brahmaṇa* is impossible. What is basically needed to be familiar with that *Brahmaṇa* is the “transcendental logic” and “super-sense” (ibid 104). As a psychoanalyst, Bezbaruah remarks that such capability of human being is to some extent hereditary; but there also subsists a structuralist design. The “ingredient” parts of that *Brahmaṇa* should be present within the soul of the *Jīvātmā* as each *Jīvātmā* is a part of that *Brahmaṇa*. In this way, Bezbaruah holds a succinct relation with American transcendentalism by arguing individual soul as part of the omnipresent over-soul.

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THE ARTISTIC APPLICATION OF INDIGENOUS ELEMENTS IN AÑKĪYĀ BHĀONĀ OF ŚAÑKARADEVA

Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami

INTRODUCTION:

Śaṅkaradeva is the pioneer of Assamese theatre. *Añkīyā-nāṭa* is the finest poignant testimony to the creative nature of Śaṅkaradeva. It was this revolutionary theatrical genre that played a profound role in making the New Vaiṣṇavite movement in Assam a success. In the middle of the 15th century, Śaṅkaradeva started Assamese drama through *añkīyā-nāṭa* by collecting material from Sanskrit Drama and various semi-dramatic genres prevalent in Assam. One comment in this regard is noteworthy- “But the ultimate source of the Assamese drama, divested of outward form, is in all probability the choral performance of the Assamese *ojā-pālī*. Śaṅkaradeva appears to have improved this kind of performance and to have given birth to the Assamese Drama.^[i]

Śaṅkaradeva wrote six plays: *Patnī-prasāda*, *Kālīya-damana*, *Keli-gopāla*, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, *Parijāta-haraṇa* and *Rāma-vijaya*. Later, his disciples, including his chief disciple Mādhavadeva, continued to practice this genre of drama. The *satras* played a special role in this regard. There are many plays written and acted by later Vaiṣṇava saints and *mahantas* in the style of these two great sages.^[ii]

The term *nāṭa* was widely used at first, but later the term *añkīyā-nāṭa* became popular. These plays are lyric-dance-drama. The origin of the *añkīyā drama*, its main features, and the art of composing the play, etc., have already been analysed by various scholars. The act of

performing the *ankīyā-nāṭa* is called *ankīyā bhāonā*.^[iii] It is worth mentioning that there is no significant evidence that *bhāonā* or theatre performance was held in Assam until the time of Śaṅkaradeva. The play of Śaṅkaradeva was the first step in the development of Assamese drama; however, the main purpose of the play was to propagate *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma*.^[iv] Various people have already discussed *ankīyā-nāṭa* and *bhāonā* from different points of view. But till now it has not been properly discussed how Śaṅkaradeva collected materials from different indigenous folk elements while starting this drama tradition. In this paper, that point will be addressed.

SCOPE AND PURPOSE:

It has been noticed that over time, the performance of *ankīyā bhāonā* has changed. Even in Mādhavadeva's plays, the form and appearance of *bhāonā* as well as other aspects are different from the style of performance of Śaṅkaradeva. There have been various changes in *bhāonā* in the later period. All of those aspects are difficult to discuss in a research paper; so instead, we will focus on how Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva utilized ethnic or indigenous elements when performing their plays. This research paper will focus on how they have artistically applied indigenous elements in the direction of the use of folk architecture in the construction of the performing place or stage of the *ankīyā bhāonā*, the *āhārya* of the *bhāonā*, the lighting, the construction of musical instruments, etc.

METHODOLOGY:

This paper will apply the critical method. This paper is divided into six sections. The first of these sections (at the outset) deals with the introduction of the research. The second section talks about the scope and purpose of the research and the third section deals with the method of research. The fourth section deals with the theoretical background of the research paper. That is, the theoretical aspects of terminology such as stage, folk architecture, *āhāryābhīnaya*, folk art, lighting, musical instruments, etc., will be briefly mentioned. The

fifth section will be the main section of this paper. It will shed light on how indigenous elements have been applied to these aspects of Śāṅkaradeva's theatrical performance. The sixth section concludes this paper.

THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

Before getting into the topic, it is useful to get a thorough understanding of the terminology of a few words. The first of these is the “stage”. Since drama is an audio-visual art, it must be performed or presented in a particular place. This performance space is called a stage. In other words, the stage usually refers to the area where a play is presented. Therefore, the most significant part of a play is the stage along with the acting.^[v] *Nāmghar* is the first permanent form of performance space in Assam. In the folk theatres that were prevalent before Śāṅkaradeva, any open place was considered a performance space or stage. Śāṅkaradeva established *nāmghar* as the first stage in Assam by performing the play *Cihna-yātrā*.

The play's history is closely related to the history of the stage since it was written only for performance. This is why the research paper contains a discussion of how Śāṅkaradeva artistically applied folk architecture while creating the performing place of *bhāonā*.

While talking about the performance space, I use another term – “folk architecture”. Folk architecture is the architecture prevalent in folk life. So what does “architecture” mean? Architecture is the process by which an architect builds a house, temple, shrine, etc., with various materials. In other words, architecture belongs to our physical culture. There are many different types of bamboo architecture in Assam. Apart from bamboo, cane, *ikarā*, straw, and wood are also used for this purpose. The folk life of Assam is mainly agricultural, so in addition to the existing houses, various types of houses are constructed like storehouses, cowsheds, *dhekiśālas*, etc. Traditionally, Assamese houses are named according to various needs - *corāghar*, *barghar*, *sarughar*, *māralghar*, kitchen, handloom,

storehouse, etc. The houses are not designed to require a lot of work - two roofs, poles made from wood or bamboo, strips of clay, wooden or bamboo sticks, doors made from wood or bamboo sticks, etc., most of them adhere to the traditional Assamese house style.

Of these, *nāmghar* is the cultural and ritual platform of Assamese life. In Assam, *nāmghar* has had a major impact on socio-cultural life. *Nāmghar* is an acting creation of the *bhakti* movement of Assam, a prominent religion. One of the aspects of the *bhakti* movement of Assam, *nāmghar*, or *kīrtanghar* has been built based on *nām-kīrtan*. Every person in Assamese society is entitled to equal rights and equal justice in *nāmghar*. *Nāmghar* has had a profound influence on Assamese life from about the 16th century to the present day. The influence of *nāmghar* is undeniable in all aspects of Assamese life.

The third terminology applied in this paper is *āhārya* in *bhāonā*. Now the question is what does '*āhārya*' mean? Bharata has mentioned in his book *Nāṭyaśāstra* that there are four types of acting – “*āṅgikavacikaschaivāharyaḥ sattvikasthā*”^[xi]. Acting is planned in four categories – physical, verbal, audible and *sāttvika*. He discusses these four categories of acting in detail in his book *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The third of these is our topic of discussion. The word *āhārya* means to acquire or collect something externally for performance. According to Bharatamuni, all kinds of applications used in drama are established by *āhāryabhinaya*. This edible acting is further divided into four categories – *pusta*, *alaṅkar*, *aṅga-racanā*, and *sañjība*. It should be noted that all of these have spectacular elements.

A *pusta* is the use of a model of an animal or non-animal in a play. It is further divided into three parts – *sāndhim*, *byzim*, and *chestim*. Replicas made of textiles or leather are called *sāndhim*, replicas of objects such as machines are called *byzim*, and replicas of moving mechanical objects are called *chestim*. Garlands, instruments, textiles, etc., used in the actors' organs and appendages are called ornaments. *Aṅga-racanā* means the process of the actor composing his or her organs with the help of different colours. Presenting an animal on the stage as an instrument in the play is

known as *sañjība*. However, there is no clear mention in *Nāṭyaśāstra* as to whether it is presented as a living or a replica. On the other hand, Nandikeshwar, in his book *Abhinaya Darpana*, has said that the ornamentation of the body by *hār*, *keyur*, *veś*, etc., is *āhāryabhinaya* act.^[x] In the context of our discussion, we will take the division made by Bharatamuni. Apart from this, Bharat has also been widely mentioned in the context of the use of masks in the play *Pratiśīrṣa*. Śaṅkaradeva took elements from indigenous folk art while using these elements in the *aṅkīyā bhāonā*, especially from the native “art and craft”.

Tolstoy wrote about “art” in his book *What is Art?* According to him: “To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, using movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience this same feeling—this is the activity of art. Art is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, using certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them.”^[viii]

From this definition, we get a clear idea of art and what kind of experience art provides. Critics divide art into two categories—fine art and practical art or craft. Art that is created for entertainment is a fine art. The art of listening to music, literature, etc., and the visual arts of architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, etc., and visual arts, and drama belong to *lalita kalā* or fine art. In contrast to art, craft refers to something that meets the needs of everyday life. Craft has a strong connection to people's daily lives.

Art and crafts are created based on people's folk life. Therefore, in the discussion about art, we have to consider folk art as well as folk life. Generally speaking, the art that has traditionally been practiced in folk societies is folk art.

Another terminology used in the research paper is “lighting”. The main purposes of lighting in a play are the revolution of scenery, the illusion of nature-realistic effect, the revelation of form-dimension,

the creation of atmosphere, design and composition-stage picture, and expressing the character's mindset (psychological expression-mood).^[xi] In ancient times, drama was staged only during the day, so no artificial light was used for it and the sun was the main source of light. Ancient Greek and Roman dramas are not known to have incorporated any kind of artificial light. Gradually, lamps, *oil śalitās*, *āriyās*, etc. were initiated at the beginning of the play's night performance. In the third chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bhārata mentions that when the *ghāt* breaks, the Nāṭacārya will light all the lamps on the stage with a lamp lit with a fearless mind.^[x] Śāṅkaradeva used this element with a beautiful combination of indigenous ingredients and crafts during the performance of *bhāonā*.

The term used next is “musical instrument”. In theatre music, any instrument used to produce sound is called a musical instrument. Śāṅkaradeva introduced his creativity and created the *khol* to perform the *Cihna-yātrā* and added a new musical instrument to the field of Assamese music. That instrument has been identified and hailed today as the bearer of the heritage of Assamese culture. Along with this, he introduced various types of cymbals. This paper will also consider how Śāṅkaradeva used indigenous elements in the context of making these musical instruments.

THE DISCUSSION:

The *bhakti* movement in Assam started by Śāṅkaradeva in the 16th century also greatly influenced the field of folk art and craft in Assam. During the propagation and spread of the *bhakti* movement, several activities related to arts and crafts were established in the institutions (e.g., *sattra*, *nāmghar*).^[xii] The way is still open for an in-depth discussion on this. However, in the 12th issue of *Dekāgiri*, a youth magazine of Śrīmanta Śāṅkaradeva Saṅgha, researcher Junmoni Gogoi has discussed some of these aspects.

First, let's discuss where *bhāona* is performed. *Bhāona* is performed mainly in *nāmghar*. Śāṅkaradeva, instead of constructing any stage and auditorium as described in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, used the open

floor of *nāmghar* as the stage and auditorium of *bhāona*. Śaṅkaradeva may have realised that he would not be able to create an impact if he simply drew the rural audience away from the stage. He might not be able to propagate his religion's core beliefs as well.

Nāmghar is a beautiful example of folk architecture. *Nāmghar* holds a very high position in Assamese folk society. *Nāmghar* is composed of four main parts - *maṅikūta*, *kīrtanghar*, *coghar*, and *bātcara*. In many places, however, only the *kīrtanghar* can be seen due to the economic condition. In the far East, the *kīrtanghar* is established in an east-west direction and the *maṅikūta* in a north-south direction. The *coghar* is usually built on the southwest side of the *nāmghar*. Earlier, four rows of poles were placed while constructing the *nāmghar*.

This is the main place where *bhāonas* are performed. When we look at any religious centre or temple from the time of Śaṅkaradeva, we see that all the religious centres are built of stone, brick, or similar architecture. These centres also have elaborate sculptures carved on them. There are many architectures in Assam, but instead of building any such architecture for the spread of devotion, it is made of bamboo, cane, wood, and straw. The traditional *dekā cām*^[xiii] usually has various paintings on the *cati*, *māralāi*, *khutā*. Such styles are also seen in *nāmghar*. The doors are decorated with paintings based on various incarnations of Kṛṣṇa or stories from several *purānas* related to Vaiṣṇavism. There are many examples of the cutting of floral decoration and the cutting of the idol of Jai-Vijay as the gatekeeper. It is to be noted that the Assamese folk artists have been painting these paintings from the beginning. Under the interest, request, and patronage of Nārāyaṇ Dās Thākur Ātā, Mādhavadeva designed and constructed the *Raṅgīyāl-grha* (*Raṅgvan-grha*) in Barpetā. Vibhiṣaṇ Ātā and Parbatīyā Kṛṣṇāi Ātai craft flowers and cut out the idol of Jai-Vijay as the gatekeeper in that *nāmghar*.^[xiii] Bamboo is a major component of Assamese culture. Bamboo is the daily commodity of the Assamese people from birth to death. Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva may have seen how this material is used in household

chores since childhood and was deeply familiar with Assamese folk architecture. Based on this, Śaṅkaradeva created the first Assamese permanent performance space. It has been mentioned in *Carit puthi* that Mādhavadeva applied bamboo-cane, added colours, etc., to the construction of *Raṅgīyāl-grha*.^[xiv] These facts prove that Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva succeeded in the artistic application of folk architecture to the construction of the stage. The reason is that what is done is to connect people in contemporary society to spiritual pursuits through art in a more humane way, and in this way to connect spiritual pursuits with everyday life in a more meaningful way.^[xv]

Incidentally, sometimes temporary *rabhās* are also used to perform *bhāonās*. It is mentioned in the *Carit puthi* that Mādhavadeva performed the *Govardhana-yātrā* by making a temporary *rabhā* in Sundaridiyā in such a way.^[xvi] Later, *bhāonā* took root in the royal court (in the royal court of Rajeshwar Singh in 1806), the stage of *bhāonā* also began to evolve and become more widespread.

Let us now discuss how indigenous art and crafts influenced the creation of the theatrical *āhārya* of *bhāonā*. There are many differences between the *bhāonā* performed today and the *bhāonā* performed in the days of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. There has been a radical change in the *āhārya* of *bhāonā*. There are some details in the *Carit puthi* about how *bhāonās* were performed or how *āhārya* was made during the reign of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. There are also differences of opinion among these performances. The first performance of Sankaradeva, the *Cinha-yātrā*, occupies the most space in *Carit puthi*. There is disagreement as to whether the play was staged. Maheshwar Neog also speculates that it may have been incorporated later.^[xvii] However, it was the beginning of the indestructible and unremitting journey that he made by integrating the *Mahābhārata* heritage and contemporary folk art into the crucible of his mind. With his compound, he embodied Assamese life and culture.^[xviii]

Any folk society in the world is usually full of natural artists. It ranges from daily necessities to items specially needed for various festivals and occasions. The Assamese folk society is also no exception. The basic structure of Assamese society is based on agriculture. Therefore, crafts have occupied a special place in their lives and livelihoods since ancient times. In addition, the availability of raw materials and low capital investment for such industries has also played a significant role in its development. In a work of art that relies on visual cues, however, traditional and personal changes also occur. Many parts of Assam are famous for a particular folk art form. These occupy a rare and proud place in several aspects of the folk art of Assam. Śaṅkaradeva achieved success by artistically applying the folk art and craft of Assam in terms of the *āhāryabhinaya* of *bhāonā*.

We have already mentioned in the discussion of the theoretical background that *āhāryabhinaya* is divided into four main categories. The first of these is *pusta*. The *mukhā* (mask) used in the *aṅkīyā bhāonā* belongs to the *pusta* and the mask is mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as the ‘*pratiśiṣa*’. In the *aṅkīyā bhāonā*, sometimes masks made of wood and masks made from the skin of a tree are used. However, masks made mainly from bamboo are more prevalent. There are three types of masks in *bhāonā* – *cho-mukhā*, *Lotokāi* or *Lotākari-mukhā* and *Mukh-mukhā* ^[xix], ^[xx] The *cho-mukhā* is large in nature, covering the whole body. They are the characters of *Nṛsimha*, *Rāvaṇa*, *Bāṇarājā*, *Kumbhakarṇa*, *Narakāsura*, *Bakāsura*, etc. The *Lotokāi mukhā* is slightly smaller than the *cho-mukhā*, but it is also a full-body mask. For example, masks of *Putanā Rākṣasī*, *Tarakā Rakṣasī*, *Śaṅkhacūḍa*, etc. *Mukh-mukhā*, on the other hand, is a face mask that fits only on the face; for example, the masks worn by *Māris*, *Brahma*, *Subāhu*, etc. The mask, which they began in the post-Śaṅkarī period, evolved into a distinctive folk art form. ^[xxi] The staging of the *Cihna-yātrā* play is a prime example of the fact that Śaṅkaradeva started this tradition. ^[xxii]

The process of producing these *mukhās*’ was derived from folk society. The formula for making masks with bamboo sticks is closely

associated with the folk life of Assam. The style is known as the *lakhim sūtra* and is adopted by the farmers of Assam to weave *ṭoms* (bamboo baskets) for storing crop seeds.^[xxiii] Śaṅkaradeva may have seen the tradition of constructing baskets in this way. The method of making this basket is an excellent example of craftsmanship. The outside of the mask is completed with clay, cow dung, cloth, etc. Masks are painted to shape the character. They are also used to dye, primarily with traditional colours like *heṅgul*, *hāitāl*, *indigo*, *dhāl māṭi*, and black. Similarly, they made brushes out of feathers, goat hair or cotton and painted them. Bamboo canes were dipped in paint to keep paint in place. Jute was mainly used to make hair. Indian bael was added as glue to bind the paint sticks. These are all resources used by the craftsmen of Assam since ancient times. Śaṅkaradeva did not deviate from the *śāstra-imagined* ideals of the scriptures, and he did not deviate from the concept of the scriptures, but he developed a tradition of refining the different elements of life in Assam and incorporating them in a new form. In other words, amid this scriptural rule-making, Śaṅkaradeva turned from his artistic consciousness to the symbolic journey of *Cihna-yātrā* to *Rāma-vijaya*.^[xxiv]

The second tool of edible acting is ornamentation or *alaṅkāra*. As has already been mentioned, ornaments include garlands, ornaments, clothes, etc., used on the limbs and appendages of an actor. There is no detailed mention of the original use of ornaments in *aṅkīyā bhāonā*. In the context of the performance of Mādhavadeva's play *Bhojan-Behār* in Rāmcaraṇ Thākura's *Carit puthi*, there is only a reference to Kṛṣṇa taking the flute in his hand with a peacock feather on his head. The use of *bukuwāli* and *pithāhāli* is a relatively recent invention^[xxv]. However, there is no lack of evidence that indigenous materials were also used in these aspects. For example, in the context of the play *Nṛsimha-yātrā* presented by Mādhavadeva, it is mentioned in the *Carit puthi* that they used one type of seed of an indigenous plant (*purai*) for detecting blood.^[xxvi] The fact that the red colour is produced by grinding the seeds of the *purai* was derived from folklore by Mādhavadeva. Similarly, the reference to

'*parbatchosajile*^[xxvii] when Mādhavadeva performed the *Govardhana-yātrā* suggests that he built it of bamboo and cane. Essentially, it was created based on Assamese indigenous crafts to meet the needs of the play. The characters also wore various headgear, gems, necklaces, earrings, anklets, etc., crafted by Assamese craftsmen. They are used in *bhāonās* by wrapping cloth around a base made of tree bark, cotton leaves or bamboo sticks and applying gems, beads, stripes, and various colours. It is not known exactly how these were made during the time of the two *gurus*. The use of indigenous materials in the manufacture of masks, however, indicates they existed during their time. Despite this, the royal dress used in *bhāonās* today is not an ancient application.

Aṅga-racanā or organs are the third component of audible acting. Body composition is the process by which an actor paints his body in different colours. The use of *heṅgul-hāitāl-nīl-dhāl clay* for the construction of the paintings of *Cihna-yātrā*, the masks, and the colourful *nāmghar* built by Mādhavadeva suggests that these materials were also used for organs.^[xxviii] There is also no mention of this in the time of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. However, based on the fact that Mādhavadeva used *purai* seeds to draw blood in the *Nṛsimha-yātrā*, it is not difficult to imagine that the two *gurus* obtained the necessary resources for organ formation from folklore. The fourth element of *āhāryabhinaya* is *sañjība*. The presentation of an animal on stage as an instrument of drama is called *sañjība*. It is not discussed here in detail.

In this context, tools of warfare were indicated - maces, swords, bows, arrows, shields, axes, etc. These are still crafted out of bamboo-cane-wood-jute. Similarly, the hair is made of jute, as is the *jalām* worn by characters like monkey. *Hanuman*, *Bear*, etc., are also made by artistically applying indigenous ingredients. Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva started the tradition of *āhārya* and performance, which was later further enhanced by the hands of various indigenous craftsmen. Both of them have given a new life and status to the folk art and craft of Assam. They have applied content from the folk life

of this region to the *āhārya*, decoration, and technical aspects of *bhāonā*.^[xxix]

While staging the *Cihna-yātrā*, Śaṅkaradeva created a dramatic atmosphere by incorporating indigenous elements to illuminate the light. He designed lighting using *jor*, *āriyā*, *cautārā*, *gacāvanti*, *mahatā*, etc., and by weaving motifs out of *agnigaḍa*, he gave his basic talent its signature. The nine lamps in *agnigaḍa* brighten up the edge of *agnigaḍa*, where all the characters dance for a while before entering for the first time. In the same way, *mahatā*, *fīrfiri*, *fuljāri*, etc., were also employed to enhance beauty. Displaying greatness brightened their faces. *Fīrfiri* was used to create an atmosphere of conflict, terror, and strangeness. It was essential to burn *fīrfiri* and *fuljāri* during the entry of Rāma-Kṛṣṇa. This light is taken out by placing *heṅgul-hāitāl* on a large lamp of sweet oil to create a colourful floral *jor*.^[xxx] by burning cloth in oil, wrapped in bamboo and wood, a *gacā* built of clay or metal, a *cautārā* like glass, earthen lamps of various sizes, etc. Śaṅkaradeva brought the bundle from his folk life and placed it next to the *bhāonā*. *Gacā* and *cautārā* were made by Assamese metal artists; the people of Assam have taken the lamps made by the potters and used them to illuminate the *bhāonā*, and gave them a high status to these crafts. To make a *mahatā*, *fīrfiri*, *phuljāri*, *sāṅgeli*, etc., used for fireworks, they would wipe it with cow dung water and leave it without use for several days. Rāmcaraṇ Thākur mentions all of these activities in his *Guru-carita*.^[xxxi]

It has already been mentioned that Śaṅkaradeva introduced his creativity and added a distinct musical instrument to the field of Assamese music by creating the *khol*. This was done to perform the *Cihna-yātrā*. That instrument is today recognized and celebrated as the bearer of the heritage of Assamese culture. In the *Guru-carita*, there is a description of how this musical instrument is made.^[xxxii]

The size of the *khol* given by Śaṅkaradeva is mentioned in the *Kathāguru-carita*, as seven fingers on the right side and thirteen fingers on the right side. Although the type of material (clay or wood) used to craft the *khol* is unknown, Śaṅkaradeva indeed made the *khol*

for the *Cihna-yātrā* performance. From this discussion, we can say that in the field of making the *khol*, Śaṅkaradeva, with the innovative power of his mind, made a revolutionary musical instrument to the surprise of the Assamese craftsman (potter). Similarly, in *Santāvalī*, *Bardoā Guru Carita* the preparation of different types of cymbals (*bhortāl*, *bartāl*, *khuṭital*, *manjirā tāl* etc.) by Assamese bell metal artists has been described in detail.

CONCLUSION:

The description suggests that Śaṅkaradeva elevated Assamese folk art and craft to a higher level by artistically applying indigenous elements to *añkīyā bhāonā*. We have discussed in this paper how folk architecture can be applied to the construction of *bhāonā* performance venues. Also, we have discussed the *āhārya* of *bhāonā*, lighting, musical instruments, etc. The journey of *bhāonā* gave the people of Assam an environment of transcendental pleasure-seeking practice with the beauty of sight and hearing – where religion is practiced through art, where art compliments religion. This paper attempts to address this issue as a whole. There is still room for an in-depth discussion on this issue.

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VṚNDĀVANĪ-VAŚTRA

THE WONDER TEXTILE DESIGNED BY

ŚAṆKARADEVA

Dr. Dayananda Pathak

Vṛndāvanī-vastra, a wonder textile, represents one very unique dimension of Śaṅkaradeva's (1449-1568) creative and artistic life and personality. A social integrator and a literary stalwart with multidimensional literary expressions, Śaṅkaradeva's creativity and artistic talent came to the forefront as and when he was at Barpetā (Pātbāusī), and subsequently at Koch Behar. The making of the *Vṛndāvanī-vastra*, the wonder textile, was taken up by the saint at the instance of Koch monarch Naranārāyaṇa during the 16th century. The king wanted Śaṅkaradeva to weave the entire panoramic view of the divine acts (*līlās*) of Lord Kṛṣṇa, being fully presented in the proposed textile piece with wizardry in colour. Since the divine acts of Lord Kṛṣṇa were shown in the textile piece, the same was described as *Vṛndāvanī-vastra* in common parlance amongst the Vaiṣṇavite devotees and the people at large. *Vṛndāvanī-vastra* is 180 feet long and 90 feet in breadth. The work of weaving the *vastra* could be completed within a period of about one year by a team of 60 to 70 weavers under the active supervision of Śaṅkaradeva, who designed all the details of the wonder textile, including the colour combinations and the portrayals of the characters centring round the idol of Lord Kṛṣṇa. The saint was also assisted in his mega textile project by Mādhavadeva, Nārāyaṇdās Thākur and Mathurādās Buḍhā Ātā and a group of veteran weavers. The pictorial narratives cover the childhood days of Lord Kṛṣṇa down to the killing of the demonic King Kaṁsa of Mathura. The panoramic, colourful and picturesque presentation of the Lord's divine act very skilfully and artfully woven into the wonder textile, he created history that is something

unimaginable during the 16th century. The Vaiṣṇavite fraternity hold the *vastra* as something divinely inspired and spiritually empowered.

Where do we find the uniqueness of the textile piece? On the one hand it reflects the creativity of the saint-poet. Earlier he never thought of textile designing in any part of his life. It is only after King Naranārāyaṇa's request, Śaṅkaradeva took the matter rather seriously. He readily agreed to design the Kṛṣṇa *līlā* in textile. The king was also pleased, and he agreed to supply the spinning materials from his end. Accordingly, the work of weaving started with an orchestrated effort of a good number of weavers from Tātikuchi (Barpetā) under the direct supervision of Śaṅkaradeva. He had to plan the designing with meticulous endeavour. He had to think of the designing of the Kṛṣṇa *līlā* that had to be relishable to every viewer without any negative point or lapse in any point. He thought, every viewer must find the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* in the textile piece. They must see Lord Kṛṣṇa in the work, and their devotion being more internalized. Besides, the work must be an artistic expression, Śaṅkaradeva reasoned within himself. The devotee of Lord Kṛṣṇa and the creative artists must be rolled into one for the success of his enterprise. In order to bring in the *līlā* of the Lord in its totality, the textile pieces must also cover a larger space. So the saint had to address different and diverse issues without any compromise in any level. The words of the king went on ringing in his ears. The time factor was no less important. The saint wanted to complete the work within a reasonable period of time. So, about sixty to hundred artisans had to be put in action. Even Mādhavadeva was not spared from the work. Mādhavadeva also worked hard within his competence. With the united efforts of the weavers being led by Śaṅkaradeva, the *Vṛndāvanī-vastra* became a reality.

Having seen the wonder textile king Naranārāyaṇa was simply flabbergasted. He was at a loss. He thought how a work of that magnitude and artistic excellence could ever be completed by the effort of the saint! His happiness knew no bound as and when he saw the lively presentation of the divine acts of Kṛṣṇa very artistically woven to life. The king preserved the *Vṛndāvanī-vastra* with care and devotional fervour in his royal archive. But how the wonder textile

found its way to England and France during the colonial regime is a matter of investigative history. Just as Kohinoor, the wonder stone got its way to England and straight to the queen's crown, the *Vṛndāvanī-vastra* too found its way to the museums of England and France. About the transfer of the textile treasure different stories are afloat. The credibility of those stories and accounts ought to be decided by the historians.

After India came under the colonial British rule all the royal sovereign powers practically lost their relevance. Under the debilitating and divisive situations, prevailing in the Koch monarchy, the wonder textile got shifted to different places along with other prized items from the royal archive. Under the same situation, pieces of the wonder textile got shifted to different museums of UK and France.

The *Vṛndāvanī-vastra* is considered to be one of the precious and invaluable artistic works ever performed by Śaṅkaradeva with the help of his chief disciple Mādhavadeva and other apostles of the Vaiṣṇavite fraternity. The Barpetā Satra, established by Mādhavadeva (1490-1596 A.D.) was one of the prime centres of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. It is said, this *satra* was built up retaining the length and breadth of the *Vṛndāvanī-vastra*. That is to say, the built up area of the *satra* is stated to be identical with the size of the *Vṛndāvanī-vastra*. Such guess works are afloat amongst the devotees. About Barpetā Satra there are rich accounts written by the then officials of the British colonial regime. The people of Assam have a special religio-emotional attachment for the classic *Vṛndāvanī-vastra* that they had not had the opportunity to see for the last five hundred years. Of late, the Government of Assam, with the acquiescence of the foreign ministry of the Government of India has been able to obtain the affirmative note from the Government of United Kingdom for bringing the available piece of the wonder textile on to Assam for a brief period.

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EKA ŚARAṆA HARI NĀMA DHARMA OF ŚRĪMANTA ŚAṆKARADEVA AND OTHER VAIṢṆAVITE ORDERS OF INDIA

Dr. Indira Saikia Bora

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, the greatest Vaiṣṇava saint of Assam was well-known for his religious reform activities. He preached a new religious ideology known as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*.

There are four paths or *mārgas* leading to union with God. Hindu scriptures have elaborately explained these paths. These are the *karma-mārga* or the path of action, *yoga-mārga* or the path psychic concentration, *jñāna-mārga* or the path of knowledge, and *bhakti-mārga* or the path of devotion and love. The fourth one is the highest one. In this stage the devotees perform *karma* pertaining to God only without thinking for a moment anything about the consequence because his love and devotion to God becomes a part and parcel of him. *Bhakti* implies ardent love and devotion for God. It has always been considered as the safest and surest path for God-realization. *Bhakti* means intense love for God. Nārada, Sanata Kumāra, Caṇḍilya and all the well known seers of ancient time stated most emphatically that nothing is counted in the court of God except love and devotion. Nārada in his *Bhakti-sūtra* went to the extent of saying “*sā bhakti parānuraktirīṣvara*”. Devotion to God purifies man on the earth.

Even Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, an intellectual and spiritual prodigy, and an exponent of *jñāna mārga*, said that without devotion and love, the path of knowledge alone could not bear any fruit. Śaṅkarācārya’s *Bhaja Govindam* has a very sharp strain of *bhakti*.

The teaching of twelve *Ālvārs* and *Nayanārs* of the South, particularly those of Nammalvar and Āndal, preached *bhakti* in the 12th century to 17th century. They had started before the *bhakti* cult spread as a movement in different parts of India.

It was, however, Jayadeva, the author of *Gīta-govindam* who became the real pioneer of in the middle age. He not only sang the earthly and erotic love of Kṛṣṇa and Radhā, but sublimated into a mystic and spiritual love. After him Vidyāpati and Canididāsa added great spiritual flavour on that theme and sang the song of divine love of Radhā- Kṛṣṇa.

Therefore, in the course of the next three or four centuries there emerged a great galaxy of luminous stars that shone in the different parts of India radiating light of *bhakti*. Nāmadeva, Ekanāth, Tukārām in Maharastra, Kabir in Northern India, Guru Nānak and his nine spiritual successors of Punjab, Caitanya, Rupa and Sanātan in the West Bengal, and Mahāpuruṣa Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva in Eastern India were parts of these galaxy. But Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's new doctrine *Eka-Śaraṇa-Harī-Nāma-Dharma* i.e. the religion of supreme surrender to one God, Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa was an exceptionally unique religious system, different from other systems prevalent in India.

The Sanskrit word *Śaraṇa* means shelter and *Eka* means 'one only'. Hence the new *bhakti* cult is known as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Harī-Nāma-Dharma*. *Nāma* here stands for the names and attributes of lord Kṛṣṇa. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva drew his inspiration for his new faith from the Vedas, the *Gītā*, *upaniṣadas*, and *purāṇas*, particularly from the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, comprising the most essential parts of the Vedānta philosophy, served as the inexhaustible source for Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva. The Vaiṣṇavism of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva is also known as *Nāma-dharma* where the means of worshiping God is the chanting of His name with undeviating devotion. The advantage of chanting the name of God is that anyone can do it irrespective of one's age, sex, or caste, and at any time or place.

Other Vaiṣṇavite cults in India have recommended the worship of a female entity as the attribute of God. In the system of Mādhvācārya, Rāmānanda and Rāmānuja, worship of Lakṣmī is suggested along with the worship of God. Rāmānuja composed three verses known as ‘*Gadyatraya*’ to sing eulogies of the Goddess Lakṣmī. Yamunācārya also sang Lakṣmī’s glory in his *Kāntā Strotam*. Vallabhācārya, Nimbārka, and Caitanya, on the other hand worshiped Rādhā. Again the deity Varāhī was worshipped by the Southern Vaiṣṇavites along with lord Varāha. It is thus clear that these Vaiṣṇavite saints worshipped *Śakti*.

But Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva maintained that the *bhakti-mārga* was one and the only way to realize God. The nine-fold way of devotion viz. *Śravaṇa* (i.e. hearing the various names and descriptions of the glorious activities of God), *Kīrtana* (i.e. chanting the name and singing the glorious attributes of God), *Smarāṇa* (i.e. remembering the names and attributes of God), *Padasevana* (i.e. serving the feet of God), *Arcana* (i.e. offering worship to God with sixteen kinds of paraphernalia), *Vandana* (i.e. offering prayer), *Dāśya* (i.e. the attribute of being a servant of God), *Sakhya* (i.e. the attitude of considering God as the best friend), *Ātma nivedana* (i.e. surrendering everything, whatever one has, even the devotee himself to God).

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva thus prescribed a very simple mode of religious worship which was absolutely free from ritualistic complexities and was the simplest, tolerant, and the easiest way of attaining God.

Another very important aspect of Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva’s religious system is the social recognition of all men and women irrespective of their caste, creed, and status. He did not attach any importance to the caste system in his religious order. Thus in the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* he said emphatically:

nāhi bhakatita jāti ajāti bicāra /
kṛṣṇa bhakatita samastare adhīkāra //

It means that there is no distinction of classes in *bhakti*. Everybody has equal right to chant the name of Kṛṣṇa.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva not only preached these principles but also ensured that these were practised. He initiated all sections of people including the aboriginal tribes of hills and plains and even Muslims in his order.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva discarded idol worship, even that of lord Kṛṣṇa. During the performance of religious ceremonies, a sacred book (especially Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's translation of *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*) is placed on a pedestal tray (*thāpanā*). Offerings and homage are paid to that holy book.

An important feature of Vaiṣṇavism in Northern India was the combined worship of Rāma or Kṛṣṇa along with Sītā or Rādhā. But Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva rejected the female element altogether. His object of devotion is Kṛṣṇa or Rāma alone, without any complementary second.

Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was a house-holder. He discouraged celibacy for the purpose of devotion. But following Mādhavadeva, who was a celibate, there are some *kevalīyā* (celibate) monks in some *satras*. However, there are no nuns in his order. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva was a monotheist. According to him Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa is the ultimate reality, who is one without any second. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the absolute reality of *Pūrṇa Brahma*. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva maintains that Śrī Kṛṣṇa is *nirguṇa*. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the repository of all auspicious qualities like omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc. He is the cause of origination, sustenance and destruction of the world. He is both the material and the efficient cause of this world. According to Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's view *nirguṇa* does not mean absence of all qualities, rather it means the absence of all inferior qualities, *Brahma* and *Paramātmā* which is the indwelling self. In the chapter *Haramohana* of *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva clearly states his philosophical views and his concept of supreme *Brahma*. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva advocates selfless love for God without any

desire. In *Bhaktī-ratnākara*, he said that a true devotee never hankers after *Sayujya-mukti*; he considers *bhakti* as superior to *mukti*.

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ŚRĪMANTA ŚAṄKARADEVA AND THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT IN ASSAM: A PHILOSOPHICAL VISION

Dr. Joy Krishna Mahanta

The spiritual movement that emerged in India during the middle age, encompassing *bhakti* or devotion in its centre was never a scattered or sporadic event. In one hand the *mīmāṃsākas*, headed by Sabaraswami and Kumarila Bhatta abnegated the magnanimity of the Supreme Self, the over lord of *sr̥sti*, *sthiti* and *pralaya* and advocated that sacrificial observances can grant salvation. On the other side, Śaṅkarācārya upheld the theory of *māyā*, popularly known as *Māyāvāda*, developing a negative attitude towards life and the universe.

Reacting to this new religious concept there emerged a revolution throughout the whole of India which tried to develop the ideal of practical devotional mysticism based on philosophical mysticism of the *upaniṣadas*. The chief objective of this new idea was to establish the omnipotent grandeur of the supreme soul and to inculcate the idea of chaste and unfaltering devotion to the supreme entity which can grant deliverance to a devotee. They also teach the people that through this *bhakti* an individual can achieve the higher realisation that each and every individual is equal as a total religious being. Later this was identified as the *bhakti* movement or Indian Spiritual Renaissance. It was also called the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement.

Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva of Assam was one of the chief advocates of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement. The saint poet with his amazing potentiality and unfathomable knowledge and above all with a generous and kind heart made to feel the people of Assam that each

and every individual is indispensable part of the Great Lord Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. In this way Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva succeeded enormously in establishing a religious thread between devotees and their worshipful deity granting all kinds of social, economic, spiritual right and equality.

Before going to the detailed discussion one thing is to be noted that Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva should not be termed as a philosopher in that sense in which we can call Śaṅkarācārya a philosopher. Of course Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva had a deep and extensive philosophical background throughout his religious life and to erect this philosophical faith and ideal he composed or translated the selective portions of different scriptures that fulfil the objective of his mission. Undoubtedly Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva was the only man who pioneered philosophical thinking in Eastern India.

In this context Birinchi Kumar Baruah said, ‘Śaṅkaradeva was not a philosopher, nor did he endeavour to evolve a new philosophy. Nevertheless, his literary works are pointers to the fact that he was steeped in the lore of Hindu Philosophy’^[i]

In this discussion we shall try to highlight the remarkable features of the faith and ideals of Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva’s *bhakti* movement in Assam as reflected in his works. In doing so we shall confine chiefly into his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* –the *magnum opus* of his faith, philosophy and ideals.

The ideal of Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva was not to propagate a religion supported by discursive reasoning and abstract thinking, but to propagate a simple system based on devotion and faith^[ii]. Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva could realise very clearly that the demand of a refined and developed life had been growing stronger than a set of theory based on philosophical maxims among the masses because the people around whom he was going to preach the doctrine of his creed, were mostly illiterate. Therefore, unlike different philosophers of India, e.g. Śaṅkarācārya, Rāmānuja, Ballabhācārya, Mādhvācārya or Nimbārka, who established their spiritual ideals through complex philosophical speculations, Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva discovered a

simple, easy and delightful means of devotion. Dr. Maheswar Neog writes: ‘Śaṅkaradeva of Assam and Caitanya-deva of Bengal did not, however, deem it necessary to follow the example of these sects in composing such glosses.’^[iii]

The advent of Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva in the religious field of Assam has accelerated the pace of spiritual, cultural and social resurgence. Śaṅkaradeva revolted against the sacerdotal despotism that prevailed in the country erstwhile and has declared spiritual equality for all men making them to develop universal brotherhood. S.K. Chatterjee writes: ‘He was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing a purer spiritual life. He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of medieval India as a whole shone upon the life of Assam.’^[iv]

In order to propagate his faith among the unlettered masses of Assam around him this great saint has composed the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, the *Bhakti-ratnākara*, Assamese versification of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, several one act plays named as *aṅkīyā nāṭas*, devotional songs and many other treatises. *Hariścandra-upākhyāna*, *Rukmiṇī-harana*, *Bali-calana*, *Gajendropākhyāna*, *Amṛta-manthana* and *Kuruksetra* and the like are compositions of *Akhyāyikā* class. He also composed *Uttarā Kāṇḍa Ramāyaṇa*, *Bhakti-pradīpa* and *Nimi-Navasiddha-Sambāda*. All these works were considered to be very significant works of higher ideals of *bhakti*.

Among all these compositions, it is said, his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā* was his *magnum opus* and all his ideals, faith and philosophy are reflected very clearly in this great treatise. Here also, a close observation will reveal that Śrīamanta Śaṅkaradeva tried to simplify the obscure philosophy and religious maxims in very simple language and homely ideas. Bezbaroa writes: “Śaṅkara did not start with any Vedāntic thesis on the nature of Godhead as the basis of his teachings. The Deity of the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata* was sufficient for him”.^[v]

It is mentioned in our earlier discussion, that, Śaṅkaradeva wrote for the ordinary people and so he has deliberately omitted

philosophical complexities. The reason of it is not far to seek hair splinting controversies on philosophy, but the main objective of Śaṅkaradeva was to propagate a religious faith based on Śravaṇa Kīrtana type of bhakti only.

Nāma or the holy name of the supreme Lord, according to Śaṅkaradeva's faith, is the ultimate object, by singing and chanting which one can attain the supreme goal of life. In his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, Śaṅkaradeva records:

*nāmesē karibe parama siddhi |
harira nāma jagatara nidhi ||*

(*Nāmāparādha* - 59)

(Only the holy name of the Lord has the capacity and ability to rescue an individual from worldly torments and as such this holy name appears to be the priceless treasure in the world.)

And subsequently the great saint poet tries to inculcate the ideals of his faith in a very precise and simplified way in the following lines of his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*:

*‘parama bāndhava harira nāma |
yijane āka lave abīsrāma ||
tāra sāta kārya sādhive dekhā |
prati prati lovā sātaro lekhā ||
prathame dahibe pātakacaya |
karibe mahāpuṇya abhyudaya ||
karāibe viṣayata virakati |
kṛṣṇnata povāibe prema bhakati ||
upajāibe āti vaiṣṇava jñāna |
māyāko dahiya kare nirjāna ||
caitainya mūrti pūrnānanda hari |
thaibanta tente yere eka kari ||’*

Nāmāparādha: 64-66

In these lines Śaṅkaradeva has hinted to almost all the ideals of his faith namely the supremacy of the holy name and its purging

effect within the mind of an individual, the nature of *pātaka* or sinful activities, *puṇya* or meritorious deeds, the torment and affliction of worldly pleasure or *viṣaya*, rejection of sensual pleasure or *vairāgya*, the greatest efficacy of *prema bhakti* or devotion of love towards the Lord, appearance of the *ātmajñāna* or supreme knowledge, annihilation of the deluding potency of *māyā* or false knowledge and lastly the identification of individual soul and the Supreme Soul.

Here in this context one thing must be noted that Śaṅkaradeva has recorded all his spiritual experiences and cognizance following the ideals of *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The faith and philosophy of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* was the model of Śaṅkaradeva. Therefore, to elaborate his ideals, Śaṅkaradeva had taken the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* to be his exemplar. Not only this, in course his development of ideals, very often he had to resort to the *Bhāgavata Bhāvartha Dipikā* (the famous annotation of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* of Sridharaswami) to bring out the purport of the complexities. Because monism of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, enriched with Sridharaswami's scholastic interpretation had worked greatly upon medieval Vaiṣṇava faith.

His (Sridhara's) interpretation of the *purāṇa* is Adventist since he was a follower of Śaṅkara, and since the *Bhāgavata* itself tends to be monist, the *Dipikā* is usually regarded as the most authoritative.

Thus Śaṅkaradeva, following the ideals of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* has propounded a series of ideals reflecting his faith throughout his works. We cannot find anything that is not recommended by the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* in Śaṅkaradeva's writings. These ideals and faiths are found revolving around every page of his works in a very easy, lucid and familiar language which produced a perennial source of attraction to the devotees. The easy accomplishment of *Śravaṇa* and *Kīrtana* type of *bhakti*, the pervading magnanimity of the holy name as the refuge amid sinful affluences of the Dark Age, *karma vipāka* or the bondages of *karma*, the concept of *Brahma*, relation between the individual self and the *paramātmā*, *pāpa* and *puṇya* etc. are the principal ideals of Śaṅkaradeva's faith and these are blended very lucidly in his writings especially, in his holy *Kīrtana*. Along

with these the devastation of *māyā* or illusion and the futility of the sensory perception had also been hinted to at many places. However, the poet with unequivocal words has announced that there is no necessity of acquiring vast knowledge or performing austerities and the like to attain Godhood because His association is very easy through *Śravaṇa* and *Kīrtana* of His name.

nalāge deva dvīja ṛṣi huibe |
nalāge sambhṛt sāstra jānibe ||
michāte mare āna karma kari |
hovanta bhakatite tuṣṭa hari

|| *Pāṣaṇḍa-mardana* -120

Śaṅkaradeva in almost all his works has dealt with the concept of *māyā* with easy and homely examples. Theoretically *māyā* or illusion is the only cause of false knowledge which in turn produces duality of knowledge within the mind of an individual. Two activities of *māyā* have been accepted and these are:

- (1) *āvaraṇa* or concealment of true knowledge
- (2) *vikṣepana* or dispersal of false knowledge

The poet explains this with easy words:

avastuka dekhavaya vastuka āvari |
ehise mohora māyā jānā nista kari ||

Bhāgavata - 2/649

Māyā or illusion has been attributed to the Supreme Soul as one of his qualities or power and is responsible for all kinds of duality and illusory knowledge or *avidyā*. Illusory knowledge begets bondage and bondages cause birth and re-birth, the root of all kinds of affliction, torment and anxiety. The activity and influence of *māyā* is so powerful that even Gods like Brahmā or Rudra cannot escape from it. Śaṅkaradeva writes in his verses:

brahmā adikari yata devata paṇḍita |
yāhara pantha hove māyāye mohita ||

But in spite of unlimited deluding potency, *māyā* has no effect or influence upon the Great Lord as *māyā* is only a creation of the God. God has created *māyā* only to continue the process of creation of the world:

anādi rūpīnī puruṣara ardha kāyā |
vyakta bhailā mahāmāyā īśvara icchāya ||'

Anādi-pātana -45

or

mukūṭa kuṇḍala yena suvarṇare bhinna nuhi
michā mātra nāma rūpa yata |
ahaṅkāra pañcabhūta tomāta pṛthaka nuhi
prabhu paramārtha vicārata ||

Vedastuti-1670

or

māyādiro īśa tumi anādi ananta

Śiśu-līlā-747

Another very important ideal of Śaṅkaradeva's faith is *karma*. *Karma*, according to Indian philosophy, is the cause of all sorrows of life and after life if it is inclined towards the pursuit of worldly pleasure. Śaṅkaradeva, following the ideals of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, has treated this idea of bondage of *karma* very significantly and the final prescription is recommended that the shackle of *karma*, the chain of birth and re-birth can only be shackled off through unfaltering devotion to the Lord and utterance of his holy name. This idea has been presented dramatically through the conversation between Prahlāda and Narasiṃha in the holy *Kīrtana*. Prahlāda asked the Lord:

kahio upāya kimate erāṅho
nidāruṇa dukha śoka

Prahlāda-caritra -443

And the Lord, in the verses of Śaṅkaradeva, prescribes the ways to get rid of such torment and affliction caused by delusion and attachment to sensuality:

sadāye śunibi mora kathā |
mora rūpa cintibi sarvathā ||
save karma bandha haiba kshiṇa |
anta kāle mota yāibi līna ||'

Prahlāda-caritra - 453,454

The concept of God or *Īśvara* as a pervading and omnipotent entity has been propounded by Śaṅkaradeva in his works with powerful and easy diction. According to the *Bhāgavat-purāṇa*, Brahma is the only knowable and substantial object in the universe who is also known as *Paramātmā* and *Bhagavāna*:

vadanti tat tattvavidastattvaṃ yaj jñānamadvyam |
brahmeti paramātmēti bhagavāniti śabdyate ||

Bhāgavat-purāṇa - 1/2/11

Śaṅkaradeva in pursuance of the above idea writes:

brahma paramātmā bhagavanta eka tattva |
ekarese tinināma lakṣana bhedata ||

Nimi Nava Siddha Saṁvāda – 180

It is also noteworthy that both the traits of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* aspects of God, as prescribed in the *Bhāgavata*, have been explained by Śaṅkaradeva in his holy *Kīrtana* vividly:

caitanya svarūpe vyāpi eka nirañjana |
tomāka bulibe dvaita kona aññajana ||

Ureṣa-varṇana - 160

In fact, Śaṅkaradeva and other followers of Vaiṣṇava faith of Assam laid much stress upon *Saguṇa Brahma* or the God endowed with *guṇa* because the theory of *bhakti* assumes the idea of personal God. Therefore, Śaṅkaradeva and as well as the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* delineate Kṛṣṇa, the worshipful deity, many a times as a child with

ordinary human qualities. This was done with a view to create more and more intimacy with the adorable God. Sometimes, the Lord appears as an ordinary one to the devotees. For example, the words of Yaśodā resemble those of a loving mother who is weary of her son's mischiefs:

*kene māṭi khāili are gopāla |
kobāi āji tora phāḍibo chāla ||*

Śiśu-līlā - 665

But immediately after that, knowledge per excellence flashed momentarily within Yaśodā and she was aware of Kṛṣṇa's omnipotence:

*nuhikanta mora putra manuṣa |
ehentese viṣṇu ādi puruṣa ||*

Śiśu-līlā - 674

A faithful submission to the supreme Lord is said to be the only means to get rid of the bondages caused by too much attachment to the worldly pleasure and sensual enjoyment. The highest good of an individual, according to the doctrines of Indian philosophy, is cessation of the cycle of birth and re-birth. According to the ideals of Śaṅkaradeva this can be attained through untiring refuge to the holy name of the Lord with a keen sense of submission unto his lotus feet. Śaṅkaradeva writes:

*putra dāra dhana ātese rati |
savāto adhama yi pāpa mati ||
sisava pāpato hove taraṇa |
yadi haripave love saraṇa ||'*

Nāmāparadhā - 41

To elaborate the moral that actions of an individual yield highest good of relieving from desire Sankaradeva tries to reveal the ideal of *niṣkāma karma* as enjoined in the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* and admonishes his followers to reject all activities tinged with desire. His ideal is that

action of an individual produces highest fruit if it is inclined towards the God. He writes:

*niskāme kariyā sakale karma |
viṣṇuta arpibā sisava dharma ||*

Pāṣaṇḍa-mardana - 95

The trivially, futility and evanescence of sensual enjoyment have been declared repeatedly throughout all his works. Guided by ignorance, human beings seem to run after mad pursuit of sensual gratification and become averse to the immanence of the Supreme Lord, inviting their ignominious doom.

So the prime of an individual should be a total resignation into the will of the Supreme Soul, who alone is capable of granting supreme bliss:

*ati lavaleśa viṣaya sukha |
āke lāgi bhaila hari vimukha ||
nakare rati hari kīrtanata |
āpuna karme sio bhaila hata ||*

Pāṣaṇḍa-mardana – 110

We have already mentioned that Śaṅkaradeva worked chiefly for the ordinary downtrodden people around him. He was much afflicted to see the ill fate of the poor people in observing the too much extravagant Vedic rituals and sacrifices. Therefore, with his new ideology, this great saint has dissuaded individuals from the pompous observances of the Vedic sacrifices and recommends the easy, simple and honest ways of Śravaṇa and Kīrtana type of bhakti. He writes:

*ajuteka yajña kare meru sama
suarṇaka deya dāna |
eka śata bhāgo govinda nāmara
reṇuka nuhi samana ||'*

Ajāmila-upākhyāna - 211

In many places of his writings and especially in the holy Kīrtana, the poet announces the glory of human life and repeatedly reminds

the devotees that human life can be attained by virtue of accumulated merits of crores of previous births. The poet further praises human life with the words that it is so adorable that even the gods like Brahma desires to take birth as human being because this human body is the source of all knowledge and merits:

*'devaro vāñcani manuṣya janma |
upaje āte jata jñāna dharmā ||'*

Prahlāda-caritra - 225

In this context our poet never forgets to admonish the devotees that sensual gratification, the chief agents of all misfortunes and miseries, can also be obtained in an animal body. Therefore, it is of no use or total folly to hanker after it making the precious human life futile:

*durlabha manuṣya janma nakarā viphalā |
cinta mane mādhavara caraṇa kamalā ||
henajāni viṣayata huyoka vimukha |
paśu śorīrato pāi viṣayara sukha ||'*

Prahlāda-caritra - 358,360

Along with the admonition the poet puts forward the easiest remedy of all kinds of moral and spiritual lapses that a human being has to recon throughout his hazardous journey of life, and has stated that the noble qualities of the holy name has the greatest efficacy to dispel ignorance from human heart making them truly meritorious:

*hari nāme sava pātaka dahave
jñāne bā ajñāne bolai |
yena hutaśane śukhana kāṣṭhaka
āti aprayase polai ||*

Ajāmila-upākhyāna -186

Another very important ideal of Śaṅkaradeva as reflected in his works is that a devotee should always keep himself away from anger, because wrath is the cause of all evils. It ensures the downfall of an individual because unrestrained anger paves the way of destruction.

The *Śrīmadvagavadgītā*, the exemplary handbook of Indian ethics enjoins:

*krodhādbhāvati sammohaḥ sammohātsmṛtīvibramah |
smṛtibhṛansādbuddhināśo buddhināśatpraṇāśyati ||*

(2/3)

[From anger arise infatuation; from infatuation, confusion of memory; from confusion of memory, loss of reason; and from loss of reason one goes to complete ruin.]

To illustrate this noble ideal Śaṅkaradeva has resorted to the parable of Jaya and Vijaya of *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, who suffered ignominy of base birth of demon for three lives for their arrogance and wrathful behavior. Sankaradeva's thesis is that a true devotee or a Vaiṣṇava must be free from anger.

Another important ideal of Sankaradeva's faith and philosophy is his repeated call to renounce pride or *ahamkāra*. Pride is the root of total downfall of an individual. So the poet with the help of various parables tries to inculcate his advice that pride, prowess arrogance or unlimited wealth can neither avert death nor destruction. Neither Gajendra nor Hiraṇyakaśipu nor Kāṁsa could overcome their inevitable fate with the help of these unreal agents mentioned above. Gajendra, being horrified at the impending death had submitted himself to the Lord with body, soul and words and the Lord granted him deliverance. So is the case with Hiraṇyakaśipu and Kāṁsa.

In many of his noble verses Śaṅkaradeva extols that untiring meditation of the Lord enables an individual to achieve supreme bliss in the form of final beatitude. Yasodā considers the Lord as her loving son, the *gopīs* as their beloved, the formidable demons as their foe. But the fruit yielded in all these means was the same, the liberation. This idea has very clearly been expressed in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* in the following lines:

*'kāmaṁ krodhaṁ bhayaṁ snehaṁ aikhyāṁ sauhrdaṁ eva ca |
nityaṁ harau vidadhāto yānti tanmayatām hi te ||*

(10/29/15)

Thus the *tanmayāta* or the total unification with the God can be achieved through pure meditation and true resignation to His will with mind, body and soul. Śaṅkaradeva declares in his holy *Kīrtana*:

*bhāi mukhe bolā rāma hṛdaye dharā rūpa |
eteke mukuti paibā kahilo svarūpa ||*

Syamantak-haraṇa – 113

The spirit of universal tolerance and love of mankind abounds in many of the verses of Śaṅkaradeva which enables his religion to emerge as one of the most generous and unorthodox one. The poet with great adventurous spirit has tried to break the barrier of caste and creed and revolted against despotism. The soothing words of the saint have brought equality and dignity to the followers:

*brāhmaṇara caṇḍālara nibicāri kula |
dātāta corata yena dṛsti ekatula ||
nīcata sādḥuta yāra bhaila eka jñāna |
tāhākese paṇḍita bolaya sarvajana ||*

Srī Kṛṣṇar Vaikuṅṭha Prayāṇa -1821

Śaṅkaradeva, in pursuance of the profound ideals of Indian tradition, goes beyond the limit of humanity and tries to express sympathy, equality and love with the entire creation. Individual soul, irrespective of any birth, appears to be a part of the whole—the Supreme Self or *Brahmaṇa*. So in many of his noble verses the poet has announced a sense of universal sympathy and love encompassing the meanest creatures including the trees and creepers. He, according to Śaṅkaradeva, is wiser and dearer to the Lord, who can apprehend a clear manifestation of Viṣṇu throughout the entire creation:

*kukur śṛgāla gardabharo ātmā rāma |
jāniyā savāko pari karibā praṇāma ||
samasta bhūtata viṣṇu buddhi nohe yāve |
kāya bākya mane abhyāsibā ehi bhāve ||*

Srī Kṛṣṇar Vaikuṅṭha Prayāṇa-1823, 1824

Another important ideal of Śaṅkaradeva is the rejection of sensual pleasure, especially, the association of women. This has also been advocated by the teachers of Indian philosophy as one of the best ways to get rid of worldly affliction. Following this ideal Śaṅkaradeva sternly interdicts his followers to avoid it because the alluring potency of it is so powerful that even the high-minded people or the gods are prone to fall its victim. So the primary duty of an individual is to renounce the group of vicious senses headed by greed:

henajāni devī tumi harira caraṇa sevi
eḍā lobha moha krodha kāma |

- *Haramohana* - 600

The idea has more and more poignantly been expressed by Mādhavadeva, the greatest apostle of Sankaradeva, in his great work *Nāma-ghoṣā* with beautiful words:

yateka anartha āse saṃsārata
tāta tinividha sāra |
kāma krodha lobha āpona nāśana
jāni karā parihāra ||

- *Nāma-ghoṣā* - 208

Perhaps this may be the cause why Śaṅkaradeva did not recommend women to take part in the dramatic works. The women characters of Śaṅkaradeva's dramatic performances were, at that time, enacted by male devotees.

Thus Śaṅkaradeva and his greatest apostle Mādhavadeva, throughout their huge literary works, tried to prove and inculcate the idea that an individual can obtain knowledge per excellence or *ātmajñāna* and feels the immanence of the Supreme Self only and when his knowledge is enriched by pure and selfless devotion. And to obtain this devotional height one must resort to *Śravaṇa* and *Kīrtana* type of *bhakti* in an unflinching way.

With the emergence of self knowledge, *ātmajñāna*, all duality and doubts in the mind of a devotee end and his heart becomes as clear as a good mirror where he can perceive the beautiful image of the Lord. At this point the devotee becomes free from all kinds of illusions or *avidyā* or false knowledge.

Śaṅkaradeva says:

*yāta dekhā carācara harimaya nirantara
harita pṛthaka keho nohe |
yijanāa bhakati hīṇa si dekhe harika bhinna
harira māyāe tāka mohe ||'*

- *Haramohana* - 599

It is already mentioned that the mental state of an individual remains rough and full of sin because of the influence of *māyā* and the mind of such individual never inclines towards God. But the moment an individual engage himself unto the glory of the Lord by chanting his holy name and hearing his magnanimity, gradual dripping starts within him and his melting heart begins to incline towards God and makes him to feel the pervading consciousness of the Supreme Lord. This, according to the scholars of Indian Vaiṣṇava tradition, is called *Bhāgavata-bhakti*. Śaṅkaradeva, in his *Bhakti-ratnākara* expresses this idea in the following words:

*tasya viṣṇoḥ prasādena yadi kacchit prabuddhyati |
ca nistarati saṁsaram devānāmapī dustaram ||*

The same idea has been illustrated by the poet in his Assamese versification:

*hari bhakatita yebe dr̥ḍha karā mati |
ijanmata nicchaye parama pāiba gati ||
bhakatita pare dharma nāhi saṁsārata |
cārio vedara jāna ehi sāra tattva ||*

- *Rasa Kr̥ḍa* - 1006,1007

In this way Sankaradeva established his faith of *eka-śaraṇa* and magnanimity of *nāma* or holy name. But unlike the other

predecessors, Śaṅkaradeva has not tried to establish knowledge, *karma* and *bhakti* in the same plane. Rather according to him:

Jñānato karmato kari samprati |

Hari kīrttanese parama gati ||

- *Pāṣaṇḍa-mardana* – 102

Therefore, Śaṅkaradeva deliberately tried to be free himself from the overloading of tough philosophies as his chief mission was to bring the unlettered masses under the soothing umbrella of *bhakti* enriched by the easy way of *Śravaṇa* and *Kīrtana* type of *bhakti*. It is beyond doubt that Śaṅkaradeva's call to his contemporary society to discard the path of knowledge and to step into the path of pure devotion proves to be very significant, productive and intellectual. Because of this new footing, the aims and objective of Vedānta remains well defended in one hand and in other hand the way to attain that goal is also achieved. Śaṅkaradeva's sincere and honest effort to bring out a new and easy path of spiritual consciousness gave rise to a new quest to the ordinary people who, following Śaṅkaradeva's ideal, could perceive the grandeur of the Lord in the form of *satya*, *śuddha* and *nitya* entity before them.

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ŚAÑKARADEVA AND MARTIN LUTHER: A COMPARISION

Mr. Babul Barhoi

INTRODUCTION

Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.) of Medieval India and Martin Luther (1483-1546 A.D.) of Germany were contemporaries though it can easily be surmised that none knew the other. It was the time of Renaissance and Reformation of Europe and full flavor of Neo-Vaishnavism in India. From the geographical and scientific perspective, it can be said that to the inhabitants of the countries, neither India nor Europe were the countries to which the inhabitants knew almost nothing at that time. To Europe, India was a wonderful land of legend filled with innumerable jewels and fables, (of course, only to the monarchs and the sailors). To the people of India, India was the world {However, Indian saints and writers had some vague ideas about the other countries of the world which they called *dvīps* (islands)}. Even then, some wonderful similarities can be traced between the two leaders of Reformation—Martin Luther of Europe and Sankaradeva of Medieval India in bringing a total change of religious, social, cultural, economic conditions of the two distant countries which gave us our modern civilization by overturning the medieval civilization. Here is an attempt to make a comparison between them.

ON FAITH/NĀMA/DEVOTION:

Martin Luther's most important doctrine was the doctrine of 'Justification by Faith Alone'. It is an interpretation of the lines of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans^[1] which he interpreted as –“explicit

faith that God had sent His only begotten son to save mankind by His sufferings was sufficient to eternal salvation, and ‘good works’ were not necessary” .

Herein, ‘good works’ refers to the sacraments, buying the indulgences, donations and taxes to the churches etc. Luther here says that there is no need to swell the properties of the popes or to beautify the churches by oozing the saps of the poor. But faith in Christ is sufficient for salvation.

What Śaṅkaradeva says in this context is also exactly the same. But he uses the word ‘*bhakti*’ (devotion) instead of faith.

He says:

karmma tapa jñāne sādhe yi gati /
dāne vā sannyāse pāve samprati //
bhakate sukhe basi pāve tāka /
udhavera āge kṛṣṇara vāka //

{Translation: The benefit which is achieved through rituals, meditation, knowledge, donation or asceticism can be acquired by a devotee by sitting lazily. It is said by Lord Kṛṣṇa to Udhava.)

And,

yajña dāna japa *tapa tīrtha vrata*
mahājñāna yoga bala /
ratna mantrē kahe *bhakata janara*
saveo puṇya viphalā //
tarka vedāgama *jñāna yoga śāstre*
puruṣaka kare andha /
koṭi koṭi janme *moka najānibe*
ihāta yāra pravandha //⁽ⁱⁱ⁾

(Translation: it is said in the Ratna Mantra that any kind of *yajña*, *dāna*, *japa*, *tapa*, *tīrtha*, *vrata*, *mahājñāna*, *yoga bala* etc. become useless for a devotee (of Lord Kṛṣṇa). These kinds of *tarka*,

vedāgama, jñāna, yoga śāstra etc. make a man blind (to conceive the truth). One who takes recourse to such activities will not be able to understand Me even in crores and crores of years.)

While Luther has given emphasis on faith, Śaṅkaradeva has done it on faith as well as devotion with emphasis on *śravaṇa-kīrtana* (chanting of and listening to the name of God and his works). The ultimate aim of both of them is the same—that is—not to go to the churches, not to the *tīrthas* (temples), not to give anything to the brokers of religions (i.e. clergies, priests) to purify oneself but to have sole faith on and devotion to God.

Śaṅkaradeva says:

nalāge deva dvija ṛṣi huibe /
nalāge sambhṛta śāstra jānibe //
michāte marai āna karmma kari /
hovanta bhakatite tuṣṭa hari^[iii] //

(Translation: One need not require to be a deity, a Brahmin or a sage; nor does he require to know a lot of the scriptures. All these works are of no avail. God is satisfied only by devotion.)

And,

harira kīrttane mahā pātakaka
yimate kare niryāṇa /
āna prāyaścitte pavitra karibe
navāre tāra samāna //
yiṭo pātakara prāyaścitta kare
dunāi tāte mana maje /
cittara śodhana harira kīrttana
pāpara ālu ubhañje.^[iv] //

(Translation: There is nothing as powerful as *Harikīrtana* (chanting God's name) in the act of destruction of the great sins. The other sacraments cannot purify the inner self (*citta*) and that is

why the mind again indulges in those misdeeds. But *Harikīrtana* can purify the inner self. Thus, it wipes out the roots of all sins.)

hari hena iṭo *duguṭi akṣara*
jihbā agre thāke yāra /
gaṅgā gayā kāśī prayāga tīrthaka
yāibāka nalāge tāra^[v] //

(Translation: There is no need to perform hard and toilsome pilgrimages to the shrines like Gaṅgā, Gayā, Kāśī, Prayāga etc. for those persons who incessantly recite the word Hari consisting of only two syllables.)

OPPOSITION OF PAPAL AUTHORITY / PRIESTHOOD

Luther said by referring to St. Paul 9I Cor, Xii of the New Testament that as all people are one body, though each member does his or her own works to serve the others. It is because all have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith and are all Christian alike; for baptism, Gospel and faith these alone make spiritual and Christian people. That is why, it is a sheer artful lie and a hypocritical device to say that the popes, bishops, priests and monks are spiritual estate and the princes, lords, peasants etc. are temporal estates^[vi].

Luther justifies in his essay ‘Address to the Nobility of the German Nation’ (The First Wall) that the difference between the spiritual authority and the secular authority is only of office and function, not of estate or blood or birth and every man is useful and beneficial to others by his office and function. Hence, the demand of the popes –that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over the spiritual— is a purely meaningless demand.

In medieval India also, the Indian priests demanded themselves as *Bhūdeva* (God in earth) and the *Śūdras* were considered as half-men or rather as a tomb alive (*jīvanta kabar*). The *Śūdras* were not allowed to utter Sanskr̥t *ślokas* or to perform any religious activity and the killing of a *Śūdra* was not considered equivalent to killing of even a cat.

Śaṅkaradeva vehemently opposed all such practices. He himself being a *Śūdra*, translated the Sanskr̥t scriptures and even redefined the designations of Brahmin, *Śūdras*, *Cāṇḍāla* etc on the basis of purity of minds and works rather than on birth or estate (. i. e caste).

He says:

cāṇḍāle kariche hari kīrttana /
buliyā tāka ninde ajñajana //
tāka sambhāṣaṇa yi jane kare /
ājanmara puṇya tekhane hare^[vii] //

(Translation: One who criticizes a *Cāṇḍāla*, an outcaste, for reciting God's name is actually a fool. One should not even talk with such a person. It instantly wipes away all the virtues that are accumulated in one's whole life.)

viṣṇura guṇa nāma alaṅkṛta /
antyajo yibā kari āche gīta //
tāka nindā kare yiṭo kumati /
puṇyaka nāsi yāi adhogati^[viii] //

(Translation: One who criticizes an *Antyaja* (a person of the lowest class of Hindu caste system) for composing God's name and His virtues) is actually a mischievous person. One who does it, destroys his all *puṇyas* (virtues) and goes to hell.)

siṭo cāṇḍālako gariṣṭha māni /
yāra jihbāye srave hari vāñī. //
samaste tīrthate karila snāna /
karile si si tapa homa dāna //
sehise kulīna vedaka buje /
yāhāra mukhe hari nāma sije^[ix] //

(Translation: Even a *Cāṇḍāla* can be considered as superior to people of other classes if his tongue incessantly pronounces God's words. It can also be considered that he has attained the benefits of

completing holy baths in all the shrines, performing the meditations, *homa*, *dāna* etc. A person can be considered born in the pure caste (*kulīna*) who understands the meaning of the Vedas and makes it a habit of reciting His name.)

And,

kukuraka khāya hena mleccha gaṇe /
sio śudhha hove hari kīrttane //
cāṇḍālo hari nāma lave mārta /
karibe ucita yajñara pātr^[x] //

(Translation: Even the *mlecchas* (a class of people) who devours even the dogs are purified by reciting God's name. A *Cāṇḍāla* can even be worthy for *yajña* as soon as he pronounces God's name.)

kṛṣṇara kathāta yiṭo rasika
brāhmaṇa janma tāra lāge kika /
smaroka mātra hari dine rāti
nabāche bhakati jāti ajāti^[xi] //

(Translation: A person who is delighted with Lord Kṛṣṇa's affairs is not required to be a Brahmin. There is no consideration of caste for devotion (*bhakati*). It requires keeping Him in mind at all times.)

brāhmaṇa cāṇḍālara nibicāri kula /
dātāta corata yena dṛṣṭi eka tula //
nīcata sādḥuta yāra bhaila eka jñāna /
tāhākese paṇḍita buliya sarvvajāna.^[xii] //

(Translation: A person is considered as a *paṇḍita* (a wise person) who does not look for the clans of Brahmins and the *Cāṇḍāla*, who considers the donors and the thieves, the honest and the depraved equally.)

jāti kulācāra dharmme kona kāryya sādhibeka
jñāna kona kāryyata śakata /

*ājñānī ajāti pāpī kṛṣṇaka bhajoka mātra
tāro haiba parama mahata^[xiii] //*

(Translation The religious and social rites that are connected to class, clan etc. can do nothing. Even knowledge cannot do anything. A fool, a person outside of the caste system or a sinner can also be greatly benefited if he just starts devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa.)

PROTEST AGAINST THE ‘GOOD WORKS’:

The chief aim of religion is salvation—salvation of human soul from the chain of birth and death. What is understood about salvation by the researcher is salvation (release) of human mind from the chain of misery, from desire or from the bondage of materialism.

But in the medieval age, both in Europe and India, people were asked or compelled to believe that salvation was possible only through the clergies, priests etc. who were the intermediaries and it was impossible to achieve salvation directly without their help, and therefore, people were compelled to seek help from these ecclesiastical class and were also compelled to believe that this ecclesiastical class was the representative of God in earth. And therefore, satisfying their greed, appetite, desire etc. was satisfying God. This was how they turned religion to a business, to a means of livelihood and a way of corruption and dictatorial administration.

The religious reformists in Europe and the Neo-Vaiṣṇavites of India revealed the truth to the populace. They proved with the help of the scriptures that there is no need of an intermediary class for salvation, because true salvation is realization of God who resides within everybody as the individual soul. Hence, sheer devotion or faith or meditation or recitation of God’s name and His works with ardent faith is enough for salvation.

In Martin Luther’s Protestantism, the pope and the ecclesiastical hierarchy were completely eliminated. The authority of the church was vested upon the kings. He reduced sacraments to only three (marriage, baptism and communion were only retained). The

elaborate Catholic Mass was replaced by simple service of hymn, prayer and sermon. ‘Good works’ like pilgrimage, fasts, worship of the Virgin and the saints, sale of indulgences etc. were abandoned. The church’s claim to the chief interpreter of the truth was set aside. Its place was taken by the Bible.^[xiv]

In Śāṅkaradeva’s religious order i.e. *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma* also, as has been already shown, there is no place for the priests, the ecclesiastical class.

He says:

*āura vedāgama vistara śāstrata
nāhi kicho prayojana /
dharmmaka āśāye aneka tīrthaka
ki kāryye karā gamana //
yadi abhilāṣa karā sarvvajana
āpona mokṣa kāraṇa /
govinda govinda buliyā bekate
kariyo hari kīrtana /^[xv]*

(Translation: There is no need of reading the vast majority of materialistic Vedic scriptures (*Āgama Vedas*). One should neither accomplish perilous pilgrimages to various shrines for becoming a pious person. If you really have aspiration for salvation, you are required only to recite God’s name by uttering the word Govinda, Govinda.)

In Luther’s Protestantism, however, the priests and the ministers were retained, he condemned only monasticism; but the ecclesiastical were no longer a class of special privilege. But Śāṅkaradeva says that a person born in the lowest social class can also be allowed to perform religious activities if he or she can excel in devotion (*bhakti*).

He says:

*cāṇḍālo hari nāma lave mārta /
karibe ucita yajñara pātra^[xvi] //*
||Mahāpuruṣajyoti || 111 ||

(Translation: Even a *Cāṇḍāla* can be worthy for *yajña* as soon as he pronounces Lord Hari's name.)

Hence, there is no question of the so called 'good works' of the Christian society in the religious order preached by Śaṅkaradeva. The saint declared by referring to the Vedas that all the religious rites (activities) can simply be performed by hymns, prayers, listening to and chanting of (*śravaṇa* and *kīrtana*) Lord Kṛṣṇa's names and deeds. There is no place of pilgrimage, meditation, worship, sacrifices in the *Eka Śaraṇa Hari Nāma Dharma*. There is only one activity here and that is—considering God as the soul that resides within every living being and (hence within the heart of oneself also). So, one should aspire to realize Him through sheer faith (devotion) and to purify the impurities by continuous recitation of His names and deeds.

BOTH LORD AND SERVANT AT THE SAME TIME:

Saint Paul himself says: "though I be free from all men, yet I made myself servant unto all". (Cor.ix.19, New Testament) and "Owe no men anything but love one another (Rom.xiii.8, New Testament). Luther says in this context," now love is by its own nature dutiful and obedient to the beloved object. Thus even Christ, though Lord of all things, was yet made of women, made under the law (Gal.4:4 N.T.) at once free (105) and a servant; at once in form of God and in the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6:7, N.T.).

In Śaṅkaradeva's writings also, Lord Kṛṣṇa is found as an obedient servant of His ardent devotees. It is devotion (*bhakti*) which can entangle Lord Kṛṣṇa and make Him even a servant to His devotees. Some instances as treated by Śaṅkaradeva are: Prahlāda, Bali, Nanda-Yaśodā and Vasudeva-Daivakī who were devotees of Lord Viṣṇu in his incarnations as Narasimha, Vāmana and Kṛṣṇa respectively.

Here are some extracts from Śaṅkaradeva's writings:

yadi hari ananta brahmāṇḍa adhikārī /

tathāpi bhaktara vaśya hovanta murāri //
tātese bandhana hari lailā yaśodāra /
nirantare nigamara e tattva bicāra //
yāra māyā pāśe bandī brahmā ādi kari /
guvālīra hāte bandī bhailā hena hari^[xviii] //

(Translation: Although God is the Lord of the infinite universe, He becomes a servant of His devotees. It is the reason why he fastened himself at the hands of Yaśodā. It is the conclusion of all the *Nigama* scriptures. God can confine even the chief deities like Brahmā with His cord called *māyā*. Even such a God (Hari) is handcuffed by the cowherds who were his ardent devotees.)

SOME OTHER SIMILARITIES:

1. Luther did not support the life of ascetics and adoption of celibacy for the saints. He married Catherine de Bora, a nun, lived a married life and had five children. Śaṅkaradeva also considered family life as the best kind of human life and he married twice.
2. Luther had an indomitable spirit whose Ninety Five Theses started the Reformation Movement in Europe. He refused to recant and had the courage to burn the decree passed against him to excommunicate him. In the same way, Śaṅkaradeva also had the courage to extol the Brahmin wives above the Brahmins, the low caste Rādhikā above the high caste Brahmin wives. The saint had the courage to defeat the Brahmins twice in the oration against the false allegations raised against him. So Śaṅkaradeva also possessed an indomitable spirit and vehemently opposed all the rituals invented by the priests.
3. Luther demanded that the Bible is the sole authority for salvation, not the clergies, nor ‘good works’. Śaṅkaradeva also suggested that the scripture *Śrīmadbhāvata-purāṇa* is enough for salvation and one should not go for any other scriptures for that purpose and one need not go for any other rituals for it.

4. Luther was a great scholar of theology and wrote several books and translated the Bible into German language. Śāṅkaradeva was also an accomplished scholar, also composed a large corpus of literature and rendered a good number of Sanskr̥t scriptures into vernacular Assamese language.

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RELIGIOUS REFORMER ŚRĪMANTA ŚAṄKARADEVA

Dr. Rajib Hazarika

After the establishment of Muslim rules in India, the Muslims controlled almost all over India during the 15th and 16th centuries. Because of the Muslim rules, the native people were exposed to a new religious belief absolutely different in from and thus the native people were affected psychologically in all walks of life. Contemporary to this historical event, a religious and social movement underwent in different parts of India. During this period, some reformers as well as saints carried out their efforts to save the age-old society from the attack of alien rulers on social, religious and political institutions. Besides, to protect the atrocities of the high classes and high caste people on the downtrodden and lower caste, the saints and reformers adopted a new belief i.e., *bhakti* movement with the principles of social reformation. The philosophers as well as reformers of the *bhakti* movements were Candidās (1417-1477), Gurunānak (1469-1538), Surdās (1479-1584), Tulśidās (1511-1637), Kabirdās (1398-1527), Chaitanya (1485-1539) etc. The philosophy of *bhakti* movement embraces the ardent love and simple devotion to God, continuous enchanting of God's name along with singing and dancing by opposing the high philosophy of the learned and elites. It has always been regarded as the safest and surest path for the realization of God. The philosophers of the *bhakti* movement travelled extensively and met common people to know the reality of the prevailing social and political conditions. They gave love, devotion, sympathy and brotherhood without any discrimination. They rendered their service to the cause of humanity. They believed that divine grace could be achieved only through devotion which was

open to all classes and castes and one can attain salvation through knowledge and *karma*.

The philosophy of the *bhakti* movement had great impact on Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568), the great Neo-Vaiṣṇavite saint of Assam. He began the propagation of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism in the later part of the 15th century in Assam. Śaṅkaradeva went on two pilgrimages in his life. There was a tremor of *bhakti* movement in India during the first pilgrimage (1483-1495) of Śaṅkaradeva. In his first pilgrimage, he went to different Vaiṣṇava cultural centres of Northern India viz. Gayā, Puri, Vṛndāvan, Mathurā, Dvārakā, Kāśī, Sitākuṇḍa, Brahmakuṇḍa, Ayodhyā, Badarikāśrama etc. It is believed that Śaṅkaradeva was impressed by the nature and workings of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite saints contemporary to him. They were Ramānanda, Kabir, Caitanya etc. As we know that Vaiṣṇavism is one of the oldest religions of India in which people believe on Viṣṇu as the Supreme God. The followers of Vaiṣṇavism believe that Lord Viṣṇu take diverse incarnations (*avatārs*) from time to time which is an important feature of Vaiṣṇava cult. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism was something different from Vaiṣṇavism, in the later, Viṣṇu was worshipped in the form of idol but in Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism, Viṣṇu, another name Kṛṣṇa could be worshiped with most simple way of devotion called *bhakti*.

During the 13th, 14th and 15th century, the land of Assam was infested with *Vāmācāra tāntric* system which prophets for sex and palate, blood sacrifices to gods and goddesses. Another religious belief of *Śāktism* was also being practiced in which practices like animal sacrifices and sometimes even human sacrifices in the name of religious rites and rituals were performed. Besides, the state was scattered among various tribes with their own political as well as religious beliefs. There were also *Brāhmaṇic* culture and caste system in the society. As a result, common people had to face difficulties everywhere. In such socio-political situations in medieval Assam, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva appeared as a reformer as well as a saint to rescue the society from the turmoil. He was well versed in Sanskrit and other local vernacular languages which helped him in searching

knowledge from the scriptures. As already stated he went out for first pilgrimage for 12 years and came into contact with many saints and scholars of the Vaiṣṇavite movement which had a great impact on his spiritual life. After returning from the first pilgrimage, he propagated *bhakti* i.e., Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement in Assam. The philosophical base of Śaṅkaradeva's Neo-Vaiṣṇavism is the culmination of *bhakti* movement of Northern India which was based on the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and, accordingly, Śaṅkaradeva introduced *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* in Assam. According to him, God is the central reality of soul and matter and without Him neither can exist. Lord Kṛṣṇa is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. Thus, worship of many Gods and Goddesses are not required and accordingly it was bluntly prohibited. Śaṅkaradeva, through congregational prayer, *Nāma-Kīrtana* and devotion to one Supreme God in the form of Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa simplified the contemporary rituals that existed in the society. Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy of Vaiṣṇavism was guided by tolerance and universality. It propagates non-violence and discarding sacrifice of living being in the name of religion. His Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement taught people the simple ways of living, equality of all irrespective of caste and creed in the field of religion.

Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma preached by Śaṅkaradeva believes in one God i.e., Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, complete surrender of mind, body and ego to the God by chanting his name and taking absolute shelter to the Lord Kṛṣṇa. It is *Eka-Śaraṇa. Nāma* refers to chanting the name of Hari/ Kṛṣṇa as means of prayer. It discarded elaborate rituals and worship of idols but advocates sober life style for the *bhaktas* (devotees). *Nāma* was considered to be sufficient for the common people and it reduced rituals to the minimum and emphasized on prayer. Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva i.e., *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* was unique and was able to unify people from all walks of life from the rich to the poor and to the downtrodden into one spiritual fraternity. Every individual was considered equal and classes and castes were ignored. Any one from the *bhaktas* can perform the prayer service and the other essential rituals. These kinds of egalitarian philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva

developed the concept of equality, humanism and democracy and tried to weed out caste differences. By prohibiting the caste code i.e., untouchability he gave more emphasis on cleanliness and established social harmony. The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement also brought a cultural revolution by unifying people and developing a sense of universality. It is economically more viable and politically secular in nature. It encompassed the social, cultural and religious sphere of Assamese society. Another contribution of Neo-Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva was the establishment of *nāmghar* and *satra* institutions where classical music, dance and drama were performed and congregational prayer offered. The *satra* institutions and *nāmghars* gave a free and open platform to the people for assembling together and creating a social harmony. Śaṅkaradeva developed new schools of paintings, songs, dance, drama and music. *Bargīts*, *aṅkīyā nāṭa* or *bhāonās* and *Śaṅkarī* dances were introduced by him as a means to convey the common people the devotion of God Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu. He wrote his songs and dramas in a new form of artificial language (a mixture of *Braja* and Assamese language) i.e., *Brajāvalī*. A literary movement was also initiated by him to propagate the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. He wrote and translated large number of books infusing *bhakti*. The poetic works like *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, *Hariścandra-upākhyāna*, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, *Ajāmil-upākhyāna*, *Bali-calana*, *Kurukṣetra-yātrā*, *Gopī Uddhava-Saṁvāda*, *Amṛta-manthana*, *Kṛṣṇa-prayāṇa-Pāṇḍava-Niryāṇa*, and books like *Bhakti-pradīpa*, *Anādi-pātana*, *Nimi-Navasiddha-Saṁvāda*, *Bhakti-ratnākara* (in Sanskrit) and *Guṇamālā* are great contributions to Assamese literature. He also translated the *Bhāgavata* and the *Rāmayaṇa* (*Uttarākāṇḍa*) from Sanskrit to Assamese language. As already stated, a large number of drama called as *aṅkīyā-nāṭa* like *Cihna-yātrā* (lost), *Patnī-prasāda*, *Janma-yātrā*, *Kaṁsa-badha*, *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, *Keli-gopāla*, *Gopī-Uddhava-Saṁvāda*, *Amṛta-manthana* were written to show the supremacy of Lord Kṛṣṇa. The devotional lyrics called as *bargīts* were written and composed by him and used to begin prayer services. *Bargīts* are the great lyrical contribution to the society of Assam. Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva, the great scholar had

changed the contemporary socio-cultural setup of the society as well as harmonized the people of Assam through his works in the process of propagating the Neo-Vaiṣṇavism. He was successful in spreading the idea of universal brotherhood by abolishing caste, class and racial distinctions which has been continuing till today. He removed the evil acts and beliefs from the society and created a new society by using various institutions. At this juncture of twenty first century also it can be asserted that his ideology, philosophy and works have great significance in shaping and saving the Assamese society from the brink of extinction.

*jai guru śaṅkara sarva guṇākara
yakeri nāhike upāma |
tohāri caraṇeku reṇu śatakouti
bāreka karuhu praṇāma ||*

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TRADITIONAL THEATRE OF ASSAM

Ruplekha Borbora

Culture is called the history of human civilization. Cultural tradition is a dynamic process of a nation. Acting, music and dance are three important factors of human civilization through which we can study the developmental process of the human society. Acting, music and dance are a strong medium of entertainment and exchange of mutual human feelings. From the very ancient times of human civilization, drama has been a practical medium of exposing human feelings through music, dance and song.

Natyaśāstra is the primary and important ancient text on Indian classical dance, drama and music. Indian drama emerges from traditional folk theatre. The narrative tradition is the main factor of traditional Indian theatre. The traditional theatre is prevailing in both prosodic and poetical art form. Though it is primarily based on ritual ethology, it is also prevailing on humorous fiction of myth and satire. The traditional theatre is divided in the following categories-

Traditional theatre –

1. Ritual ideology dependent –

- 1.a. Epic dependent
- 1.b. Mythology dependent

2. Satire

- 2.a. Folk tale dependent
- 2.b. History dependent
- 2.c. Social topic -

2.c.i. Romantic fiction dependent

2.c.ii. Heroic fiction

2.d. Comedy dependent

Assam is an epitome of India where people of different castes and creeds with rich, colourful identity are residing with harmony. They have their own language, religion and cultural identity. Since time immemorial, they are observing their own religious prayers, dance, drama and other traditional cultural activities. Among these religious devotional prayers, dances and dramas are playing great importance in social life. Over and above traditional folk dances and prayers, priests like Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavdeva are contributing to the great cultural heritage of the people of Assam.

PUTOLĀ NĀC

Putalā-nāc or puppet play act is observed all over the world. It is also an ancient traditional play of Assam. The putalās are administered by strings or sticks. It is called putalā play because some stories are displayed with the help of putalā. The presentation style of putalā-nāc may be compared with that of Proscenium stage.



The putalās play their role according to the will and direction of the director known as Sūtradhāra. But in the human play, the actors display their characters based on the facts of the play as directed by the director.

There are four types of putalā-nāc. They are :

- a) Shadow putalā
- b) putalā directed by stick.
- c) putalā directed by string.
- d) putalā play performed by hands.

According to the historical evidence of Kalikā-purāṇa of ancient Kamrup or Pragjyotish, putalā play tradition is continuing from 9th century. During the time of Śaṅkardeva he introduced chāyā putalā or shadow putalā. Now-a-days putalā play or nāc operated by strings are in existence. Putalās are made of kuhilā, kal tharuwā (made of dry banana body) cloth, bamboo stick, cow-dung etc. In decorating the putalā, dress and ornaments are used according to demands of the character. The instruments like khol, and flute are generally used in putalā nāc. The Śutradhāra operates the performance of putalā play or nāc.



DHULĪYA-NĀṬ:

Basically, dhulīyā bhāona has emerged from Kamrup District. The people who performed are known as dhulīyā and they perform on various occasions like marriage ceremony, function, festivals as well as they perform acrobatics as that in circus. In general, dhulīyā-nāṭs are two types:

- a. Myth
- b. Satire based on current affairs.

Before, acting was not a part of dhulīyā-nāṭ but to make the performance more interesting, entertaining and lengthy so that it continues; the whole night acting (abhinaya) has been added to dhulīyā-nāṭ along with dance and music. Secondly, where khuliyā bhāorīyā was slowly getting developed dhulīyā bhāonā carried on the tradition and involved the elements of khuliyā bhāorīyā which helped it get and recognized as an art of tradition.

In various parts of Assam, we find dhulīyās. As there are several types of dhulīyās like one who plays in pūjā, one who plays in festivals and one who plays in meetings or gatherings. The group of dhulīyā who perform in meetings and social occasions consist of around 60 to 70 people, 40/50 of them play the instrument called as dhol, 20 to 25 people play the cymbals and 10 to 12 people play another musical instrument called as kāli. Dhulīyās are classified by various names:

1. Leader is termed as ghāi dhulīyā
2. bāyā or bāyan
3. gāyak or gāyen (singer)
4. taliyā (Cymbal player)
5. bhāorīyā or bhāirā
6. āriyā dharā
7. acrobatic dhulīyā
8. kāliyā player

There is another part named as chaṅg, included in their performance, which is performed by the bhāorīyā or bhāirā. In the

performance the stories or situations of current affairs prevailing in the society are taken. At the end of the dhuliyā performance, the bhāoriyā performs the piece of chaṅg.

The stories which the dhuliyā performs or acts were never scripted but now- a-days certain written evidence is found. They use the regional languages prevailing in the society for communication during the performance, generally stories of the dhuliyā bhāonā are taken from the mythological stories like Khaṭāsūr-badh, Śītā-haraṇa, Andha Munir Abhiśāp, Abhimanyu-badh etc. At times, they included historical stories also like Cīn Bhāratar Yuddha, Jaymatī etc. They enact social stories also, for example –cur police, old man marriage (buḍhā biyā) etc.

OJĀ-PĀLĪ:

Ojā-pālī is a semi-dramatic traditional art form of Assam. It is performed by a group of choruses. It is a combination of three art forms: dance, drama and song. It is continuing in Assam from Pre-Sanskrit period. The chief singer or leader of the team is called ojā. He performs it with the help of 15 to 16 assistants and they are known as pālī. So this performing art is called ojā-pālī. Pālīs are divided into two groups. The pālī who performs by the right side of the ojā is called dāinā pālī and other pālīs who perform by the left side of ojā are called general pālī (sādhāraṇ pālī). The stories performed by the ojā are described by dāinā pālī. Ojā-pālī are divided into two parts:

- a) Based on epic.
- b) Non-epic or based on myth.

Ojā-pālī tradition based on epics are: byāhar ojā-pālī, Rāmāyaṇa ojā-pālī, Durgābārī ojā-pālī, pañcali oja-pālī and dulari ojā-pālī. Non-epics ojā-pālīs are divided in: Sukananni ojā-pālī, bikhahari-gān, māre gān, Padma-purāṇ and Ṭukariya ojā-pālī.

KUṢĀN GĀN:

Kuṣān gān originates from Goalpara district of Assam. It is a combination of song, dance and drama. Kuṣān gān is known as Rāvaṇ gān or Benā gān also. In the performance 15 to 16 members accompany. The leader known as mūl or gītāl recites the verses from purāṇa and the Rāmāyaṇa. He takes the help of another performer known as dāwari or dohāri. They make conversation with each other as the songs and dances are going on by the ceṅgrā or cokrā (boy dancers). Now a days, girls known as cokrī takes part in the performance. Musicians also accompany the performing team with khol, bīṇa and cymbals.



The performance of kuṣān gān begins with Saraswatī vandanā. The mūl or gītāl begins by singing and playing the bīṇa at first while entering the stage. Thereafter, the other participants with encircling movements enter the stage and support gītāl with singing, dancing and acting.

BHĀRI GĀN:

Bhāri gān is one of the important traditional dramas of Goalpara District. It is also a combination of dance, drama and music. This traditional folk drama is mostly preserved among the Rabha community of Assam. It is presumed that the word bhāri comes from the word bhāorīyā. The facts of the drama are based on the stories of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata.

Acting is less and music is more important in bhāri gān. There is one leading actor called mūl or gāyanīā accompanied by a group of actors. The supporting actors use mask made of wood. There is a comedy character called ketwā. Sometimes the ketwā display his acting which is irrelevant to the main story. The leader of the bhāri gān takes a cuwar (made of yak tail) in his hand and leads the chorus and his assisting companion. Vocalists of the group wear dhuti, cādar and Rudrākṣa mālā. The main instruments used in bhāri gān are khol and tāl (cymbal).

KHULĪYĀ BHĀONĀ:

Khulīyā bhāorīyā or bhāonā is a popular and indigenous traditional theatre of Darrang and Kamrup districts of Assam. Khulīyā bhāorīyā is also performed in some parts of Nalbari and Barpeta Districts. The story of khulīyā bhāorīyā is mythological like the Vaiṣṇavite dramas. The stories are mainly taken from the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. The main objective of khulīyā bhāorīyā is to entertain the audience with amusement and to give a moral lesson also. Khulīyā bhāorīyā is more ancient than the aṅkīyā bhāonā. It emerges from the Byāh Gowā Ojā-pālī. The leader of khulīyā bhāorīyā is called ojā or sūtradhāra. He is the main architect of this type of plays. Sūtradhāra or ojā while dancing in accompaniment of khol (small earthen drum similar to the mṛdaṅgas) and cymbals sing songs which are repeated by the pālīs.

The term khulīyā bhāorīyā, comes from the words khulīyā and bhāorīyā. The person who beats the khol is called khulīyā and the

actors are called bhāorīyā. The khulīyā bhāorīyā perform the characters of Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata, Śatrughna, Daśaratha, Rāvaṇa, Bhīma, Arjuna, Sītā, Draupadī, Kuntī etc. Generally, four to five numbers of pālīs, four to six numbers of khulīyās and two to three numbers of actors take part in khulīyā bhāorīyā. In addition to these, there are twenty to twenty-five bhāorīyās. The khulīyā bhāorīyā starts with beating of the khol which is called ‘khola ghāta’. Then the oṅ taking suwar (made of yak tail) in his right hand with various dancing poses enters into the stage. In this way, the oṅ dances for a while and there after the oṅ performs vandanā and the companion reiterate his vandanā. Originally there was no written script of khulīyā bhāorīyā. It is an oral tradition.

DHURĀ NĀṬ:

After the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite era a kind of drama based on the ideology of aṅkīyā-nāṭa came in Assamese dramatic tradition which is called dhurā-nāṭ or dhurā-bhāonā. But the dhurā-bhāonā was aimed at for the satisfaction and amusement of the audience. The stories of dhurā-bhāonā were taken from the two epics, where Khatāsura badh, Baghāsura badh, Uṣa-haraṇa, Subhadra-haraṇa, Druṇacārya badh etc. are included. It may be mentioned here that the religious aspects are not given importance in dhurā-bhāonā. Only the amusements and entertainment of the audience are prime factors in dhurā-bhāonā. Here the conversations are made by singing method. The mūl or leader taking suwar (made of yak tails) in his hand sings and dance and the accompanists use to follow him. He wears dhoti, designed kurṭa and a head-gear. Now a day, dhurā-bhāonā is not in existence.

PĀLĀ GĀN OR BHĀONĀ:

Pālā gān or bhāonā is a type of Kīrtana or religious music. The stories of pālā gān consist of songs, drama and dance. Pālā gān or pāl nām has great resemblance with the pāñcālī gān prevailing in Assam in satra of Awniāṭi and Dakṣiṇpāṭ of Majuli. It is a performing art similar to that of oṅ-pālī of Assam. In pālā gān or bhāonā there are

no ojā or sūtradhāra. Only one character named bibek conduct the whole performance. Here one young girl wears yellow gown frock and ghughurā in both feet. pālā gān or bhāonā has emerged as an evolutionary process of yātrā after 1826 A.D. Nowadays pālā gān or bhāonā has no existence in our society.

The dialogues of pālā gān or bhāonā are short, simple and spontaneous. pālā gān or bhāonā is observed in special social occasion. It is primarily observed in public places, nāmghar etc. The songs of pālā gān or bhāonā are of various types and dialogues are also delivered in lyrical type.

Instruments used in pālā gān or bhāonā are harmonium, tabla, dholok, khanjira etc. The musicians sit inside of the stage for performing the pālā gān or bhāonā. The group of these musicians is generally called ācār. The story of Hariścandra-upākhyāna is popularly played in pālā bhāonā. It is a holy work and great faith for the audience to enjoy the pālā bhāonā.

Over and above there are many more types of folk theatre among the various tribes of Assam. They are hogrā nāc and bahuwā nāc prevailing among the Sonowāl Kachāri community. The story of Dakṣhya, Satī and Lord Śiva is described in bahuwā nāc. At the closing ceremony of spring festival, the bahuwā nāc is observed.

Among the Tai Phāke community, there is a type of dance drama based on collection of cotton tree and weaving of holy cloth for Buddha or Bhānte.

Among the Tai Aitom community there are some dance drama namely Kā Meṅgwi called butterfly dance, Kā-Fī-Fy performance related with war and devil, Kā-Nāṅ-Wen dance drama based on fairy.

Assam is a land of various tribes and community comprised of colourful cultural traditions. Each and every type of tribe and community carry their own charm and significance with a few similarities here and a few differences there with one another. Each

of them can be seen in a wavelength of similarities in spite of all the differences which justifies the unity in diversity of the country.

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