AN UNSUNG COLOSSUS
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ŚAṆKARĀDEVA

SIVANATH BARMAN
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The Life and Works of Śaṅkaradeva

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FORUM FOR ŚAŃKARADEVA STUDIES
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Vande Pitaraau
DEDICATED TO THE SACRED MEMORY OF MY PARENTS

- Author

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PREFACE

This slim volume is a popular introduction to the life and works of Sañkaradeva, the neglected genius of medieval Assam. Not too many propagators of religion have had as variegated a personality and contributed as profusely to the land in which they were born as Sañkaradeva. But painfully enough, he is little known outside the Assamese speaking masses. The non Assamese scholars, in their books on the religion and literature of medieval India, make only a passing reference to this man and never pay him the attention he really deserves. The fault, however, lies with us — the Assamese — who till now have failed to make much headway in bringing him out of the narrow rim of the society in which he lived and worked.

The book is a humble attempt at projecting Sañkaradeva, — on the occasion of his 550th birth anniversary — to the outside world in a perspective that I deem fit. Heavily annotated details of his life and works have been wilfully omitted, as the book aims not at scholars, but general public who might have simply heard the name of Sañkaradeva, possibly by a fluke.

I owe my gratitude to my friends and well-wishers who have helped me in writing this book. I must acknowledge my special obligation to Shri Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami and Shri Pradip Jyoti Mahanta, the President and Secretary respectively of the Forum for Sañkaradeva Studies, but for whose request and constant encouragement the book would never have been written. Shri Dev Goswami not only gave me encouragement, but was also kind enough to glance through the manuscript and gave me some valuable suggestions. To him my debt of gratitude is too enormous to be ever repaid.

Sivanath Barman
ABOUT THE BOOK

An Unsung Colossus, a study on the life and works of Sañkaradeva (1449-1568), the great saint-poet, by Dr. Sivanath Barman, a distinguished scholar, is brought out as a part of the year-long programme of academic activities undertaken by the Forum for Sañkaradeva Studies in connection with the 550th anniversary celebration of Sañkaradeva's birth. We express our sincere gratitude to Dr. Barman who has complied with our request to write the book.

Pradip Jyoti Mahanta
General Secretary
Forum for Sañkaradeva Studies

Guwahati, September 13, 1999

ABOUT THE SECOND EDITION

We have great pleasure that the first impression of this edition is out of print within such a short period. We are, therefore, bringing out reissue of the book. We hope, this issue will also be equally adored by the public.

Pradip Jyoti Mahanta
General Secretary
Forum for Sañkaradeva Studies

Guwahati, November 1, 1999

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This is my way. And what is yours? As to the way, it does not exist.

— Nietzsche

I

No other man has had so powerful and so lasting an influence on Assamese life and society as Śaṅkaradeva. For the last five centuries Assam has been buffeted by gusts of social change; its political sky has resounded many times with the thunder-storms of internecine feuds among kings and princes, foreign invasions, imperial dominations and so forth. But Śaṅkaradeva has survived all these vicissitudes of history and retained the same hold on the minds of the Assamese people as he had half a millennium ago. In a way he draws more attention now than ever before. Till the first decade of the present century he remained more or less within the confines of the faithful only. Now, he has gained wide acclaim from all including even those who do not have any propensity towards religion.
This has become possible, because Sañkaradeva was not a mere guru, the propagator of a particular faith, but a many splendoured personality, whose actions and ideals have made the Assamese masses pulsate with a new verve, a new vivacity, and enlivened them for a new social restructuring. He was a whole man, — a man, we may venture to say, of the same genre as Leonardo (who was his contemporary), born, however, in a long distant and uncared for land of Assam. In addition to being the suzerain of a new faith in Assam, he was an erudite scholar, a gifted poet, an able dramatist, a talented musician, a steadfast pursuer of humanistic ideals and above all, a great organiser of social reform. In history we find many a great soul who has reached the dizzy heights of success in a particular sphere of thought or action. But rarely do we come across a person radiant with so broad a spectrum of qualities as Sañkaradeva.

A man of such universal talent can be studied through various perspectives, each delivering a new refulent form as in a kaleidoscope. Such studies have actually been made, mostly in Assamese, by different groups of people at different times.

II

Works on Sañkaradeva may be said to have begun about half a century after his death. In the early half of the seventeenth century two biographies appeared — one on Sañkaradeva alone by Bhusaṇa Dwija and the other on Sañkaradeva along with his dearest disciple Mādhavadeva by Daiyārī Thākura. Almost at the same time one Vaikuṇṭha Dwija wrote a small book on the lives of Sañkara and Mādhava, as also of Sañkara’s two grand sons — Puruṣottma Thākura and Caturbhujha Thakura. In the second half of the same century two more biographies of Sañkaradeva came out — one by Rāmānanda Dwija and other, a very small one, by Aniruddha Dāsa.

The above-mentioned works, all in verse, were written by those who, not being far removed from Sañkara and Mādhava in time, were able to gather their materials from the memorial discourses made by those who had come in contact either with the two gurus themselves or their immediate disciples. As such, these works gave more or less a realistic account of Sañkaradeva’s life.

Of the later medieval works on Sañkaradeva we may count on three hagiographies of which one was written in verse and the other two in prose. The verse work was composed by an unknown writer under the pseudonym — Rāmacaraṇa Thākura, the nephew of Mādhavadeva. Of the two prose works — Kathā-guru-carita (or Guru-carita-kathā, as it was renamed and re-edited by Dr. M. Neog) and Bardowā guru-carita, the former is outstanding by its volume and the encyclopaedic range of materials it covers. The lives of Sañkaradeva and Mādhavadeva are narrated here in detail along with those of their many apostles and evangelistic deputees sent to different parts of Assam in order to propagate the neo Vaisnavite faith.

The works mentioned above were composed at a time when Assamese neo-Vaisnavism spread far and wide and was ramified into different sects, and the myths around Sañkaradeva had escalated to such an extent that the ascription of supernatural qualities to Sañkaradeva had become almost a sine qua non for the hagiographers. That is why these works, in contrast to the earlier ones, are marked by the growth of miracles and a strong current of apotheosis.

III

The medieval period having come to an end, no one, up to the first decade of the present century, made any earnest effort to rediscove and re-assess the genius of Sañkaradeva. The Assamese intelligentsia was so much imbued with the colonial type of modernity brought about by the British that none of its members cared to look back at their neo-Vaisnavite heritage with any sense
Introduction

*Times* has made him the unrivalled leader in this field.

Of the other leaders who stand in prominence in this field, mention may be made of Kaliram Medhi, Dimbeswar Neog (elder brother of M. Neog), Birinchi Kumar Barua, Rajmohan Nath and many others whose books and articles in English helped popularise Assamese neo-Vaisnavism outside Assam. Satyendranath Sarma, a contemporary of Neog, wrote a number of books on the literature and culture of the neo-Vaisnavite period of which *The Neo Vaisnavite Movement and the Sattra Institution of Assam* is most outstanding both in scope and materials.

Modern Sāṅkaradeva scholars from Bezbarua onwards have been English-educated people versed in both Eastern lore and Western spirit, and rationalists enough not to attribute the genius of Sāṅkaradeva to the will of God; at the same time, they (at least a sizeable section of them) have been devout Vaisnavas and averse to allow their rationalism to interfere with their faith. Consequently, their studies, though objective, are often tinged with uncritical eulogism, thus allowing surreptitious entry of many a subjective element that obstructs the pathway to modern scientific analysis. They seem to be more interested in savouring the fragrance of Sāṅkaradeva's works than in unearthing the sociological process whereby these works had grown out of the material world of muck and mire. In the hands of these scholars the deifying tendency of the olden days are now greatly extenuated, only to be replaced by the worship of Carlylean type of heroes,—heroes who are supposed control historical forces without being controlled by them.

IV

The present monograph is an attempt, albeit a very modest one, to understand Sāṅkaradeva from a standpoint which, without an iota of disrespect either to him or to his works, seeks to demystify the holy haze that surrounds and adumbrates him and explore by
felt pained at the prevailing order of things and pined for a better and brighter world which he tried to reshape in his own unique way.

This approach — of observing Śaṅkaradeva from 'below' — is comparatively new in Assam. Attempts, however, have been made in this direction (mostly in Assamese) by a small group of secular and socialist minded scholars of our time, starting right from late Bhabananda Datta. This approach might have many shortcomings. Being a new instrument of research, it might have been swarmed with many an unintentional error. But as an old Latin adage says, "In order to gain truth we must dare to err."
The neo-Vaisnavite movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568) in Assam was a part of the larger pan-Indian resurgence of bhakti in medieval India. While it was basically a reaction against the excesses of sacerdotal religion, the spirit of new ideas manifested itself in an overall social change almost unprecedented in its scale in the history of Assam. Śaṅkaradeva was an extraordinarily gifted man, widely travelled, sound in traditional Sanskrit learning, poet, playwright and musician par excellence. He “... gave to Assam a new discipline of faith ... and helped Assam to break away with the past with its complicated esoteric doctrines and its unmeaning practices, and gave to the people something simple and straight-forward, divested of all questionable associations or implications. He was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing in a pure spiritual life and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India as a religious leader, he is unquestionably one of the greatest, India has produced, .......... He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of medieval India as a whole, shone upon the life of Assam. (S.K. Chatterjee : The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India, Guwahati, 1970).

Much valuable work has been done over the years on the diverse facets of the Śaṅkaradeva movement both by academics and also those from outside the academic world. With a view to providing an institutional support for all such labour to yield results in broader social terms and creating an atmosphere of scholarly exchanges in which Śaṅkaradeva Studies become socially meaningful, the Forum for Śaṅkaradeva Studies was set up in 1988.

Publications of the Forum include: