

**THE TRADITION OF RELIGION
IN ASSAM**

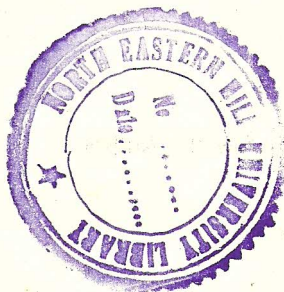
A Philosophical Study

Archana Barua

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Dedicated to my mother
Sjta Kanchan Bala Barua

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Preface

This book represents a somewhat revised version of my doctoral dissertation, submitted to the Department of philosophy, NEHU, in 1989. The content of the present work is much the same as the original dissertation, although I have made a number of changes adding some new materials to some chapters. I have also changed the title of the original dissertation. The present work is a development of the original dissertation.

To write about the tradition of religion in Assam is inevitably to confront one of the difficult or rather abstruse aspects of Assam's culture. However, my work has been made easier by several kinds of help I have received in the field. I have benefitted from help by representatives of both tradition and modern scholarship.

I am grateful to sattradhikars Sjt Narayan Ch Goswami, Sjt Gauri Kanta Bhattacharya, Sjt Achyut Mishra and Sjt Istadev Navis, among others for fruitful discussions I had with them about matters relating to the Sattrā Institution and tradition. The scholarly writings of such pioneering modern Assamese scholars as Laksminath Bezbarua, Banikanta Kakati and Dimbeswar Neog have given me some penetrating insights to work with on this field with a non-traditional approach. My work would have been practically difficult without the support of the basic guiding lights I have discovered in them for the Vaishnavism of Shankaradeva. On several matters I have also been helped by the English translation of Namghosha by Haramohan Das and the voluminous work on 'Sankaradeva and his Times' by Dr. Maheswar Neog. On the other hand, the works of Sri Manoranjan Sastri, Sri Tirthanath Sarma and Dr. Satyendra Nath Sarma, Sri Bap Ch Mahanta etc. on the history of Vaishnavism in Assam have also helped me in my work.

A new perspective, connected with new ideas and bearing also

on theme of Comparative Religion, was provided to me by the scholarly writings of my brother Sri Bhaben Barua, who has been a source of grate inspiration to me. I am also grateful to Muktodhara Cultural Association for important scholarly materials made available to me in this field for understanding religion in the light of new philosophical ideas.

Finally, I am specially indebted to Professor Dr. Sujata Miri, who supervised, with a great deal of patience and attention, the writing of the original dissertation for the degree of Ph.D. I am indebted to Professor Dr. Mrinal Miri, who took keen interest in the progress of my work. I am also indebted to Rev. Father Stephen Maveley, SDB, Principal, St. Anthony's College for his help and cooperation during the period.

I am grateful to Dr. Dilip Kr. Chakravarty, Professor and Head, Department of Philosophy, Gauhati University, and Dr. A. Balasubramanian, Professor and Head, Department of Philosophy, Pondicherry University, for the encouraging words of high praise that my work has received from them : they also examined my thesis with a close attention.

I am grateful to the memory of my father, late Debendranath Barua, who also took an interest in my work. My mother, Sita Kanchan Bala Barua, had been a source of inspiration and illumination while I was working on this thesis. To my husband, Sri Debabrata Barua, I am grateful for his patience and friendship shown during the entire period devoted to the research work.

SHILLONG,
The 2nd October 1996.

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INTRODUCTION

In the light of contemporary analytical philosophy, we may use Wittgenstein's notion of a 'language game' and a 'form of life' in order to discuss forms of religious belief in a new way in order to highlight the significance of the fact that the speaking of language is a form or an activity of life. To understand any language, one may set it within the situation of its appropriate language game. W.D. Hudson wrote the following words in one context suggesting that philosophical analysis is basically a process of clarification.

"By mapping logical frontiers, I am differentiating a language game clearly from other language games. Wittgenstein speaks in one place of philosophy as a battle against bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. Such bewitchment arises when one language game gets confused with another ; and it is just such confusion which philosophy exists to dispel by mapping clearly the frontiers between language games."¹

Accordingly, in order to map the logical frontiers of the different kinds of religions of Assam, I have placed them against their sociological and historical backgrounds. This, I hope will clarify some problems here.

In the words of Wittgenstein, "What we do in our language game is to rest on a tacit presupposition."² The concept which is tacitly presupposed, which is called the constitutive concept of a particular form of life, determines what things are meaningful within that discourse. Within the moral discourse, the concept of goodness is the constitutive concept. Goodness may be defined in an utilitarian way as

implying maximum happiness ; yet it makes sense to ask, is what produces maximum happiness good ? Similarly, in the religious discourse, the grammar of the concept of God determines what things are meaningful within that discourse. About the nature of the constitutive concept of the religious form of life too, I would like to quote Hudson.

"I have emphasised above the complexity of the concept of God. Let me now emphasise its 'open-texture'. Philosophers called attention to the 'open-texture' of empirical concepts. They point out that what is meant by a material object term, e.g. 'table', can never be given final and complete definition in sense contents. The open texture is evident in two ways : (i) one can never complete the empirical description of a material object; it is always logically possible to extend the description by adding some further details ; (ii) one can never be sure that some new and unforeseen experience will not cause one to modify or retract the description of that which one calls God. It follows that to be exploratory or at least open-minded, in one's religious belief is not only a religious or moral virtue (if it is either of these), but a logical requirement of employing the concept of God correctly."³

Through analysis of the different religions of Assam, I have observed that there are different levels of development of the constitutive concept. Although all religions tacitly presuppose God as the constitutive concept, this concept is found to be elusive and of open texture. The transcendence of the concept may be taken to imply that more may always be said in describing God than what has been said.

The different religions of Assam are placed in their social and cultural contexts and the location of religions in such contexts has helped me to suggest that the majority of the people in certain culture really believe, say and does certain things in the context of their actual historical existence within that culture where they are subject to all sorts of real,

mundane pressures. At this level, religion may be connected with ever present mundane needs, which dominate the so called popular religions. But it would be a mistake to identify religion only with this aspect. Religions also concentrate on the distant ideal or an eternal goal. That is the aspect Paul Tillich referred to when he spoke of religion as man's ultimate concern.

All the religions of Assam present both these aspects, the dominant role of one aspect may give a different colour to any one of these religions. The choice of the 'language game' or of 'the form of life', all these matters which make up a style of thought or the spirit of the times, are to some extent influenced by the social and institutional milieu of the thinker. In order to understand the meaning of religious concepts, I have placed them in their historical and the sociological contexts. The discussion of the *Ek Sarana Nām Dharma* of the Vaishnavite Saints Shankaradeva and his ardent follower Madhavdeva, has been presented with a special emphasis as this religion presents some unique features. I have depended on a great deal of sociological and historical works in the field of the Vaishnavism of Shankaradeva and my attempt has been to explore the uniqueness and the peculiarity of this religious tradition in particular. This accounts for the large number of sociological references made in some parts of my writing. This may be taken as an attempt at justifying some philosophical observations with the help historical research.

The first chapter consists of an account of the Pre-Shankaradeva religions of Assam. An attempt has been made to give an account of the religions of the tribes of the Assam Valley, better known as the plains tribals – who are now generally found in the foot-hill areas of the plains. I have found that the tribes of Assam worshipped a host of minor deities and they acknowledged a Creator Deity who was

superior to the rest. As this Supreme Creator Deity was mostly inactive He was often pushed to the background and the minor deities claimed the whole attention of the tribes. Though inactive, the Supreme Creator Deity was remembered and revered.

The first chapter also deals with another important religion, the religion of Saivism and of Shaktism which prevailed in Assam mainly from the 7th century. In Assam, the religion of Saivism was mixed with Tāntricism and Kāmākhyā became a famous centre of tāntricism.* In the religion of Saivism too, the Supreme Creator Deity Shiva is inactive in which the idea of Shakti becomes dominant, and the grammar of this constitutive concept determines the cultural form of life associated with this particular religion.

Besides the religion of Saivism, and Shaktism, Vishnu worship also flourished at a particular time. The Badaganga Rock Inscription (554 A.D.) is the earliest recorded evidence of Vishnu worship. During the rule of the pala kings, a second phase of Vishnu worship is recorded. Two important centres of Vishnu worship are the Vasudeva Pitha and the Hayagriva Pitha. In both these centres, Vishnu worship is associated with murti, mantra and diksā.

After an examination of the different religions of Assam, an attempt has been made in this work to define the religious tradition associated with the Vaishnavite Saints Shankaradeva and his ardent disciple Madhavadeva. The distinctive features of this religion is marked by its stress on monotheism, by the non-idolatrous mode of worship, its abolition of mantra as well as diksā and the introduction of Nām and Sarana. With these specific features, which marked it off from the Brāhmanical Vaishnavism of the time, this religion came to be known as the *EK Sarana Nām* Dharma or the Mahapuruṣiyā Dharma. The personality of the Creator Deity is definitely spelt out and the transcendent Supreme God

Vishnu Narayana, the DEVA, is identified also with the Upanishadic Brahman in the way of the Vaishnava philosophy. Shankaradeva and Madhavdeva, like the Vaishnavite reformer Ramanuja, presented the personality of the Deity in a definite form. The Supreme God as Vishnu, is not the inactive Purusha, but the Purushottama of the Bhāgavat Gitā, who is beyond the ksara and the aksara, who is the controller of both Purusa and Prakrti.* Isvara is also the Mahāpuruṣa of the Bhāgavat Purāna, Nārāyana, who is identified with the Purusa of the Vedas. The root of Vaishnava theism is traced to the Vedas, as well as to the Upanishads where the act of creation is said to be preceded by an act of reflection which shows the intelligence of the Supreme Deity as its guiding force. Prakrti is regarded not as the efficient cause of creation, but only as the instrumental cause.** Vishnu Narayana represents the sattva aspect of the Deity, the ultimate reality, the Para Brahman. The Supreme Isvara is also the Visvarastā (Creator of the world), which idea shows panentheism, not pantheism and Laksmi as the spouse of Narayana is conducive to the Supreme Purusa but no separate worship of the deity is necessary as Laksmi is pleased when Narayana is pleased. This attitude explains the absence in Shankaradeva's Vaishnavism, of the dual worship of Laksmi Narayana, of Rāma-Sita, Rādhākṛishna etc., which are associated with some other types of Vaishnavism. The monotheism asks for the strict *EK Sarana* to the Deva, this is the spirit of a sloka from the Bhāgavat Purana implying that leaves and branches of a tree get nourishment when water is poured at the root of a tree. The *Deva* is identified with *Nām*, *Guru* and *Bhakat* and Sarana is given to these four realities which signify in essence the Sarana to the one. The prominence given to the devotee is a special feature of this religion; and devotees belonging to the tribes of Assam and also the Muhammadan devotees got equal considerations. Within the Bhakti path,

the hierarchy of caste was not effective and the Shudra gurus also gave Nām Sarana to some Brahmin disciples.

In the third chapter, the Damodaria form of Vaishnavism is studied. It is found that after the death of Shankaradeva, caste implications within the Bhakti path gave rise to conflicting dogmas. The Damodariya form of Vaishnavism has a striking affinity to the Caitanyite Vaishnavism of the later stage. Among other sects, within the Purusha Samhati, caste hierarchy is observed and worship of the finite deities is neither encouraged nor objected to. The Nika Samhati, headed by Mathuradas Buha Ata of the weaver class, acknowledges the influence of Madhavdeva. In this sect, the Satradhikar is elected democratically. The Kala Samhati of Upper Assam, headed by Gopal Ata, consisted mainly of low caste disciples and of tribal people along with others. The prominence is given to Bhakat and Guru; non-idolatrous and monotheist. One of the sub-sects, the Dihing Sattra, acknowledged royal patronage and boycotted the Moamoria sect for its revolt against the Ahom King.

After an analysis of these sects against their proper sociological backgrounds, an attempt has been made in the fourth chapter to show that the meaning of a concept changes when associated with different historical conditions. The history of the concept of bhakti is traced and it is found that at different stages of its development, the concept has acquired new shades of meaning. This helps me to trace the development of the Bhakti concept within the two forms of Vaishnavism. Bhakti becomes more intimate and passionate within the Vaishnavism of Caitanya, and at the triumph of the Parakiya status of Radha at a later period, the conflict between the dutiful and the free is overcome in favour of the free as the intimate type of passionate love triumphs. The emergence of Radha from Laksmi, the parakiya nayika from the Svakiya status are related to different contextual changes. The Damodariya form of Vaishnavism is much

similar to the Caitanyite form of the late period as both acknowledge the influence of Shaktism and of Tantricism. On the other hand, in the non-idolatrous *Ek Sarana Nām Dharma*, flourishing among the peasants, the low castes, the manual labourers etc., Laksmi, the chaste and ideal wife of Narayana remains the ideal. The dasya bhakti becomes social, not individual. Namghar, not the temple, is the common centre of worship and this form of reformist religion presented striking similarity to the other reformist sects like the Brahmo religion of Ram Mohan Roy, Sufism of Hazarat Ajan Pir and even with Christianity to some extent as all these different types of religions pictured God as love, as a person and as transcendent. The non-idolatrous mode of worship, the supremacy of nām, the abolition of priesthood and of caste rigidity in matters of devotion are striking similarities of these sects. It is also striking that within the Caitanyite cult, Krishna becomes the moon and Caitanya is described as the moon, (Caitanya Candra). Among the Sudra classes in the Assam valley, Krishna is the Sun,* and Shankaradeva is described as the Sun.

In the conclusion, I have summed up my observations by an extension of Wittgenstein's analysis of language games and the meaning of religious language games in a non-relativistic way. It has been observed :

"The work done so far in this direction is, I believe, disappointing largely because, it has either side-stepped the question of religious truth and the rationality of religious belief, or else, it has adopted a relativist standpoint on this issue."⁴

"... There is, in any case, another side to Wittgenstein's philosophy in which he does not acquiesce in cultural relativism but instead roots our concepts and behaviour in facts about human life and the world."⁵

My humble submission in this regard is that the meaning of a religious discourse is largely modified by the changes

in the ordinary discourse. It may be seen how the concept of Krishna Lakshmi, Krishna as the sun, appeals to a particular context where the adherents of the belief, the people among whom the particular concept was developed and nourished, were the free peasants. Within the context of Bengal, Radha emerges from Lakshmi and Krishna becomes the romantic hero, incomplete without a particular heroine, and this is meaningful within a culture where the cult of the Devi is predominant. Moreover, the sociological observations reveal that the peasants of Bengal, unlike those in the Assam valley, were regarded as low castes, while the agriculturists in the Brahmaputra valley were equal to the high castes. It has been observed :

"Caste prejudices, however, flourished in places settled by Bengalees who had inherited the legacy of discriminatory social order tilted in favour of the orthodox Brahmins. Unlike the Brahmaputra valley, the Surama valley, a predominantly Bengali cultural zone, had always acted as a miniature Bengal in upholding the doctrine of Karma in order to legitimise the unequal injunctions of religious scriptures."⁶

The meaning of a concept changes according to different contexts and so it would be proper to suggest that the religious language game is like the non-religious language game in many respects. Some of its concepts are modified owing to some changes in the ordinary discourse, although the transcendence of the constitutive concept of God indicates that it is not reduced to the social conditions. The possibility is always there that something more can be said about it. Within the same culture, the concepts may change their meaning for example, within the Caitanyite sect itself, in some contexts, the Lakshmi Vishnu picture replaces the Radhā-Krishna one.*

The last chapter emphasises the presence of a reality which is common to all religions. Of course, religions differ

in their rituals, myths, the superstitions they generate and the dogmas they propagate. However, as long as there are seers like Shankaradeva, a particular religion would always touch that common reality and such a seer would have a new lease of life. As a great thinker observes :

"It is only among a few intellectuals that this creative quest is self-conscious, this search for new expression of the ancient truth. Still rarer is the explicit recognition that, in some senses, the religious task today is creative not only of form but of essence. The truth of religion is itself developing."⁷

This creative urge was amply illustrated in the lives of the great devotees and saints of India. Shankaradeva was one of the best representatives of this tradition in Assam.

The Vaishnavite saint Shankaradeva was born in 1371 Saka* (A.D. 1449), in the Bhuyān family at Alipukhuri, a place about sixteen miles from the town of Nowgong. His father was Kusumavara, the chief of the Siromani Bāra Bhuyān. His mother Satyasandhā died three days after his birth. Shankaradeva was brought up by his grandmother Khersuti. Shankara, endowed with natural gifts, soon developed a strong physique and a quick brain. After Sankara set out on a pilgrimage to the holy places of India. During his long pilgrimage of twelve years he had scholarly discussions with many religious heads and gurus, studied the religious scriptures and offered his comments on many occasions. It is said that he met Kabir at Badarikāshrama and had friendly discussions with him. Shankara now returned home and remarried. Shankaradeva now began to preach his tenets of neo-Vaishnavism, and he wanted to be of service to humanity. To be a spiritual preacher, Shankaradeva realised, one need not renounce the world. This creative genius sought to safeguard the two realms of life, the finite and the infinite, as he wanted to bring out the essence of religion in a significant manner. Shankara Deva

propounded the Vaishnava cult in the form of the Ek-Sarana-Nām-Dharma. It advocates four primary elements viz., (1) Comprehension of Parama Brahma, the all pervasive Supreme Being in the form of Narayana. Nārāyana, the Supreme Godhead, is the Nirguna Brahman of the Upanishads. So he says the following form of prayer in his Kirtan-Ghosha — “At the outset I bow down unto Narayan the Eternal one in the form of Brahma, the Cause of all incarnation.” (2) The complete self-surrender – Ek Sarana – unto the Supreme Being in the form of Sri Krishna as extolled in the Gita. (3) Sat Sanga, fraternity with pious divines as enjoined in the Maha Bhagawata. (4) Divine services in the form of prayer and chanting the name of the Supreme Being.⁸

Shankaradeva was an upholder of equality in the spiritual sphere. This blending of social and religious reforms is a unique feature of the Ek Sarana Nam Dharma. Shankaradeva says in the Kirtana, “Why need one be a Brahmin who devotedly recites the name of Krishna. He might be a Chandala, but he is far Superior to any man who is not attached to the name of Hari.”

The spirit of the Ek Sarana Nām Dharma of Shankaradeva reminds us of Christianity’s emphasis on service of man as service of God. It may also lead us to the Gandhian ideal which also emphasises a permanent aspect of all religions.

“I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe that if only one could all of us read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of these faiths, we should see that they were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another.”⁹

Reference

1. W.d. Hudson, *The Logical Structure of Religious Belief*, (London : Macmillan, 1974) p. 8.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1953).

3. W.D. Hudson, *The Logical Structure of Religious Belief*, p. 23

* At this period, Prāgiyotish came to be known as Kāmarupa.

* Like Rāmānuja, Shankaradeva accepts Isvara as Ānandamaya Vigraha (having a blissful form).

** In this respect too, this religion differs from the philosophy of the tantra.

Krishna Suryya bhailanta udita.

Nam Dharma karile bidita' (Kirtana : Shankaradeva)

4. Pattric Sherry, *Religious Truths and Language Games*, The Macmillan Ltd., 1977, p. vii.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

6. Bimal J. Dev and Dilip K. Lahiri, *Cosmogony Caste and Social Mobility in Assam*, (Delhi : Mittal Publications, 1964), p. xii.

* "It is also interesting that in Vikrampur and South-Eastern Faridpur, Laksmi, consort of Vishnu and not Radha, whom Krishna loved, enjoyed the adoration of the Vaishnavas and the non-Vaishnavas. Laksmi worship grew highly popular throughout Vikrampur Paragana. It was patronised by the agricultural communities and the upper caste Hindus." (Dr. Rama Kanta Chakravarty, *Vaishnavism in Bengal*, pp. 286-287).

7. W.C. Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1977) P. 183.

* The exact year of Shankaradeva's birth is open to dispute. The majority of scholars accept 1449 A.D. as the year of his birth.

8. H.M. Das (Ed), *Mahapurush Sri Madhavdeva Namghosha*, p.12.

* From a speech delivered by Gandhiji at a public meeting held at Trachinapoly on the 10th February 1934, Harijan, 16-2-1934, pp.5-6.

9. M.K. Gandhi, "Caste Must Go and the Sin of Untouchability", Compiled by R.K. Prabhu, (Ahmedabad : Navajivan Press, 1964) 39.