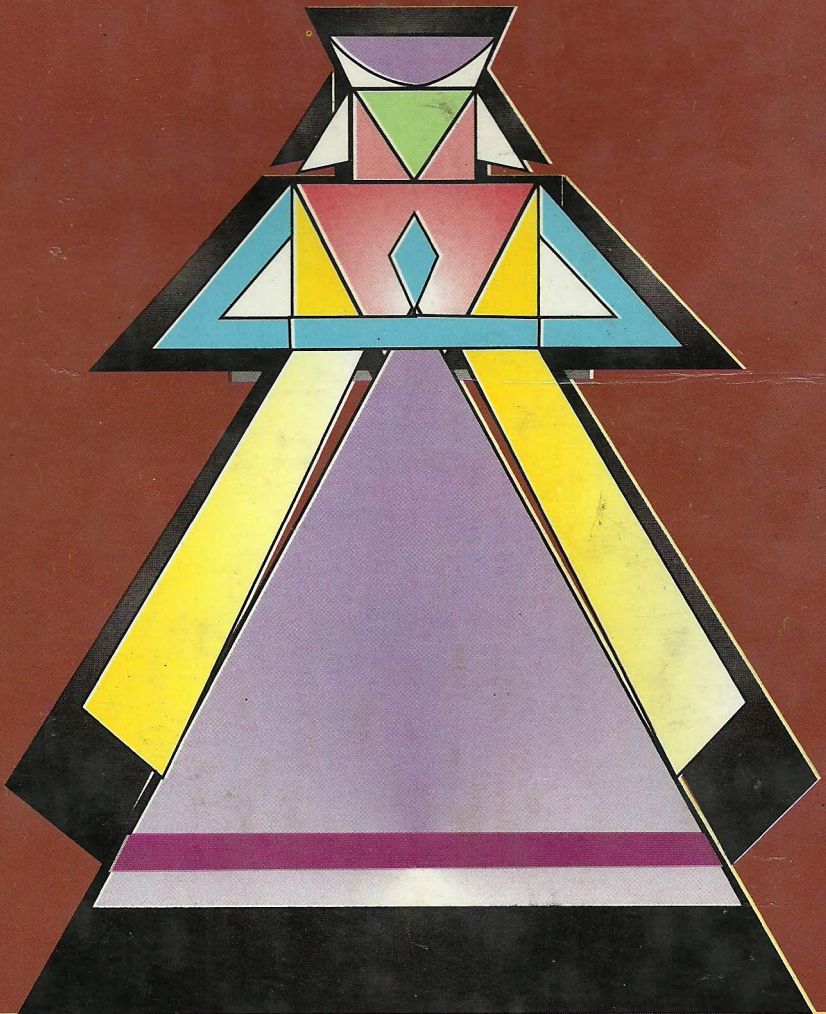


AN UNSUNG COLOSSUS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND WORKS OF SANKARADEVA



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SIVANATH BARMAN

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UNsung COLOSSUS

An Introduction to
The Life and Works of Śaṅkaradeva



Sivanath Barman

FORUM FOR ŚAṅKARADEVA STUDIES

GUWAHATI : ASSAM : INDIA

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VANDE PITARAU

DEDICATED TO THE SACRED MEMORY OF MY PARENTS

- AUTHOR

PREFACE

This slim volume is a popular introduction to the life and works of Śaṅkaradeva, 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 Śaṅkaradeva. 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 Śaṅkaradeva, — 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 Śaṅkaradeva, 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 Śaṅkaradeva 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 Śaṅkaradeva (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 Śaṅkaradeva Studies* in connection with the 550th anniversary celebration of Śaṅkaradeva'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

Guwahati,

September 13, 1999

Forum for Śaṅkaradeva Studies

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

Guwahati,

November 1, 1999

Forum for Śaṅkaradeva Studies

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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 Śaṅkaradeva 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 Śaṅkaradeva.

A man of such universal talent can be studied through various perspectives, each delivering a new refulgent 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 Śaṅkaradeva 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 Śaṅkaradeva alone by Bhuṣaṇa Dwija and the other on Śaṅkaradeva along with his dearest disciple Mādhavadeva by Daityāri Ṭhākura. Almost at the same time one Vaikuṅṭha Dwija wrote a small book on the lives of Śaṅkara and Mādhava, as also of Śaṅkara's two grand sons — Puruṣottma Ṭhākura and Caturbhujā Ṭhākura. In the second half of the same century two more biographies of Śaṅkaradeva 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 Śaṅkara 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 Śaṅkaradeva's life.

Of the later medieval works on Śaṅkaradeva 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 Ṭhākura, 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 Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva are narrated here in detail along with those of their many apostles and evangelistic deputies 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 Śaṅkaradeva had escalated to such an extent that the ascription of supernatural qualities to Śaṅkaradeva 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, upto the first decade of the present century, made any earnest effort to re-discover and re-assess the genius of Śaṅkaradeva. 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

of seriousness and solemnity. Moreover, the preaching community itself had degenerated so much that some scholars (Hemchandra Barua, the famous Assamese lexicographer, for instance) saw only the moral laxity of the religious heads that went behind their apparent holiness and vehemently decried it.

The honour of being the pioneer of modern Śaṅkaradeva studies goes to Lakshminath Bezbaroa, known in Assam as *Sāhitya-rathī* ('the charioteer of literature'). Born in a family rich in neo-Vaisnavite tradition (his father had authored a biography of Śaṅkaradeva in verse), but brought up in an environment where English education held sway, Bezbarua naturally had to shoulder the responsibility of being the *persona grata* for writing the lives of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva from a modern view-point. Banking heavily on medieval hagiographies, he wrote, in the second decade of the present century, two books — *Śrī Śrī Śaṅkaradeva* and *Śrī Śaṅkaradeva aru* (and) *Śrī Mādhavadeva*. These two books, written in Assamese, along with his two famous lectures delivered (in English) at Baroda (later compiled by M. Neog under the title — *The Religion of Love and Devotion*) paved the way for a new approach to Śaṅkaradeva studies in Assam.

Later, Banikanta Kakati, one of the most incisive minds of modern Assam, enriched these studies by writing a number of innovative articles — both in English and Assamese — and editing a book (in English) on this subject. It may be mentioned that he was the first to write a biography of Śaṅkaradeva in English (published by G.A. Nateson & Co. in 1923).

Standing on the shoulders of giants like Bezbaroa and Kakati, there appeared, in the post independence period, a scholar of great erudition — late lamented Maheswar Neog. He saw further, delved deeper and through life long research raised the neo-Vaisnavite studies to a level yet unattained. A prolific and meticulous writer, he wrote and edited, both in English and Assamese, a large number of books and articles on the subject. His magnum opus *Śaṅkaradeva and His*

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 Śaṅkaradeva 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 Śaṅkaradeva 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 eulogium, 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 Śaṅkaradeva'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 Śaṅkaradeva 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

methodological analysis the mundane significance of his works. Such a perspective considers the great man neither a divinely endowed personality nor a superhistorical agent unimpeded by the pulls and pushes of the society he lives in, but an outstanding individual who absorbs the spirit of his age, who, in the words of Carr, "is at once the product and agent of historical process, at once the representative and creator of social forces which change the shape of the world and the thought of man."¹ Looked at in this way, the great man not only guides, but is also guided by society. He not only makes circumstances, but is also made by circumstances.

Śaṅkaradeva was a man of religion and on any discussion on him the question of religion inevitably crops up. However supra-terrestrial it might appear to be at first sight, religion is in reality a very earthly phenomenon, a reflection of the real, material world and its secret can be explored by the analysis of the society we live in. Religion is generally thought of as a psychological release, a solace to those who feel crushed by the tyranny of mundane life. This view, though veracious, is, however, lopsided and overshadows the other side of the picture — the revolutionary content of religion; for, a reflection notwithstanding, religion does not mirror the world in a passive, mechanical manner. It has with reality a dynamic, dialectical relationship which acts and reacts on each other, finding fulfilment in its attempt to change the face of reality itself. As Marx rightly noted, religion is not only the sigh of the oppressed creature or the heart of a heartless world; it is also the *spirit* of the spiritless situation; religious distress is not only the expression of real distress, but also a *protest* against real distress.²

I have tried to study the life and achievements of Śaṅkaradeva from these points of view. He is portrayed not simply as a pious ascetic who spent his life in tranquil contemplation and heavenly bliss totally oblivious of the worldly woes that surrounded him, but as a man of action, a reformer — if not a revolutionary — who was acutely sensitive to the sufferings of his fellow human beings, who

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 :

1. Maheswar Neog : *The Contributions of the Śaṅkaradeva Movement to the Culture and Civilization of India*, 1988, 1998.
2. Satyendra Nath Sarma : *Glimpses of the Art of Śaṅkaradeva's Poetry* 1989, 1998.
3. Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami (Ed) : *Essays on Śaṅkaradeva*, 1996.
4. Kesavananda Dev Goswami : *Life and Teachings of Mahāpurusa Śaṅkaradeva*, 1999.