

ASSAM
VAISHNAVISM

ANIMA DUTTA

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(Its Twentieth Century Voice—Lakshminath Bezbaroa)

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PREFACE

The glorious Bhakti Movement starting from the twelfth century A.D. to the sixteenth century A.D. was gradually and continuously growing in Assam too. The great Indian saints—Ramananda, Kabir, Tulsidas, Tukaram, Namdev, Vallabha, Jagannath Das, Caitanyadeva, Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva—all contributed to the preaching of the Bhakti Dharma, a universal and graceful faith. Assam, the easternmost part of the country could attain a high level of excellence in its literature and culture under the blessed guidance of Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568), the founder of Assam Vaishnavism. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the most illustrious amongst the litterateurs of the twentieth century Assam has thoroughly assessed the impact of this continuing Bhakti cult on the Assamese society from various angles. Bezbaroa's concern for Assam Vaishnavism is most genuine and profound. I am presenting this book to the lovers of India's glorious ancient traditions with the title *Assam Vaishnavism: Its Twentieth Century Voice—Lakshminath Bezbaroa*, which is substantially based on my doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Gauhati.

I am indebted to several persons for their direct or indirect help to me in preparing this work. First, I record my profound sense of indebtedness to Dr. Maheswar Neog, formerly Jawaharlal Nehru Professor, Gauhati University and Saint Sankaradeva Professor, Punjabi University, Patiala, for his

guidance and encouragement during this investigation. The foremost authority on Lakshminath Bezbaroa's entire range of literature, Dr. Neog has taken keen interest and meticulous care in guiding me throughout my project in spite of his delicate health and busy schedule.

Next, I offer my thanks to the Librarian, K.K. Handiqui Library, Gauhati University for allowing me liberal facilities of using the library.

I record my gratitude to my husband Shri Hirendranath Dutta, Reader in English, Gauhati University for the help he offered to me throughout my work.

I would like to offer my thanks to some more persons for their suggestions, encouragement and enquiries in bringing this work to completion. They are Dr. G. P. Sarma, Dr. Anjali Sarma, Dr. Nilima Sarma, Dr. Lilavati Bora Saikia, Dr. Sulekha Chakravarty, all of them from Guwahati and also my sister Mrs. Pratima Barua of Shillong. My sons Priyankar and Rupanka helped and inspired me in their own ways.

Lastly, I offer my sincere gratitude to the Mittal Publications, New Delhi, for publishing the work. I deem it a privilege that my book is included in the list of publications by this firm which has acquired all India distinction as the leading publishers of learned books. By choosing to publish my book, they have added something to the growing interest for the Bhakti faith in India.

ANIMA DUTTA

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TRANSLITERATION

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ONE



INTRODUCTION

India occupies a high position in the sphere of philosophy. Ancient India was a land of spiritualism and philosophy. It is a certainty that an intelligent student interested in philosophy will find in Indian thought endless varieties of materials, so much so, that a wealth of such philosophical ideas may not possibly be found anywhere in the world.¹

To know the glorious past of India, we must have some knowledge of philosophy. S. Radhakrishnan, one of the most outstanding scholars and philosophers of India, says:

To the Indian student, a study of Indian philosophy alone can give a right perspective about the past of India.²

On the other hand, to realise the true essence of any religion, we must study philosophy, because philosophy and religion are interrelated.

Philosophy and religion are intimately related because philosophy itself is regarded as a spiritual adventure, and also because the motivation both in philosophy and in religion concerns the spiritual way of life in the here-and-now and the eventual spiritual salvation of man in relation

to the universe. Practically all of Indian philosophy, from its beginning in the Vedas, to the present day, has striven to bring about a socio-spiritual reform in the country and philosophical literature has taken many forms, mythological, popular or technical, as the circumstances required, in order to promote such spiritual life. The problems of religion have always given depth and power and purpose to the Indian philosophical mind and spirit.³

Bezbaroa's Attachment to Indian Religion and Philosophy

Lakshminath Bezbaroa wrote his philosophical essays throwing insight into Indian religion, especially the Vaiṣṇava faith, and his thought has always its roots deep in Indian philosophy. The Industrial civilisation started developing in India during the time when Bezbaroa started his literary activities. Because of the spell cast by the new set of values, the minds of many people of that time were distracted from idealism and took their turn towards materialism. In such an atmosphere, there was every possibility of Bezbaroa's ideas being influenced by the materialistic concepts. But Bezbaroa, who had a deep attachment to the Indian ideals, was not deflected by materialism. He could transcend materialistic realism which made its appearance in his stories and satirical sketches and moved ahead in quest of the ultimate goal of human existence.⁴

He got engaged in making comparative assessments of the ways laid down by the yogīs, sages and other saints of our country. He studied the ancient scriptures and compared those with Western religious scriptures and found the ultimate truth of life in the nāma-dharma propounded by Śrīmananta Śaṅkaradeva. The foundation of his spiritual faith came to be strengthened by the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata*, besides the Vaiṣṇava scriptures of Assam such as the *Kīrtana*, *Nāmaghoṣā* and *Bhakti-Ratnāvalī*.⁵

Bezbaroa's Devotion to the Vaiṣṇava Faith of Assam

Bezbaroa who brought an intellectual and spiritual renaissance to his state is a great son of Mother Assam. Suniti

Kumar Chatterji, National Professor of India of Humanities, said on one occasion:

Lakshminath Bezbaroa was thus an illustrious son of India and a member of the galaxy of the great men and women who raised the name of India during the last century.⁶

Bezbaroa is the maker of an epoch in modern Assamese literature. All the literary men of Assam regarded him as the helmsman of Assamese literature. Even now, Bezbaroa's influence extensively prevails in the realm of Assamese literature. Bezbaroa's literary genius has many facets. He is novelist, dramatist, poet, short-story writer, folklorist, hagiologist, writer of humorous and philosophical essays, all combined in one. There is no aspect of literature which the light of Bezbaroa's genius has not reached. But according to the view expressed by many leading literary scholars of Assam, Bezbaroa is honoured most as an exponent and expositor of the Vaiṣṇava faith and philosophy of Śrī-Śaṅkaradeva and of that saint's great contributions to the culture of Assam.⁷

Vasudev Sharan Agarwala, in his review of Maheswar Neog's *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times* in the *Journal of Assam Research Society*,⁸ compares Śaṅkaradeva to the glorious sun under whose warmth of mind, Assam blossomed like a lotus of thousand petals (*sahasradala kamala*). He observes in the same review:

It is difficult to imagine how deep and widespread was the influence of Śaṅkaradeva on the cultural renaissance that burst forth in medieval Assam. There are poets and composers, there are saints and religious teachers, there are musical masters, there are preachers, but Śaṅkaradeva was a genius in whom all these qualities were rolled into one.

Bezbaroa is the first and foremost exponent and expounder of the Vaiṣṇava faith and philosophy and its ideals as preached by Śaṅkaradeva. He is the first Assamese writer to get actively engaged in hot polemics and long-drawnout controversies in order to defend the glory and sanctity of the Vaiṣṇava faith and subsequently the body of these polemics has turned out to

be an important addition to the Assamese literature of the twentieth century.

Bezbaroa asserts that the writings of Śaṅkaradeva and his disciple and apostle Mādhavadeva form a great legacy of Assam's cultural tradition. It is Bezbaroa's conviction that if this basis is not strengthened, modern Assamese literature and culture would not be able to draw proper nourishment. Realising the importance of this fact, Bezbaroa worked through his whole life to establish the ideals of Śaṅkaradeva on the high pedestal of Assam's national life. Bezbaroa got inspiration for such a strenuous work because of his sincere devotion to neo-Vaiṣṇava religion of Śaṅkaradeva and his true adherence to nāma-dharma. In the words of Atulchandra Hazarika:

Lakshminath's life was saturated with the thought of Śrī-Kṛṣṇa and Śaṅkara and Mādhava. To establish this point not much effort is necessary. When we turn over the pages of a few numbers of old copies of the *Bāhī*, we can immediately realise that devotion to Śrī-Kṛṣṇa was in every pore of his existence and flourished like a lotus. After the name of Kadamba, Śrī-Kṛṣṇa's favourite tree in the Vṛndāvana, Lakshminath christened his only anthology of poems as *Kadam-Kali* (buds of Kadamba tree) disregarding in the process many other fragrant flowers, such as golāp, tagar, campā and nageśvara. Also the *Bāhī*, so gloriously edited by Lakshminath, derived its name from the melodious flute adorning the hands of Śrī-Kṛṣṇa.⁹

Family Background and Upbringing

Bezbaroa was born in a devout Vaiṣṇava family. About his ancestors, we know that a brāhman Vaiṣṇava by the name Kalibar came to Assam from Kanauj. He was a learned man and was well-versed in Āyurveda. King Jayadvajasiṃha (1648-63) appointed him as Bezbaruwā or the chief royal physician. One after another, the descendants of Kalibar enjoyed that official status. Kalibar's grandson Puruṣottama Baruwā embraced the Mahāpuruṣīyā faith of Śaṅkaradeva and is said to have made suitable arrangements to Badulā Padma

Ātā for establishing a sattra in his orange orchard. That is how the Kamalābārī sattra of Majuli was brought into being. Since then, the descendants of the Bezbaruwā family became ardent followers of the Mahāpuruṣa. Lakshminath was the son of Dinanath Bezbaroa a scion of this devout Vaiṣṇava family.¹⁰ Dinanath Bezbaroa performed all the Mahāpuruṣīyā rites with meticulous care. All throughout the day, his house was resounding with various programmes of congregational prayers and religious discourses.¹¹ In the words of Maheswar Neog:

Dinanath Bezbaroa was such a passionately religious man that when he saw his own end fast approaching, he had a big merchandise boat built for him, made his way in that boat to the Vaiṣṇava temple, Kamalābārī sattra, and died there in untold bliss. . . . It would thus not require much imagination to envisage to oneself the atmosphere of life in the family of the Bezbaroas. Lakshminath dived into and swam in this intensely Vaiṣṇava atmosphere and learnt many things as naturally as learning to breathe.¹²

Bezbaroa's Basic Convictions

As a college student with philosophy as one of his subjects, Bezbaroa had an interest in that subject. But he developed a deeper interest in philosophy in his later life. He had deep and extensive study of the philosophical texts of India. He had also profound knowledge of other principal religions of the world—Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. He studied the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the Vedānta and other five systems of Indian philosophy along with various other writings of different ancient Sanskrit scholars. As a result of this, his religious sympathies were formed and his views on religion and philosophy were evolved.

Bezbaroa had a firm conviction about the excellence of the Vaiṣṇava faith and philosophy. He had great admiration for Śāṅkaradeva and sought to establish his greatness by comparing Śāṅkaradeva's brand of Vaiṣṇavism with those of other Vaiṣṇava preachers of India.

In the whole range of his philosophical treatises, Bezbaroa has put particular stress on the point that God is one, but men call him by many names. This has been declared by the seers of the *R̥g-Veda* also, who realised that true religions comprehend all religions.¹³ Though Bezbaroa himself is an admirer of Śaṅkaradeva and a devotee of Kṛṣṇa, he never condemns other religions. This trait of catholicity reveals the nobility of his character.

According to him, God has not got any specific name. The form of address which a devotee chooses to make to God turns out to be His right name.¹⁴ He posits in another place:

The Kṛṣṇa of Śaṅkara and Mādhava is the Controller of Prakṛti and Puruṣa of the Sāṅkhya, the Lord of Kāla and Māyā, and God the Father of Christ, and Āllāho Ākbar of Muhāmmad.¹⁵

Bezbaroa, while explaining Śaṅkaradeva's philosophy against the background of Advaitavāda and Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda, has put special emphasis on intuition. Sincere and genuine devotion to God is a part of intuition. Logic and arguments do not help in the realisation of God, because man's knowledge is limited and God is the Absolute Truth and is indivisible pure knowledge. He says:

God is infinite, indivisible and incomprehensible. How can you know Him by taking the way of knowledge? Of what avail will it be to throw a tiny fishing-net into the vast sea? How can you, a minute spark coming out of the Infinite Cosmic Wisdom, be able to know His vastness, however, much you may attempt seriously to develop your knowledge?¹⁶

According to S. Radhakrishnan:

Indian philosophy makes unquestioned and extensive use of reason, but intuition is accepted as the only method through which the ultimate can be known. Reason, intellectual knowledge is not enough. Reason is not useless or fallacious, but it is insufficient. To know reality

one must have an actual experience of it. One does not merely know the truth in Indian philosophy, one realises it.¹⁷

Bezbaroa asserts his firm conviction about a good life on earth with an attitude of non-attachment to everything worldly, and that is the spirit of many systems of Indian philosophy. He has reiterated many times the view that a man may attain real happiness by dedicating the result of his past actions to God and living the life of a normal householder, yet at the same time maintaining a kind of detachment, comparable to water-drops on a lotus leaf.¹⁸

How Events of Bezbaroa's Life Reflect His Convictions

In Bezbaroa's life, there are many instances which indicate his thorough acceptance of this kind of outlook. Bezbaroa was a cheerful, busy man of action. Sloth was a thing alien to his temperament. He lived a very happy life with his family. But the spirit of self-possession came to him automatically in all really critical occasions. That is why he could accept with true humility as God's will many sad incidents of his life, such as the death of his first child Surabhi, the conversion of his youngest daughter Dipika to Christianity and his act of abruptly quitting the job in Bird & Company because of the unbearable physical strain it entailed. He never lost his will-power and always believed in the mercy of God. Bezbaroa, who took the *Bhagavad-Gītā* as the beacon of his life, regained his peace of mind after the shocking death of Sarabhi with the help of the twenty-eighth śloka of the second chapter of the *Gītā*.

Beings are unmanifest in their beginnings, manifest in the middles, and unmanifest again in their ends, O Bhārata (Arjuna). What is there in this for lamentation?¹⁹

The precept of the *Gītā* that the soul is eternal, indestructible, ancient and ever-lasting had its profound impact on Bezbaroa's mind and this fact contributed to his will-power and belief in the mercy of God.

Bezbaroa's Service to Nāma-Dharma

Lakshminath Bezbaroa, whose writings ushered in a new epoch in Assamese literature, is a towering figure by any standard. Because of such a role he played as a writer, his life-long devotion to the cause of nāma-dharma must be a significant factor for truly assessing his literary qualities. In his private life he not only observed the practices of nāma-dharma, but also was actively engaged in the spreading of nāma-dharma and used his pen for that purpose. The study of the faith based on Vaiṣṇava bhakti-tativa had its impact on his personality. It must be a matter of great curiosity as to why an unusually talented writer like Bezbaroa attached such importance to nāma-dharma and spent his energies relentlessly for its propagation. Many a scholar and critic has written on Bezbaroa's different forms of creative work. A few have also attempted to offer their views on Bezbaroa's writings on religion and philosophy. But a systematic and exhaustive investigation of the same has been still found wanting. To my understanding there is great scope for detailed assessment of the views on nāma-dharma of a writer of Bezbaroa's calibre, a writer who possessed profound insight into the foundation of the socio-religious life of Assam. Such a venture is bound to be of help to understand the total literary output of Bezbaroa in a broad perspective. For these reasons, I have been prompted to choose the aforementioned topic as the subject of my present investigation.

The Extent and Method of my Investigation

The following pages are an attempt to trace the continuity and interrelationship amongst the religious and philosophical books and articles, Bezbaroa wrote on different occasions. I shall be trying to make a detailed assessment of his knowledge of the Upaniṣads and the Vedānta philosophy in the light of the interpretations he has made of those famous texts. Together with this, I am analysing his exposition of the bhakti cult.

An attempt is also being made to trace the advent of nāma-dharma into Assam in its various historical stages and the

form it assumed, along with the influence it exercised on the social life of Assam. Briefly, these constitute the aim of my present undertaking.

The English translation of the ślokas of the *Gītā* and the Upaniṣads quoted by Bezbaroa in original Sanskrit are taken from S. Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore's *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*. The English translation of two such Sanskrit ślokas (p. 167 and p. 182 in my work) are being taken from Franklin Edgerton's *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy*. In the cases of other Sanskrit ślokas and also Assamese verses, I am mentioning the name of the translator in the foot-notes and no such reference is being provided when I myself have ventured to offer my own translation of the ślokas and Assamese verses.

I am using diacritical marks in the names of persons of ancient or medieval periods. But no diacritical marks are used in the names of persons of the modern age, as modern people spell their names in divergent ways in accordance with their own choice.

In case of place-names of ancient days, diacritical marks are used; but in the case of modern place-names, such marks are not utilised.

As I am not warranted to make any change in the quotations cited in this work, so discrepancies in the spellings of proper names would naturally be noticed in such quotations. For this reason such different spellings as Kṛṣṇa, Kṛishṇa and Krishna, Viṣṇu, Viṣṇu and Vishnu, Vaiṣṇava, Vaiṣṇava and Vaishnava, would be found here.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Radhakrishnan, S., *Indian Philosophy*, vol. I, preface, p. 8.
2. *Indian Philosophy*, vol. I, intro., p. 55.
3. Radhakrishnan, S., intro., Radhakrishnan, S. and Charles, A. Moore ed. *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, p. xxiii.
4. Goswami, T.N., 'Bezbaruwar Tattvamūlak Pravandha' in *Lakṣmīnāth Bezbaruwā*, ed. Saikia, C.P., p. 71.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
6. Chatterji, S.K., 'The Nineteenth Century Renaissance' in *Lakṣmīnāth Bezbaroa, the Sahityarathi of Assam*, ed. Neog, M., p. 6.

7. Neog, M., intro., *The Religion of Love and Devotion*, p. xiii.
8. Cited on the jacket of the book *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times*.
9. Intro., *Bezbaruwā Granthāvalī*, p. viii, vol. I.
Even though Hazarika has termed *Kadam-Kali* as Bezbaroa's only anthology of poems, he has included another sheaf of lyrics in his compilation of *Bezbaruwā Granthāvalī*, which lyrics did not earlier come out in book form.
10. Neog, M., *Lakṣmīnāth*, p. 1.
11. Neog, M., intro., *The Religion of Love and Devotion*, p. xiii.
12. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
13. Radhakrishnan, S., intro., Radhakrishnan, S. and Charles A. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. xxvii.
14. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, *Tattva-Kathā*, p. 179.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
17. Radhakrishnan, S., intro., Radhakrishnan, S. and Charles A. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. xxv.
18. Lakshminath Bezbaroa, *op. cit.*, pp. 96, 170.
Radhakrishnan, S., says in the intro. of *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (p. xxix), "This is an attitude of mind with which the individual fulfils his part in life and lives a 'normal' everyday existence in company with his fellow men without being entangled in or emotionally disturbed by the results of his actions".
19. Quoted by Lakshminath Bezbaroa from the original Sanskrit, *Mor Jivan Sōwaran*, p. 178.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), the most illustrious amongst the litterateurs of the twentieth century Assam is the maker of an epoch in modern Assamese literature. He is novelist, dramatist, poet, short-story writer, folklorist, hagiologist, writer of humorous and philosophical essays, all rolled into one. Yet even after acknowledging his impressive versatility, it can be asserted that in the history of Assamese society Bezbaroa is to be esteemed most of all as an exponent and expositor of the Vaishnava faith and philosophy of Srimanta Sankaradeva and of that saint's precious contributions to the culture of Assam.

The Bhakti Movement of medieval India was founded in Assam by Sankaradeva and his disciple Madhavadeva and since then it has been getting deeply entrenched in the Assamese society. This living faith was in need of a defender to vindicate itself in the changed situations of the twentieth century. While attempting to rise up to this task, Bezbaroa not only achieved his purpose, but also successfully instilled into the minds of the Assamese people the full sense of appreciation of their greatest religious and cultural hero.

Bezbaroa worked throughout his whole life to reinvigorate the message of Sankaradeva in accordance with the needs of the present-day society. By means of his philosophical and theological writings (included in the *Tattva-Katha*, *Sri-Krishna-Katha*, *Sri-Bhagavat-Katha*, *The Religion of Love and Devotion* and the biographies of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva) and his various presidential addresses at different literary and social organisations, Bezbaroa has analysed the principles and ideals of the neo-Vaishnava faith of Sankaradeva. Along with this, he establishes the fact that an integral interrelationship glowingly exists between Sankaradeva's ideas and the splendidly rich Indian philosophical concepts.

(Contd. on the next flap)

In this book an attempt has been made to assess Bezbaroa as a spokesman of the Assam Vaishnavism. Simultaneously some aspects of Bezbaroa's life particularly those happenings which shaped his mental make-up as a writer have been brought to focus.

Rs. 150

Dr. (Mrs) Anima Dutta (b. 1938) passed the M.A. (Assamese) securing First Class First with gold medal from the University of Gauhati in 1961. She was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Gauhati for her thesis **Lakshminath Bezbaroa : His Contribution to the Study of Religion and Philosophy.**

After serving for some time in colleges as lecturer she joined the Gauhati University as a lecturer in the Department of Assamese in 1966 and had been promoted to the post of Reader in 1985.

She has to her credit a number of short stories, published in standard Assamese periodicals, of which some have come out in a collection *Beli Phular Sapon* (The Dream of the Sunflower). Her name as a front-ranking modern short-story writer has found its place in all the histories of Assamese literature.

She is the author of a large number of learned articles and discourses which have been published in prestigious literary journals and national Dailies of Assam.

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