CHAPTER-II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Fig.1: Map of Assam

Introduction

During 14th and 15th centuries the socio-economic, political, and religious conditions of the North East India was in turmoil. The cultural and religious order of the whole northern and the North East India, the Indian spirit lay prostrate. People had fallen from the high pedestal of the Vedic Age, had forgotten the teachings of Gita and had become ultra-Materialistic. Dark clouds of ignorance and superstition hovered over the country. If anything was left of religion, it was the form of formalities. Man had become self-centered, women were not cared for avarice, jealousy, hypocrisy and insincerity had taken hold of the vast mass of our population.

From times immemorial, whenever the moral fibre and religiosity of a people reached low ebb, God sent some blessed soul to raise the people of the area to higher

level, show them once again the path of love and guide them to be in tune with the infinite.

Accordingly for restructuring, revival and re-establishment of the toppled cultural and religious order, a spiritual awakening occurred which is broadly known as the medieval Bhakti Movement founded on liberal principle of equality and brotherhood. This renaissance or the movement though limited to the field of religion and culture played a very important role in inspiring the masses and shaping the modern India.[1]

It was in that century that several saints of great endowments appeared in various provinces to carry the gospels of the new faith to the masses by rendering the Sanskrit Puranas into regional languages. Of these saints Ramananda (1440-1470), Namadeva, Kabir, Vallabhacharya, Sri Tulsidas of Uttarpradesh were most impressive and occupied the first place in the society.

In Bengal the notable saint Chaitanya, in Punjab, Guru Nanak, in Rajasthana Mira Bai was born. In Assam also appeared the many gifted Sankardeva (1449-1569 A.D.), a Kayastha by caste, who shaped the religious, social, cultural and literary life of the people of the province for ages to come.[2]

Sankardeva was not primarily a philosopher or an educational thinker. As a religious preacher he propagated a simple system based on devotion and faith to a single God that is in the almighty. In the true sense, we may call him a psychologist, who could clearly understand the mind of the people. In a sense Sankardeva is well known as a ‑Mahapurusha‖. He builds the nation in the soil of Assam. There are no caste differences or any variability in his ―dharma‖. His aim was to educate the people of Assam.

Indian philosophers and their views on education

The name of Swami Dayananda (1824-1933), Swami Vivekanda (1863-1902) Lokamanya Tilak (1856-1920), Robindra Nath Tagore (1861-1941), Maharishi Arabinda (1847-1933), Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) need special mention among

those philosophers who have made important contribution in the construction of modern India.

Swami Dayananda

Swami Dayananda established Arya Samaj by which he wanted to reconstruct education on the basis of Vedic system of education. The principle of Return of Nature permitted the Gurukulas following the ideas of Swami Dayananda. Dayananda was an exponent of compulsory education for all the children. He favoured the democratic nature of education. There should not be difference of class, caste and sex in the matter of education.

Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda was a great philosopher, educationist and a real prophet of humanity who stood for the universalization and spiritual brotherhood. His concept of man transcended the cultural boundaries of the East and West and his message has universal relevance. He realized the dignity and diversity of human beings and man is the manifestation of God. Swami Vivekananda‘s philosophy was a vedantic. According to him this world is the result of the eternal, impersonal and absolute spirit‘s attempt to objectively manifest itself. Man is the highest manifestation of the spirit. The ultimate aim of life is to attain wonderful unity with the creator.

Swami Vivekananda‘s philosophy of education is a reflection of the general philosophy of life. To him education is manifestation of the perfection already existing in man. The individual only discovers it. In Vivekananda‘s own words *Perfection is already inherent in men and education is the manifestation of the same.*

Swami Vivekananda stressed the positive education. He felt that the existing system of education provided only negative education- an education which took us far away from our culture, religion and our original thinking. It did not train our will and inner conscience. So according to Swami Vivekananda, real education is that training by which the current and the expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful. He wrote, - *By education I do not mean the present system, but something in the line of positive teaching. Mere book learning will not do, we want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s own feet.* The ultimate aim of education and all

training according to Swami Vivekananda is man making. Vivekananda recommended the following aims of education

i) Creation of self-confidence and self-realization.
ii) Building of character.
iii) Development of personality.
iv) Service to mankind.
v) Universal brotherhood.

Robindra Nath Tagore

Robindra Nath Tagore was not only a poet, but also a philosopher and a great educationist with marvelous quality. He not only put India in the world map of culture and literature but proved the world the values of India, way of life and thinking. He received Nobel Prize for literature in November 1913 for his world famous classic –Gitanjali‖.

Tagore was a great lover of nature. He was dissatisfied with existing system of education because it ignored our own customs, traditions, convention, manners, ideologies, morals and ideals. It had taken Indians away from their own culture and civilization, So Tagore considered the then educational institutions as –Educational factories life less, colourless disassociated from the context of the universe within the bare white walls starting like eyeballs of the dead.‖ Tagore emphasized the innumerable implications of education and said, –Education is a permanent part of the adventure of life. It is not like a painful hospital treatment, curing student‘s instincts freedom, creative -self-expression active communication with nature and man and Internationalism were the main principles of Tagore‘s educational philosophy.

In 1901 he laid the foundation of the world famous institution, Shanti Niketon, gradually this institution had developed into an international university (Viswa Bharati) to give a practical shape of his educational ideas.

Tagore had three main objective of establishing Viswa Bharati which may be outlined below.

(I) To learn different culture of the world.

(II) To establish the institution of rural re-construction for economic and social development of the villages.

(III) To establish a living relationship between the East and the West.

Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of Nation, is more known in the domain of political and social reform than in the field of education. Yet he is one of the greatest teachers of mankind for all times to come –a prophet of its spiritual regeneration.‖ He has earned him a place among the men of genius of the 20th Century. Gandhi had developed the concept of Basic education which is based on the sound principle of learning by doing. By education Gandhiji meant all round development of body, mind and spirit. He tried to make it a reality through his system.

At a very early age he had studied the *Gita* and the *Ramayana* and also Vaisnava and Jaina literatures. These studies sharpened his moral sense and kindled his religious insight. It was possible to be achieved through use of a useful handicraft. Craft education can train the child to make use of his hands and the intellect resulting in the development of his mental powers. Self - supporting aspect of craft education can train in the development of moral senses of _ahimsa‘ or no-violence in the child. Thus basic education was a practical plan of education that basically aimed at all round development.

A brief life sketch of Sankardeva

Sankardeva was born in the middle of 15th century at Alipukhuri near Bardowa in Nagaon District, Assam, India.

It is immaterial to know on exactly what dates the great reformer Sankardeva came to the world and had his emancipation: the innumerable Guru - Caritas have given different dates and the Janma-Cakra in its authenticity is also not available.

There is some controversy about the date of Sankardeva‘s birth and the duration of his life. The most reliable of his biogrophers, Daityari, assures us that Sankardeva died in the evening of the second day of bright half of the Lunar month in the solar Bhadra, 1490 Saka/1568 A.D. but has not given the date of his birth. The

traditionally held date of his birth is Asvina-Kartika, 1371 Saka/1449 A.D., allowing him duration of life covering roughly 120 years, the full span attributed to a Mahapurusha.

The *Kathaguru-carita* gives Thursday, Kartika Samkranti, that is, the Kati Bihu day (the last day of Asvina) of 1371 Saka as the date of birth, 119 1/2 years as the duration of life and 1490 Saka as the year of passing away. One of the ancestors Candibara came to Assam in the 14th century from Gauda and his family down to Sankardeva professed Saktism.[3]

Srimanta Sankaradeva was born into Shiromoni Bara - Bhuyan family near Bardowa a place about 16 miles from the present town Nagaon in a tiny village Alipukhuri, on the South bank of the Brahmaputra in 1449. The Bara - Bhuyan were independent land lord in Assam and this group not belongs to royal families. His family members including parents Kusumbar Bhuyan and Satyasandha were Saktas. The child did not have a taste of paternal affection as the cruel hand of destiny removed the parents in a very tender age. So he was raised by his grandmother Khersuti.

Sankaradeva was thoroughly educated in Sanskrit. At the age of 12 years Sankara was sent to his village school maintained by a Brahmin Scholar, Mahendra Kandali. It is said that at about this time Sankara came to be called Sankaradeva (with the addition of the epithet *deva* to his name) at the wish of his teacher, Mahendra Kandali, who saw extra ordinary qualities in the person of his pupil. During his schooling Sankardeva laboured hard and within a short span of time of six or seven years he came out of the school as an acknowledged scholar in various branches like the Puranas, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and other Kavyas, Kalpa, Grammer, Philosophy and the Tantras, while formed the usual course of studies. Even in his school days Sankardeva showed signs of his poetic genius. Some of his biographers have recorded that only after learning the alphabets, he displayed his creative talent by composing a poem on consonantal wordings without the use of any vowel except the first.[4]

The poem runs thus :

Karatala Kamala Kamaladala nayana
bhavadava dahana gahana vana sayana
napara napara para satarata gamaya
sabhaya mabhaya bhaya mamahara satataya
kharatara yarasara hatadasa vadana
khagachara nagadhara fanadhara sayana
jagadagha mapahara bhavabhaya tarana
parapada layakara kamalaja nayana.

–Thy palm is like the lotus. Thine eyes are like the lotus petals. Thou are the consumer of worldly afflictions. Thou art the sleeper in deep forest. Thou art omnipresent and inner soul of all. Thou constantly removest my fear and vouchsafest my safety. Thou art the weilder of large swift arrows. Thou art the destroyer of the ten headed demon. Thou art the rider of the bird Garura and the uplifter of the mountain. Thou art the reposer on the hooded serpent (Ananta). Thou art the dispeller of worldly sins. Thou art the savior from the earthly grief. Thou art the giver of final beatitude. Oh lotus eyed Lord! (I pray thee).

The Harishcandra-upakhayana, a narrative poem, is also said to be a composition of his school days. From the school days Sankardeva‘s relegious temperament set his relatives thinking that he might not enter the world, so they took the earliest opportunity to arrange his marriage at the age of 21 with Suryavati. To the couple was born Manu, a daughter, but the loss of his wife at the age of 24 years only had a tremendous effect in turning young Sankardeva‘s mind from wordly pleasures to the search for the Absolute Reality. He was deeply engrossed in the study of the scriptures including the Vedanta, the *Bhagavata* and the *Gita*, had a clear vision of true religion, realised the mission of his life, the preaching of the cult of *Bhagavata* bhakti.

As Sankardeva made some initial experiments in his creed, he realised the visit to some centers of religion in the country, particularly of the cult of bhakti was the pre-requisite for having full religious experience and for exchanging views with the contemporary reformers of India.[5]

In 1481 A.D., at the age of 32, after handing over the responsibilities of his house to his son-in-law, Hari and those of Bara-Bhuyanship to his uncles- Jayanta Dalai and Madhava Dalai. Sankardeva set out on a pilgrimage, accompanied by seventeen persons including Mahendra Kandali and Ramarama Vipra. He visited most of the sacred places and temples of Lord Vishnu of northern and southern India like Jagannatha Puri, Ganga- tirtha, Gaya, Varanasi, Prayaga, Vrindavana, Govardhana, Mathura, Kurushetra, Badrikasharma, etc. In the course of this pilgrimage extending over twelve years Sankardeva came in contact with Vaishnavism practised in different regions and entered into religions discourse with vaisnavite scholars of various schools. At Badarikashrama he is said to have composed a Bargita- *mana meri rama charanahi lagu*. He stayed at puri for a considerable time. After twelve years of his sojurn he returned home as a much-learned and well equipped man in vaishnavite theology and liturgy.

Sankardeva, soon after his return from pilgrimage was pressed by his grandmother to get married a second time and by the Bhuyans to resume the duties of Siromoni Bhuyan. And thus he had to marry Kalindi in 1497 A.D. and share the responsibilities of Gomosta, but he kept his mind always alert and engaged in scriptures. He also removed his residence from Alipukhuri to Bardowa. He set up a prayer hall there, which becomes the embryo of Vaishnava - monastery (Satra). There one Jagadish Mishra of Tirhuta came from Puri with a copy of the *Bhagavata* with Shridhara Swami‘s commentary, and after a discourse for about a year with him, Sankdardeva reached at the conclusion that the message of the *Bhagavata* the religion of suprime surrender to one (*Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*); and that on being Vishnu-Krishna, is the supreme. Sankardeva now took himself completely to the task of propagation of the *Eka--Sarana-Nama-Dharma*. As the sweet smell of a blossoming flower attracts the bees to itself so seekers of God now began to visit Sankardeva and take part in his congregations, and he also with vigorous enthusiasm started mass conversion. Sankardeva here fixed the principal tenets of his *Eka-Sarana-Nama-Dharma* and for its propagation he not only arranged for community singing but also started composing lyrics *Kritanas*, poems based on the *Bhagavata*. It is said that about this time he had also written and staged his first play *Cihna-Yatra*. But very soon Sankardeva‘s campaign received a temporary set back from the clash between the Bhuyans and the Kacharis which compelled the former to quit central

Assam. The Bhuyan families including that of Sankardeva crossed to the North of the Brahmaputra to avoid the oppression of the Kacharis and settled at a place called Gangamukh or Ganmau near present Viswanath, a place in the Sonitpur district.[6]

His stay a Dhuwahata was marked by two significant achievements. The first was the acquisition of a disciple like Madhavadeva, a staunch Sakta who later on became his chief apostle. But the more popularity the *Eka-Sarana-faith* of Sankaradeva started gaining the more hostility of the brahminical sacerdotalism he had to face. When the hostility became unabearable, Sankardeva arranged for a religious discourse and after a full length debate he was able to win over traditional Brahamin priests and as a result his prestige and popularity was enhanced. Even then the priests did not sit idle. They approached the Ahom king Suhummung who summoned Sankardeva to argue with the Brahmins in the court, and there too, Sankardeva won and was acquitted honourably. But then an unhappy event took place. In an elephant catching operation by the order of the Ahom king, the elephant escaped from the enclosure under the vigilance of Bhuyans. For this fault Madhavdeva and Hari were caught and taken to the capital where Hari was beheaded but Madhavadeva being a celibate was released after six months. This unfortunate event pained Sankaradeva much and he migrated from Dhuwahata to Barpeta in 1546 A.D. and finally settled at Patbausi. At Dhuwahata he wrote *vipra patni-prasada*, *pashanda mardana*, *Namaparadha* and other poems.[7]

A Kayastha youth of thirty two years, Madhavdeva, was a staunch Sakta and was proud of his learning. He came to Sankardeva with all the fury of a combatant, as the latter was responsible for initiating Madhavdeva‘s brother in-law, Gayapani, into Bhakti so much so that Gayapani refused to bring Madhavdeva a goat for sacrifice to the Goddess. A great controversy now ensued between Sankardeva the exponent of Bhakti, and Madhavdeva, who too was well versed in the *Sastras*. At Barpeta Sankardeva‘s best acquisition was Bhavananda, who later on came to be known as Thakura Ata. Brahmin disciples like Damodardeva, Harideva and Ananta kandali were also taken into his fold here. It is also very important that major portion of his writings-songs, Kirtanas, dramas, kavyas etc. were composed here. He along with his 120 devotees went on his second pilgrimage extending upto Puri at about 1550 A.D. and returned back within six months. Returning from Puri, Sankardeva resumed his regular customary works. But the growing popularity of his faith invited a fresh

hostility from Brahmin priests. Though the hostility of the pandits did not cease completely, yet now the saint Sankardeva was in a better position for he had now the support of king Naranarayana and his brother Chilaraya. Chilaraya also built a *Satra* at Bheladanga for his stay while he had to visit the capital. At the kings court once Sankardeva also established his superiority over pandit Kavichandra Dvija of Navadvipa in a scholarly confrontation.

In his last journey from Patbausi to the capital he stayed for a while at Ganakakuchi with Madhavadeva and nominated Madhavadeva as his successor to the apostolic seat. There he wrote Ramvijoy nata, his last work, at the request of Chilaraya. Now his end was fast approaching and his long event full life to an end suddenly in the month of Bhadra, 1569 A.D. His last ceremonies were performed on the bank of a small river, Torocha.

Sankardeva is the most celebrated name in Assam. He was the most worthy son of God who is also regarded as an incarnation by a section of Assamese people. He had not only his robust physique with a handsome personality but also an unparallel mind. He was a versatile genius, a good administrator, a religious teacher and a socio-cultural reformer. He was a preacher, devotee, saint, dramatist, actor, painter, musician and an erudite scholar who shaped the modern Assam five centuries ago.

Sankardeva was and is still regarded by the orthodox section of vaisnavas of Assam as incarnation of Vishnu. Considering the versatility of his genius and contribution he made to the fields of religion, literature, music and theatre, the tribute is not unjustified, its contribution is indeed great. In the words of Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati, it may be said: ‒Sankardeva had given Assam a new life, latters and a state. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdom perished in the dust, but Sankardeva‘s state endures and broad in the general heart of men his power survives.‖[8]

The socio-cultural and political condition of Assam during Sankardeva's times

Socio-cultural condition

Assam is bound on all sides by people mostly of Mongolian origin. The Tibeto-Burman tribes, the Singphos, the Mishmis, the Adis, the Miris, the Daflas, the Akas and the Bhutiyan have their hearth and home on the North East and due North of Assam.

Among the North East Assam tribes the Adis are the most numeros and powerful enough to merit mention in the yougini-tantra. The meitheis (Monipuri) is known to the Assamese as Mekheli or Manglu/Maglau, adopted Hinduism at least as early as the fifteenth century with the spread of vaishnavism during the rule of king Kyamba amongest them.

The sixteenth century marked the meteoric simultaneous rise of two great powers of Assam, the Kochas and the Ahoms and the Ahoms and the entire country was shared between them. The old kingdom of Kamatapur was destroyed by the invasion of Ala Uddin Hussain Shah about 1498, and after a brief interregnum of confusion, a new kingdom rose from the ashes of the old. The Chief of the Koch tribe, Bisnu Sinha, established this new kingdom, about A.D. 1515 with Koch Behar as capital.

The Chutiyas, Kocha and Kacharis were the most dominant of the Tibeto Burman races. The seat of their capital known as Dimapur, still possesses speciments of Bodo architecture built upon the 12th and 13th century. The Garos of the Garo Hills and the Mikirs of the Mikir Hills have lived in comperative isolation from the surrounding people of their own stock or otherwise. The Ahoms conquered the North Eastern parts of Assam in the first half of the thirteenth century and began to rule the country with vigour. Several other Shan tribes, all Budhists, migrated into Assam after the Ahoms had made their home here. Another Budhist tribe is the Naras, who formed a part of the aboriginal population of the North East before the coming the Ahoms. Many of the Vaisnava leaders of the period, including Sankardeva and Madhavadeva were Kayasthas that were taking to the plough or to the carrying of loads on their shoulders is indicated in Kotha Guru Caritas.[9]

Political condition

The political history of the times immediately preceding the age of Sankardeva still remains virgin field of research. Since the beginning of the thirteenth century the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa was slowly undergoing a process of disintegration. The whole of Assam, from the eastern- most Dikkaravasini region to the river Karataya in the West, disintegrated into several kingdoms, some of which did not survive more than a few decades. From materials supplied by Ahom chronicle and the medieval biographeies of saints (carita puthis) it appears that a line of Chutiya kings (the Chutiya tribe is a branch of the Bodo race) ruled in the easternmost tract of Assam at present known as Lakhimpur District. The Chutiya kings were reigning at Sadiya from the beginning of the thirteen century till the subversion of their kingdom by the Ahom in the early part of the sixteenth century.The Chutiya worshiped various forms of Goddess Kali with the aid of their tribal priests. The important form in which they worshiped this deity was that of kecaikhati (the eater of raw flesh) to whom the human sacrifices were also offered. To the west of Chutiya kingdom lay the Ahom principality which included the modern district of Sibsagar and parts of Lakhimpur district during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries of the Christian era. The Ahoms were shan tribe; they used to worship their tribal Gods viz Comdeo, Phra, Tara, Along etc. till their conversion to Hinduism in the later part of seventeenth century. Further west, there was the Kachari kingdom to the south of river Brahmaputra and it probably extended at least half way across the modern Nagaon district. The Kacharis were a Tibeto-Burman tribe and they followed their own tribal custom and religion. The Kachari kings of this period may have professed Hinduism, but there was no evidence to support that the bulk of the Kachari population followed Hinduism. Sir Edward Gait is therefore, of the opinion that _at this time, the Kacharis were free from all Hindu influence‘. Towards the closing decades of the sixteenth century the Kachari kings formally accepted the Hindu culture and it is known from a silver coin issued in 1583 A. D. by Yasonarayanadeva from Maibong. The coin speaks of Yasonarayanadeva as a worshiper of Hara Gauri, Siva- Durga and of the line of hacengsa. On both sides of Brahmaputra to the West of Kachari kingdom of the South and the Chutiya kingdom of the North East were a number petty chiefs known as Bhuyans who were independent land Lord. The term _Bhuyan‘ means _Lord of the Land‘. Some of the chiefs had been at one time under the kings of Kamrupa-Kamata,

when the rulers of Kamrup were strong; these Bhuyans served them as mere Lords of district administrators. With the seven Kayastha families, the ablest was one named Candibara, who became shiromoni or chief, Candibara settled down later at Bardowa in Nawgao where the great grandson, Srimanta Sankardeva was born.[10]

Srimanta Sankardeva belonged to leading Bara- Bhuyan family and in his verse translation of the *Bhagavata purana* he calls his father Kusumvara, chief *bhaumika*, his grand- father Suryavara, *mabada desadhara* and his great grand- father Rajadhara, *mahagramesvara*. The tradition of Bara- Bhuyans is peculiarly common to both Assam and Bengal. According to Ramacarana, Candibara the grand- father of Sankardeva, and other Bara- Bhuyans ruled the land of Kamrupa under King Dharmpala, Candibara was Sankardeva‘s great grand- father and from his second son, Gadhara Bhuyan, sprang up the Barbhagiya Chaudhary family of Nam Barbhag.

Thus the Bhuyanship of Sankardeva‘s family waned into extinction and no political importance was left to their lot. Sankardeva himself was only too happy to absolve himself of the responsibilities of a Siromoni Bhuyan and to be left to seek the Kingdom of God among men. But the political atmosphere was so turbulent that it did not allow him to live in peace with his friends and relatives anywhere until he migrated to Kamrupa, where he had a time of comparative tranquillity.[11]

Sankardeva as a social reformer

Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1569 A.D.) the Vaishnavite *Guru* of Assam is not only the greatest religious preacher, but also the strongest revolutionary social reformer ever born on the soil of Assam. As a matter of fact, all great religious prophets of the world, e.g. Jesus Christ, Hazarat Mahammad, Gautama Buddha, are essentially great social reformers. And Srimanta Sankardeva of Assam is also no exception. All these great prophets and preacher were born into societies full of religio-social evils that were about to axe at the super structure of the society. When chaos becomes the order of the day and all religious practices predominated in the name of religion, this superman raised their strong heads with the message of new faith and social justice even at the risk of life. What is said by Lord Krishna in the *Gita* regarding His incarnations has proved axiomatic in the case of every prophet and preacher of the world. And lord Krishna‘s famous saying is : –O Bharata ! Whenever

there is a blemish on the Truth, and the untruth comes to predominate, I have an incarnation to protect the truthful, to destroy the evil-door and to establish the rule of _dharma‘ in the world.‖ The _dharma‘ or religion of *Gita* is a force that binds all together for pure and harmonious social living. So anything that mars the purity of living can never be termed as religion, whatsoever its votary may acclaim it to be.

Srimanta Sankardeva was born into a society, where all sorts of evil practices, resulting from Saktism, Tantricism and decadent Buddhism were rampant. The most tragic outcome of the vedic heritage was the ugly concept of casteism in which the so-called upper classes closed all doors of wisdom and devotion to the so-called lower classes. The lower caste people were deprived of all prestigious positions in the society and the shares of the royal rule; and even their very presence in a religious temple or a festival was an act of impurity leading to a sin. So the lower caste people were, as if criminals by virtue of birth from all social, political and religious points of view, and they were nick named candalas (untouchables).[12]

The greatest of social reforms performed by Srimanta Sankardeva in the social recognition of man irrespective of caste, creed and status through his neo-vaisnavite faith. The lower caste people got due recognition for the first time in the social history through the heart-searching message of the great *Guru*. Like the ancient ―Krnwantu Viswaryam‖, Sankardeva conceived of universal equality. It can better be appreciated in the light of the prevalent struggle in the contemporary medieval society. In the field of devotion the sense of equality indicates large heartedness and in the social context it indicates the establishment of such equality. It is clearly expressed in the following verses.

Kukura Candala gardabharo atmarama
janiya sabako padikariba pranama
Samaste bhutata atma buddhi nohe ja
kaya - vakya - mane abhyasiba ehi bhave
sakala pranika dekhibeka atmasama
nabachai bhakti jati ajati.

Many examples of this kind can be quoted from Sankardeva‘s works.

It can be said that in the eyes of the poet, the society could be either one of integration (bhakta) or that of disintegration (vibhakta). The society in which he lived was of the latter type and decadent. His ideal of society was the former, i.e. well organised and ruled by principles of equality. Inequality was the fundamental character of the disintegrating society. Sankardeva on the contrary conceived of a Bhakta - Samaja or intergrated society.

That a social being should follow the rules of the society is acceptable to him. He gave greater improtance to human values than legal sanctions, kindness, love, benevolence, etc. One is more closely related to human values than to love, kindness to the weak, help to the distressed etc. are qually emphasized by him. He takes all in vaisnava terminology *Punya* and *Dharma*. Deception and oppression and inflicting pain to others were called *Papas*. Throughout his life he tried to elevate good deeds to the status of social prestige. Such preaching are at several places in his writtings.

Jagatra Punya mane Jana nista kari
Prani Upakara alpako nuhi sari
Hena jani Pranika abhaya diya dana.[13]

Sankardeva envisaged unity in dirversity and oneness in duality. Here, he is guided by his single minded devotion to one God. Be it family or society his ideas are influenced by the philosophy of Advaita. The following verse can be taken as the foundation stone of his social thought.

Satru mitra udasina sabate samana.

To make no distinction between friend and enemy, i.e. to convert an enemy into a friend through good thoughts and feelings indicates social peace and progress.

The essence of these thoughts can be traced to the vedas.

drte drmha ma cakshusa sarvani bhutani samiksantam
mittrashyaham caksusa sarvani bhutani samikshe
mittrasya caksusa samikshamahe.[14]

Srimanta Sankardeva established a new democratic social order in the society with the *Namghar* (the village prayer house) at the base and the *Satra* (central monastery) at the top. His preaching and messages were conveyed to the masses through this democratic channel. The *Namghar* has become a solid base of the Assamese society in many a respect. It is common meeting place of the villagers not only for the *kirtana* (singing) of Sankardeva‘s preachings, but also for the maintenance of social justice, art and culture. As the foundation of this social order is so firm and deep that it could withstand all political upheavels i.e. the removal of the age - old monarchies and the establishment of the colonial rule of the British imperialists. Any political changeover in Assam has nothing to do with this democratic religio-cultural structure of the society, the base of which has been laid deep down on the village community.

Srimanta Sankardeva kept his neo-Vaisnava faith aloof from the pull of politics of the time. His avowed principle was that he would never be a *Guru* of a king. Although Sankardeva received patronage from Maharaja Naranaryana of Kooch Behar of the time, he refused to accept the king as his disciple. When the king gave him an ultimatum Sankardeva was in a fix and, it is said, the great Vaishnavite *Guru* preferred breathing his last to his acting a *Guru* of a king. This incident makes it crystal clear that Sankardeva was a staunch believer of secularism in politics. Had he willed to dominate over the politics of the time, he could have done it quite easily, and king Naranarayana would have acted a propagator of his new faith as King Asoka or Harsavardhana did in the case of Budhism. And we have the lesson from history that wherever a religion happens to be a state policy, its spiritual sanctity is marred, and the political administration suffers. Moreover, with the change of a propagator king, the country begins to suffer from abuses of misrule, leading to miseries of the masses. From the history of Assam itself we have the lesson how the involvement of religion in politics gave birth to the Mayamara rebellion that shook the backbone of the Ahom administration. As Sankardeva kept his religion away from the political order, he did not have any immediate political gain; but the greatest gain of his democratic religion is that it has remained pure and unshaken in the teeth of all political stroms that swept over Assam. It is realy interesting to note that the path of India‘s secularism as shown by Mahatma Gandhi appears to have been established long ago by the Vaishnavite saint of Assam. Besides this Sankardeva‘s religion is entirely free from any political

push and pull and its accompanying vices. And it is a path, pure and simple for the spiritual search of man for the attainment of heavenly bliss.

As a successful social reformer, his *Satra* institutions constitute the best in Hinduism. There is no high or low, no Varna or community, who may be debarred from having initiation and visiting the temple of God. This constitutes as well the best in pure Buddhism and Christianity. But, the Varna system, based on professions along with the best and refined Hindu Samskaras, Sankardeva had ever the respect for.[15]

Sankardeva and other vaisnava leaders of Assam were rigidly opposed to all blood sacrifices. A veritable stronghold of Sakti worship the cournty seems to have in those days presented a picture of constant sacrifices to the various forms of the Devi. Sankardeva is very much attributed by Ramananda with the statement: ‒One who worships Durga with sacrifices is a great sinner, one who worships Durga with the sacrifice of animals, one who organizes the worship, one who cooks the sacrificial flesh, one who eats cooked meat, one who decapitates the animals, and one who buys the animals for sacrifice—all the six of these are responsible for the loss of life‖. In the *Bhakti-ratnakara* Sankara quotes from the *Bhagavata Puruna* to say that one who sets aside the rules of *Satras* and sacrifices animals to *pretas* and *bhutas*, is destined to hell and dark perdition. He then adds that in case one does not transgress the rules of sacrifice, one may go to heaven. Having influenced by Ramananda of North India Sankardeva also adopted the effective means of propagating the gospels of his faith through Assamese. The *Bhagavata - Purana* formed mainstay of his cult. Sankardeva studied this work thoroughly and rendered portion of it into simple Assamese verses, songs and dramas so that the teaching might appeal to the commonalty. In some of his private discussion Sankardeva said being a Sudra he has rendered the *Bhagavata* to *payara*. This act is immensely wrong. The objection that a Sudra should not read the great purana was met with by Sankardeva on the authority of the work itself.

Vipro'dhityapnuyat prajnam rajanyodadhi - mekhalam
vaisyo nidhi - patitvam ca sudrah suddhyeta patakat
Sudra Gurus and Brahma Disciples. [16]

Sankardeva was brought to book in Koch court of Behar for accepting Brahmans among others as disciples, and Sankardeva‘s reply to the charge was that a *Candala* if he is a devotee is superior to a Brahmin without devotion. A *Candala* who remembers Hari heart and soul is much superior to a Brahmin observing various religious vows -So says Sankardeva. Again he says another passage, –That candala to consider superior on whose lips the name of Hari constantly abide. As soon as he utters the name of Hari he earns the merit of performing many sacrifices. He is a real kulina (i.e. of good or high origin) and he knows the *Vedas* whose lips utter the name of Hari. He earns the merit of ablution in all holy places and of performing various sacrifices, meditation and deeds of gift.‖ True to ideal Sankardeva enlisted followers from all sections of people including Mahmmedans. True to that ideal the religious headship was not kept confined to a particular class. Even today, the headship of many a *Satra* is held by non- Brahmin communities.

In his *Namghosa* Madhavadeva refers to the acceptance of *Nama-dharama* by people of Garo, Bhota, Yavan, Miri, Asama and Kachari origin, who were till the time of Sankardeva outside the pale of Hinduism. In Sankardeva‘s vaisnavism the non-Hindu population of the country found an attractive portal into Hindusim and through it they entered a clean and disciplined way of individual and social life.[17]

Sankardeva preached equality in the spiritual domain. He not only admitted but preached that everybody is equal in the eye of God and therefore, everybody has equal right to worship. The path of spiritual realisation cannot be the exclusive right of a socially privileged to bring their brethern of the lower stratum to the path of spiritual realisation. The Vaishnava Movement, of which the *Satra* institution served as the religious organ, supplied a common and simple religion based on ethical devotional codes and conducts and to a considerable extent did away with the various faiths and creeds of diver‘s shades and grades. The most important social contribution of the *Satra* institution is the upliftment of the backward classes and minimization of the rigour of the caste distinction. Another notable social contribution of the *Satra* institution is its services to the tribes during its long history of more than four centuries.

Srimanta Sankardeva‘s relegion is the most liberal, tolerant, simplest and easiest way of attaining God and it is economically most viable. It may be called the

religion of the common man. There is no room for any hostility between the rich and the poor in the name of religion. Even the Saktism and Tantrism learnt the lessons of humanitarianism from Sankardeva's faith and these dependent Hindu faiths have been considerably modified. Srimanta Sankardeva has been tolerated in Assam in some form or other even by the bitterest enemy of his faith. And he has ultimately become the common Guru of the entire Assamese race. What his disciple Madavadeva says is really significant.

Srimanta Snakara Hari bhakatara
Jana jena kalpa taru,
tahanta binai nai nai Amara parama guru.

[Meaning: There is no other preceptor for us above him]

Srimanta Sankardeva brought about cultural revolution in Assam. He opened not only the door of religion for the laity, but also the doors of language, literature, art and culture for all. It is the fortune of the entire Assamese race that Sankardeva was born in Assam to lay the firm foundations of the Assamese language, literature dance, drama, music, art, painting and culture as mediums of his faith and for this religio-cultural renaissance in Assam, the entire Assamese people, irrespective of castes and creeds may justly be proud of Srimanta Sankardeva, as their real Guru. Let us all join in showing obeisance to the sacred relic of the Saint.

Joy Guru Sankara Sarba Gunakara
Jakeri nahike upama.
tohari saranakaranu satakuti
bareka karuhu pranama (Madhavadeva)[18]

Literary works of Sankardeva

Srimanta Sankardeva is undoubtedly the greatest Assamese till date. His eclectic genius and his versatility ranged over all aspects of Assamese culture and literature and he created great and significant works in all the genres and sub-genres. In the history of mankind, there are certain periods which witness the birth and growth of such remarkably great people that they stand out from and tower over the

rest by their greatness and versatality. These people like Goethe in Germany, Shakespeare in England, Rabindra Nath Tagore in Bengal and Mahapurusa Sankardeva in Assam make their language the language of the people transcending all barriers of time.

Assamese literature had earlier stalwarts like Madhava Kandali, _the unerring predecessor poet‘ and they had definitely enriched Assamese literature but Sankardeva‘s versatility and range were quite another matter altogether, and his technical felicity and inventiveness coupled with his renaissance mastery of all branches of literature can count comparison with only Goethe and Shakespeare. It was to facilitate the preaching of his Neo-Vaishnavism that Sankardeva explored and exploited the possiblities of prose and verse and achieved such heights in them that his achievements and his period may be compared only to Elizabethan and Puritan age in English literature. The internationally renowned Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterjee bears witness to this when he says, –*The greatest name in early Assamese literature is that of Sankardeva and he has left his stamp on Assamese literature and culture and way of life".* Not to talk of early literature alone but no one till now has been able to approximate to his greatness and stature in Assamese literature.[19]

Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala, the famous Indologist, compares Sankardeva to the glorious sun under whose warmth of mind Assam blossomed like a lotus of thousand petals. He observes:

–*It is difficult to imagine how deep and widespread was the influence of Sankardeva 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 Sankardeva was a genius in whom all these qualities where rolled into one."*

Assamese writer Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938), the most illustrious amongst the litterateurs of twentieth century Assam, is the maker of an epoch in modern Assamese literature. Bezbaroa, for the first time, explained to everybody that the age of Sankardeva is the period of renaissance in Assam. The Assam of this renaissance period happens to be the vast, noble and glorious Assam. Assamese literature reached its golden age during this period. The stalwarts of this age-Sankardeva, Madhavadeva, Ananta Kandali and others - drew on the resources of old

Indian literature, just like bees collecting honey from widely different sources. Bezbaroa opines in his presidential address at the Assam Sahitya Sabha session in 1924:

–If our mother had not begotten these great sons, we would not have been able to stand with our heads high in this north eastern corner of India, taking justifiable pride in our rich language and literature, our highly developed social structure and liberal religious faith".[20]

Language

Language is an important mode to translate one's thoughts and Sri Sankardeva picked up the spoken dialect of the masses, added luster and sacredness to it as he used it in writing the *Bargits* and *Ankiya Nats*. The twelve years pilgrimage in Northern India was the baking ground for his formative adaptation of the local dialect.

The impact of vidyapati's *Brajawali* songs and his witnessing of some social performances combined with the direct experience and intermingling with the local people appears to have helped him develop the script and dialect.

In his various writings, Sankardeva seems to use three types of language, such as (i) Literary Assamese,

(ii) Colloquial Assamese

(iii) *Brajawali* Assamese.

Saint Sankardeva used *Brajawali* Assamese in his *Bargits* and *Ankiya Nats,* whereas he wrote and translated other books in standard Assamese except the Bhakti - Ratnakara in Sankrit. Simultaneously we find some sort of colloquial speech in dialogues of certain characters in his *Parijat harana nat*. Thus Sankardeva seems to be familiar with varieties of speeches current in his time.

The term *Brajawali* is applied to such a language in which Vaishnava songs were composed in the regions namely Braja now *Mithila, Bengal, Orissa* and *Nepal;* but in Assam this sacred language is called *Brajawali*. It is worth observing that saint Madhavdeva, the principal disciple of saint Sankardeva, termed this peculiar language as *Brajawali*.

In the day-to-day event in rural life, Madhavadeva had added a life - like colour regarding the language used. We can find some forms of spoken dialect, such as dake, dekha, gela, utha re, carite, bathan etc.

The following dialogue highlights how Sankardeva used colloquial dialect:

Ava pamari Sachi ! oh ! Indraka dekhai atave darappa kayali. Ava tohari bhataraka kaiche nahi palataya ? Hamu manusi haya tohari parijata niya jau. Ohi tape marite najava. (Parijat - haran nat by Sankardeva).

This is a piece of chattering - battle occured between Satyabhama (the wife of Krishna) and sashiprabha (the wife of Indra) for taking away the parijat - flower from the latter‘s garden. Here Satyabhama ridiculed Sashiprabha in a very harsh manner. In some earlier pieces also we observe the vulgarity, low mentality and shamelessness in the speeches of these two women characters showing the natture of certain village-folk.

These are the speciments of spoken dialect in the rural area of early and modern Assam. Most of the vocabulary used in the dialogues is noticed in our village life. Sankardeva and followers must have heard these spoken words, realised the gravity and peculiarity of them and thus applied them in their *Bargits* and *Dramas* with a view to attracting the village-folk to the Neo-Vaishnavite religion.

Now, historically and linguistically it is confirmed that Assamese *Brajawali* has not been brought from outside. It has evolved on the soil of Assam at least in the thirteenth century A.D.- if not earlier. The text of the two inscriptions is as follows:

(a) *Aditya sama Sri Samudra pala rajye prabala Sabasika*
Satra Saguna Kriya/Sanvasim bole dana puaya Saja/
yogihati/saka isa bana cakra/mudha bhanati/

Ambari Stone Inscription

Perhaps this type of language was regarded as standard colloquia of the masses in medieval Kamrup or ancient Assam. But it cannot be said that the sopken dialect was entirely transformed into the *Brajawali* language for the next century to be used by Sankardeva in his *Bargits* and *Ankiya Nats*.

It is a credit to the genius of saint Sankardeva that he revived the *Brajawali* language through his *Bargits* and *Ankiya Nats* and inspired the vaisnav devotees of Assam to continue it till the 18th Century A.D. and even after. The language he developed was easily understood by the common people who were not conversant in Sanskrit, the language of the upper educated rulling class. By writing in *Brajawali* he became the architect to bridge the gap created by the different dialects. This gave the initial essential drive to the spreading of the Vaishnavite Movement in the North East, subsequenlty it became a common language of the people of Eastern India through which they exchanged their views, composed their songs and produced literary works, documents including inscriptions.[21]

Literature

Besides producing far reaching religious and social effects, the Sankarite movement gave a great impetus to the development of learning and literature in Assam. Sankardeva, though a remarkable Sanskrit Scholar, wrote mainly in Assamese, the living language of the people, with the aim of making the Sanskrit lore accessible to the uneducated masses. He himself composed a large number of texts, consisting of translations, commentaries, and original works to expound his creed. These writings had also their practial utility. They were constantly required for regulation of daily duties. This, therefore, greatly encouraged literacy and learning.

Sankardeva drew inspiration chiefly from the *Bhagavata* which was described as the sun amidst the *Puranas*, comprising as it does the essence of *Vedanta* philosophy (*Purana surya maha Bhagavata Vedanaro ito paramatattava*). An early attempt was, therefore made to translate the book into Assamese. It was realy a very bold and extraordinary undertaking to reader into a provincial language a venerable text written in the grand style of a classical tongue. In this connection it is interesting to note that Sankardeva was accused before the Koch kind Naranarayana by the Brahmanas as he read, taught and translated the *Bhagawata.*

Sankardeva‘s literary output is considerable, and consists of quite wide variety. Compositions in Assameses, Assamese *Brajawali* and Sanskrit; Prose verse and poetical prose; translations or adaptations, compilations from different texts, and lyrical effusion; songs and lyrics, longer narratives and a doctrinal treatise. Several typical forms could also be marked out among Sankardev‘s works in Assamese: lyrics

(e.g. *Bargit* and *Bhatima*); choral songs (*Kirtana - ghosa)*, which are objective in purpose, longer narratives or episodes (Upakhyana) (e.g. *Hariscandra - Upakhyana*, *Rukmini - harana kavya*); and *dramas* (anka or nata). The list of works given below would give an idea of the vast extent of Sankardeva's writings.

(A) Longer narrative episodes

i. Hariscandra - upakhyana.
ii. Ajamila - upakhyana
iii. Gajendro - upakhyana
iv. Rukmini harana - kavya
v. Amrita - mathana kavya
vi. Kurusetra kavya
vii. Balichalana.

(B) Translations from puranas

(1) Bhagavata - purana

i. Bhagavat - I
ii. Bhagavat - II
iii. Bhagavat - III
iv. Bhagavat - VI
v. Bhagavat - VIII
vi. Bhagavata-IX
vii. Bhagavat - X
viii. Bhagavat - XI
ix. Bhagavat - XII

(2) Ramayana - Uttara - kanda

(C) Theological cosmological works

i. Bhakti - pradipa
ii. Nimi -navapasiddha - samvada
iii. Anadi - patana
iv. Bhakti - ratna kara
v. Uresa - varnana

vi. *Prahlada - carita*

vii. *Hara - mohana*

viii. *Pasanda - mardana*

ix. *Namapardha*

x. *Sisu - lila*

xi. *Rasa - krida*

xii. *Kamsa - vadha*

xiii. *Gopi - uddhava - samvada*

xiv. *The jarasandha yuddha*

xv. *Syamantaka - harana*

xvi. *Narada Krishna - darsana*

xvii. *Vipra - puttra - anayana*

xviii. *Damodara - viprakhyana*

xix. *Daivakir - puttra - anayana*

xx. *Veda - stuti*

xxi. *Krishna - lila - mala*

xxii. *Rukmini prema - kalaha*

xxiii. *Srikrishnar vaikunatha - prayana*

xxiv. *Caturvimsati - avatara - varnana*

xxv. *Bhagavatar tatparya.*

(D) Works composed to suit prayer - service

i. *Kirtana ghosa and*

ii. *Gunamala.*

(E) Drama or plays

i. *Patni – prasada nata*

ii. *Kaliya – damana nata*

iii. *Keli-gopala nata*

iv. *Parijata – harana nata*

v. *Rukmini – harana nata*

vi. *Rama – vijaya nata*

(F) Lyrics

i. Bargits

ii. Bhatimas

iii. Totaya 22

(A) Longer narrative episodes

i. Hariscandra - upakhyana

This work happens to be a long narrative of 618 verses, considered popularly to be a work of Sankaradeva‘s formative period, was written most likely during his stay at Dhuwahat, along with other works like *Patni - prasada - nata* and *Pashanda - mardana* while he was in a state of mental tension caused by his opponents, which though symbolically has also been flashed in the lines *bighnika sankaye nupujibo hrsikesa* and *hari tusta bhaile tusta hobe caracara* and also in the fight between Vashishta and Vishwamitra. The poet has adapted its story from the *Markandeya Purana.* It is said that the four corner posts of *Eka-Sarana-Bhakt*i (*deva, nama, guru* and *bhakata)* have been fixed in it. Dr Maheshwar Neog, an acknowledged authority on Sankardeva and his times, is of the opinion that *Sankardeva betrays here his sustained literary characteristic of painting hideous pictures with a play of humour,* and perhaps from this ‗purely literary point of view‘, although tentatively, he ascribes this piece of poetry to Sankaradeva‘s early years. According to bigraphers on Srimanta Sankaradeva the logically arranged work through which Sankardeva not only met the challenge to brahminical sacerdotalism but also defended his *Eka-Sarana faith.* Allegorical and symbolical in form, the narrative leads to submission to the one absolute Hari. It is an allegory which has been expressed through symbolic characters. The aim of this poem is to reveal the character of a Vaishnava (jani nirantare suna Vaishnava caritra - 4). That Vaishnava is Harischandra who is none else but the poet himself in disguise. By symbolising himself as Harishchandra, Sankardeva has got primordial images to express himself or a safety valve to release his mental conflict which he was trying to resolve. This poem presents the real inner conflict of a contemporary intellectual who was deeply influenced by the Advait philosophy and experiences of his trails and triumphs in metaphysical quest as well as devotion of faith. To maintain its poetic fervour the poet has also added a little kavya-

rasa at various places (*kathoraka bhaya kathara asaya dilon kichu karya - rasa* ---- 617). unquote.

ii. Ajamila - upakhyana

The *Ajamila - upakhyana* (the story of the Brahman, Ajamila) section consists of four kirtanas of 42 verses. It is adapted from the Bhagavata - purana, VI, 1-3, while the fifth kirtana glorifying Nama has been written independently by Sankardeva‘s from various sources. It was composed by Sankardeva while he was at Bardowa.

iii. Gajendro - upakhyana

The *Gajendra-upakhyana* (the story of the elephant king) is taken from the Bhagavata - purana, VIII 2-4. It is related in 3 Kirtanas of 38 verses. The main feature of this section is the description of the Trikuta hill in the Occean of Milk. In enumerating its flora Sankardeva selects a few names from the original and makes additions of his own so that a part of his Trikuta almost becomes a fruit - laden forest of Assam. The erotic atmosphere, in which the elephant king enjoyed the company of the she-elephants, is effected with an amount of delicacy of imagery. In several places in the *Bhagavata - purana* the celestial abode of Paramesvara and his transcendent form are placed before the reader‘s eyes. The second book says that some people (*Yogis*) recollect in their meditation (dharana) a tiny image of the person in his four-armed pose, applying his attention on every one of the limbs. It describes how the Lord showed his own region (sva-loka) to *Brahma* in deep meditation. The third book gives a picture of Vaikuntha and enjoins upon the *Yogis* to meditate (dhyana) on God in his Heaven. The eleventh book envisages an image of the Lord mentally to he placed over the lotus-like plexus of the heart. In the ‒Dhyana-varnana‖ section Sankardeva pictures forth the Vaikuntha and its Lord, on which the devotee is exhorted to fix his mind. These two pen-pictures approach the *Bhagavata* closely enough; but the saint-poet works them up in his own way and the music of the verses lends to them and abiding sweetness.

iv. Rukmini-harana-kavya

According to the *Katha-gura-carita*, the *Bhakti-pradipa* and the *Rukmini-harana*-(kavya) were composed by Sankardeva after his return from the first pilgrimage. That the *kavya* is an early work of the poet is scarecly to be doubted. It is

full of poetical exuberance and descriptive elaboration; colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions are also numerous. Partly for this popular cast of language and style, and partly for the pleasant subject - matter appropriately treated, this is one of the most popular of Sankardeva‘s works. In it Sankardeva is not always faithful to the original texts. He interweaves the two versions of the story of the abduction of Rukmini by Krishna, as it is given in the Harivamsa, II (Chapters 59-60, and the *Bhagavata - purana, X*. Chapters 52-54, and adds profusely from his own imagination so much so that in the poem under review we get an almost new version of the puranic story. It also envisages in an original manner the Assamese way of life; and social manners and customs, especially those connected with marriage, are reflected in the narrative from place to place. The social interest of the work centres around the domestic life of an Assamese Hindu family, of which Sankardeva finds a prototype in that of Bhismaka, Besides the hero and the heroine there are other characters, which show Sankardeva‘s power of characterization - Rukmi, Rumikini‘s eldest brother, haughty and irreverent, the queen Sasiprabha with all concern for her daughter, Rukmini; Sumalini, the faithful and loving nurse of the heroine; Vedanidhi, who runs Rukminis errands and provides a great deal of laughter with his boasts and his weak nerves ; the king, Bhismakar, a kind and lenient father and a devout Vaisnava. Sasiprabha and Sumalini are Sankardeva‘s creations, while Vedanidhi is the name given to the Brahman, mentioned in the *Bhagavata.* Although the work is popularly referred to as a *kavya*, Sankardeva calls it simply pada or payara (verse-work) and Lila (divine sport), katha (tale) of Krishna or that of the abduction of Rukmini. The erotic sentiment in its incipient phase of both the hero and the heroine is brought out in certain places.

v. Amrta-manthana

Of the original 24 chapters of Book VIII of the Bhagavata-purana, Sankardeva has left out the initial and final ones and narrated the following tales from the rest:

(i) The story of the elephant king (Gajendraopkhyana), Chapters 2 -4 incorporated in the Kirtana - ghosa.

(ii) The story of the churning of the ocean (samudra - manthana), chapters 5 - 12, forming Sankardeva‘s work, Amrta - mathana;

(iii) The story of Vishnu‘s charming Hara in the form of Mohini (ch. 12), included in the in the Kirtana - ghosa as ―Hara -mohana‖.

(vi). The story of the deceit of Bali, Chapters 15-23, which with an admixture of matter from the Vamana - purana gives us Sankardeva‘s *Bali-Chalana*.

To all intents and purposes these are four independent pieces of composition; but these are sometimes combined in the shape of one work. All this is considered as the work of Sankardeva living at Patbausi. But considering the language, we are inclined to take at least the first three metrical works as Sankardeva‘s early compositions.

The *Amrta-mathana*, ‗the churning of nectar‘, a work of 640 verses, tells us the story of the churning of the Ocean of Milk. The work glorifies Hari, whom all Gods had to supplicate at the time of their calamity. The youthful exuberance, free sweep of imagination, employment of a large number of idiomatic and homely expressions and occasional play of a broad humour seem to mark out the *Amrta-mathana* as an early composition. Sankardeva developes the story of the purana freely, and embellishes it with poetic sentiments (kavya-rasa) and episodes.

vi. Kuruksetra

It is related in the *Katha-guru-carita* that the Kuruksetra and the *Rukmini-harana* were composed by Sankardeva late at Patbausi. This work must have been written in extreme old age, as the writer betrays the fear that his end was fast approaching. It is interesting to note that nowhere in the work does the saint subscribe his name but refers to himself as ‗the servant of Krishna‘ only.

The *Kuruksetra* is an adaptation from Chapters 82-85 of the tenth book of the *Bhagavata - purana*. It describes the meeting of Krishna and Balarama with Nanda. Yasoda, Rohini and the milk-maids of Vraja in the war -fields of Kuruksetra. The eight principal consorts of Krishna relate to Draupadi and other ladies the tales of their union with Krishna. Then comes the thoughtful passage of Vasudeva‘s hymn to Krishna in course of a sacrifice he performs; and the work closes with a description of Krishna‘s and Balarama‘s bringing back Daivakis six dead sons from the under world to her side for a short duration. It contains some of Sankardevas finest philosophical

passages: for example, Kishna‘s consoling words to the Gopis, vasudeva‘s hymn and krshna‘s reply. There is an Advaitic under-current in them; at the same time they teach that Bhakti is the way to the Lord. There are also lines of much poetical beauty such as Bali‘s prayer to Krishna in Sutala.

vii. Bali-chalana

(Deception of king Bali) is yet anotheir poetic work of Sankardeva, probably composed while he was at Patbausi, in close collaboration with Gopal Charan Dev. It is a mature piece of writing about demon king Bali. Drawn from the *Bhagawata Purana*, he has equally drawn from *Bamanapurana*, and thereby he has added honey in milk to sweeten the taste of milk. In his words:

Bhagawata katha ito amrit sakshat
Bamanapurana kisu misra dilo tat
Duikatha nibandhilo kori ek Thai
Jena madhumisra dugdha swad barhi jai.[23]

(B) Translations from Puranas

1. Bhagavata - purana

Sankardeva drew inspiration chiefly from the Bhagavata which was described as the sun amidst the *Puranas,* comprising as it does the essence of Vedanta philosophy.

An early attempt was, therefore, made to translate the book into Assames. It was really very bold and extraordinary undertaking to render into a provincial language a venerable text written in the grand style of a classical tongue.

The translation of the entire text was not a light job for one man. So Sankardeva alloted different sections for translation to his different disciples. Sri Sankardeva‘s rendered only 8 skandhas out of his 12 ‗Skandhas‘ of the original Bhagavata.

The rendering of the *Bhagavata* marks on era of renaissance in Assamese poetry; its literary influence on Sankarite literature was manifold and immense and proved a shaping force upon Sankadeva‘s writings.

i. Bhagavata – I

Sankardeva's *Bhagavata - I*, is more an adaption or a matter - of - fact analysis than a translation of the original. In his merciless attempt at abridgement, he makes us lose much of the poetical and philosophical content of the original Sanskrit text. Several chapters are slightly touched or skipped over, for example, the description of Vishnu's incarnations in chapters 3 is set aside completely, possibly because it has already been dealt in the *Kirtana-ghosa.* Chapters 11-15 are very summarily treated with practically nothing being reproduced from Chapter13. Thus, we have only 421 verses in place of 813 *slokas* of the original.

ii. Bhagavata - II

Sankardeva seems to have been suficiently old when he composed this work. In one verse he says that _old age has come,' presumably on him. A devoted disciple of Sankardeva, named Madhava (of Jainti), was in a dying condition, afflicted by small-pox, at Patbausi. The news was brought to the Master, who was so much affected by it that mute tears began flowing down his cheeks. The *Katha-guru-carita* says that Sankardeva was rendering the *slokas* of the *Bhagavata-purana - II*, at that moment; but that at the touch of this grief his pen dropped down.

This work comes very often for reference in religious discourses mainly on account of the following interdiction against the worship of deities other than Vishnu in one of the concluding admonitions (upadesa) :

anya devi deva nakariba seva
nakhaiba prasada tara
murtika nacaiba grho napasiba
bhakti haibe vyabhicara.

[Meaning: Do thou not make obeisance to other Gods and Goddesses, nor partake of food offered to them, cast not glances on (their) idols, nor enter (their) temples, lest they Bhakti be vitiated.]

As an adaptation from the *Purana*, the work is not of much value or beauty. It is mainly because this small work with 261 verses becomes scrappy in its attempt at rendering the ten chapters of the original book of 392 *slokas*. The description of the

cosmic Purusa incarnation in Chapter 1 and that of the four-armed Purusa residing within man‘s heart in Chapter 2 are left out, while Bhakti is eulogized at the cost of other religious efforts (*puja namaskara dhyana samaste duskara*). These two initial chapters are thus dismissed in 14 verses. Sankardeva also avoids mentioning Gods to be worshipped with various ends in view (Chapters 3). In the description of the creation of the world the twenty - four *tattvas* are practically avoided. The account becomes full and the poet comes to his own when he describes the activities of Srirama and Krishna, Vaikuntha and its Lord. He elaborates the picture of the Lord that is given in a single *sloka* in the original into eight verses.

iii. Bhagavata - III

It is also known as the *Andipatan.* It relates the creation of seven patalas, incarnation of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara and a description of Graha-Naxatras.

iv. Bhagavata - VI

In this Skandha Sankardeva narrates the story of Ajamil. It shows how a sinner gets rid of troubles of Naraka through chanting name of the Lord.

Krishna Guno Nama Smari Sravana Kirtana kari
Jena mate Sudha huiya mare
Kauti Tirtha brata tope kauti jag jnaija Tape.
Shrehi mate pabitra nakare.

Here in this Skandha Shri Sankardeva used several rhymes like dulari poda etc. which added to the literacy beauty of his writings.

v. Bhagavata - VIII

Sankardeva retells two stories from *Bhagavata purana-VIII* in his two works—*Amrita Manthana* (the churning of necter) and *Bali chalana* (the deceiving of demon king Bali). The first describes the extraction of necter by the Gods with the help of demons. Here also there is a description of furic fighting between Gods and demons. In Bali chalana the story of Vishnu‘s dwarf incarnation is powerfully narrated.

vi. Bhagavata - IX

Some time after Sankardeva‘s visit to Naranarayana‘s court about 1480 saka/1558 A. D., a scholar Kalichandra Pandit came to Cooch Behar in a sort of scholastic expedition. Some of Kalichandra‘s followers went to see Sankardeva and found him rendering the *Bhagavata purana-IX*. But unfortunately Sankardeva‘s rendering of this book today not available.

vii. Bhagavata - X

Sankardeva rendered the *Bhagavata-X* which is popularly known as *Adi-Dasama*. It is considered one of the most excellent works of Sankardeva. The idea has been reflected in the writings of Dr. M. Neog when he said.

–Next only to the Kirtana ghosa which also covered some of the anecdotes of this book, Sankardeva’s Adi Dasama is the most popular vaishnava scripture by virtue of its sustained story interest, rich poetry and fine versification”.

It is an Assamese rendering of the first part of *Bhagavata-X*. Beginning from the marriage of Basudeva with Daivaki it depicts the life and activities of Lord Krishna from the days of his childhood practically ending with the killing of the king Kongsa and release of Daivaki and Basudeva.[24]

viii. Bhagavata - XI

Sankardeva‘s *Bhagavata-XI* narrates the passing away of Krishna, the unbounded sorrow of Udhava, Arjuna, the Gopies and other at the disappearance of their beloved Lord and the death of Pandavas. It is very much important from the point of *Bhakti*.

The advice rendered by the Lord to Uddhava at the time of His departure is quite important for the Bhaktas.

ix. Bhagavata – XII

Sankardeva‘s Bhagavata-XII is a free and easy adaptation of the twelfth Book of *Bhagavata purana*. Here the philosophical passages are rendered in much dexterity and clarity of vision.[25]

(C) Theological cosmological works

i. Bhakti - pradipa

Bhakti Pradip is another poetic work of Sankardeva. It also declares the greatness of devotion to Lord Vishnu. Regarding the authenticity of Sankardeva‘s authorship of the work there remains a minute dispute. The disputants points to the fact that many of his biographers have not mentioned the work as being authored by the saint. To substantiate teir poins the critics refer to the style and contents of the work as distinctly different from the other works of the Master. The content is stated to have been taken from some Garuda purana.[26]

ii. Nimi-navasiddha-samvada

The *Katha - guru - carita* places the *Nim-navasiddha - samvada* (King Nimi meets the nine accomplished sages) as a work written within the early part of Sankardeva‘s stay in the Koch state. This is very likely, as judged from the balanced and dignified style and the way of exposition of its serious contents, it is decidedly a late work. It is a verse - rendering from Chapters 2-5 of Book XI of the *Bhagavata - purana*, and represents a conversation between Nimi, the king of Videha, and the nine Siddhas, Havi, Antariksa, Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avirhotra, Drumila, Camasa and Karabhajana, all great exponents of Bhakti and *Nivrtti-marga* (the path of salvation through detachment or asceticism). In a *Satra* or sacrificial assembly instituted by the king, the Siddhas give an exposition of their faith in reply to nine questions put to them by the king. The nine topics talked on are:

(i) The worship of the Super-soul as the *summum bonum* in life, vv. 42-77;

(ii) The characteristics and activities of *Bhagavatas* or devotees of Krishna; vv. 78-103;

(iii) The activities of Vishnu‘s manifestative power, maya or illusion; the creation and destruction of the work of being; vv. 104-128,

(iv) *Bhakti*, the best and only way to save oneself from the dire effects of *maya*; vv. 129-173;

(v) Characteristics of *Paramatman* or Narayana; vv. 174-203;

(vi). Karma-yoga, or the performance of various rites and rituals which lead men to the devotional mood; vv. 204-229;

(vii) The incarnations of the Supreme : Purusa, Naranarayana, Hamsa, Datta, Rsabha, Hayagriva, Matsya, Varaha, Kurma, the one saving Gajendra, the one saving the Balakhilyas, the one saving Indra and other Gods and Goddesses from Vrtra's hands, Nrsimha, Vamana, Parasurama, Ramacandra, Balarama and Krishna, the Buddha, and Kalki; vv. 230-326;

(viii) The sad plight of the non-believer here on earth and hereafter; vv. 317-364;

(ix) The code of worship of the Lord in the four Ages; vv. 365-404.

The rendering is, on the whole, faithful to the original, but in places the serious discourse breaks into a story, for instance, in course of the description of Krishna's life and that of Naranarayana. Sankardeva's views on the Buddha and Buddhism will also be found interesting: ‒And after this the Lord will incarnate as the Buddha and propagate many a heretical scripture (pasanda sastra). The Asuras will desert the path of the *Vedas* and give up sacrifices, engaging themselves in mere disputations. All men will take to the ways of Asuras and heretics. Befooled, they will blame *Bhakti* and perform unclean rites.‖ [27]

iii. Anadi-patan

It is also an important poetic work of Sankardeva. It is about creation of the universe and its different levels, composed in larger perspectives. The work is presented in the form of a dialogue between king Parikshita and rishi Suka. It is stated in the *Kathagurucarit* (bio-graphy of the saint) the saint composed *Anadi patan* with a specific idea of weaning away one of his disciples Budha Daivajna Atoi) from his undersirable preoccupation with astrology. Having read the work Budha Daivajna Atoi started gradually losing his interest in astro-logical studies.

iv. Bhakti - ratnakara

Bhakti Ratnakara, composed in Sanskrit, epitomizes the essence of the neo-Vaishnavite cult under the leadership of Sankaradeva. It is in fact the manifesto of the *Bhakti* Movement in this par of the country. This poetic treatise rests on four

rudimentary principles of *Bhakti* or devotion, popularly described as charivastu (four precious items of faith) in Assam. They are *Deva* (deity to be worshipped), *Nam* (chanting the name and glory of God, i.e. Lord Krishna or Narayana), *Bhakat* (devotee of God) and *Guru* (spiritual master). Madhavdeva susequently incorporated the last item- *Guru*. *Deva* means Lord Krishna or Narayana. For Sankaradeva Lord Krishna is the supreme soul, the sole force behind all creations and destructions. He is the cause behind all causes. He is to be worshipped only through pure devotion. It should be only through *sravana* (listening to Gos‘s name and glory) and *kirtana* (chanting of God‘s wisdom and divine love), and not through any other modes of worship or rituals.

Nam means chanting of God‘s name and his glories. *Bhakat* means a devotee of Lord Krishna. Bhakats bear the image of the Lord in their hearts. For Sankaradeva bhakat is placed at a higher pedestal, almost next to the Lord, while *Guru,* subsequently added by Madhabdeva, stands for the spiritual master, placed in reverence, next to Godhead. Sankardeva himself brought in the first three items of faith, while the idea of the fourth came directly from his disciple. The four principles constitute the foundation of *Bhakti* and *Bhakti* Movement.

One should concentrate on Lord Krishna, with body and soul. He should be the ultimate goal of every soul. Lack of concentration on Lord Krishna may lead to debauchery, Sankardeva believed. The way to Lord Krishna is only through pure Bhakti. According to *Bhagavat purana* there are nine kinds of Bhaktis-*sravana* (hearing of God‘s name), *kirtana* (chanting of the lord‘s name), *smarana* (recalling God‘s name regularly), *arcane* (worship with flower and incense), *padasevana* (servility to Godhead), *dashya* (servitude to Godhead), *sakhitya* (friendliness with Godhead), *vandana* (utmost loyalties) and *deha-arpana* (dedication of one‘s body and soul to the Lord).

These nine forms of Bhakti constitute the nine pillars of the Bhakti Movement. Every saint during the period had his or her ways of looking at things. They accepted and popularized one or the other depending upon their redilections, personal tastes and habits. But all the nine roads led to the same spiritual destination. It is total identification with Godhead or Lord Krishna. Sankardeva to suit his own ways of

looking at things accepted only the first two kinds of Bhakti, i.e. *sravana* and *kirtana.* For him *sravana* and *kirtana* are the two straightest ways to God realizations.[28]

v. Uresa - varnava

The *Katha-guru-carita* states that after having received the *Bhagavata-purana* from Jagadisa Misra, Sankardeva celebrated Lord Jagannatha in twenty-one Kirtanas. The *Uresa-varnana* section of the *Kirtana-ghosa*, therefore, seems to have been one of the earliest parts, and was probably composed at Bardowa. The caritas refer to the recitation of this section at Dhuwahat. Twenty Kirtanas out of a total of twenty-one of *Uresa-varnana* are actually a compressed rendering of the purana. Chapters 43-51, 57-60 and 63. The 21st Kirtana speaks of the results that accrue from singing the glory of Jagannatha and the taking of the *mahaprasada* or food that is served at Puri to all people irrespective of caste or community. This divine food is glorified in the *Skanda-purana*, Utkala-Khanda, and Sankaradeva‘s lines seem to be based on this authority.[29]

vi. Prahrada-caritra

The *Prahrada-caritra* section of the *Kirtana-ghosa* is made up of 22 kirtanas with 257 verses. It was completed by Sankardeva at Bardowa. The narrative interest is well maintained, and the verses have an easy lilt, while the principles of *Bhakti* are explained in simple words from time to time. The *Prahrada-caritra* has two distinct parts: the first seven kirtanas describing the curse on Jaya and Vijaya, doorkeepers of Vaikuntha, that they would be born on earth as Asuras; and the second part relating the story of Prahrada and the Man-Lion incarnation of Vishnu. The sources of these two parts are Book III, Chapters 15-16 and Book VII, Chapters 2-10 respectively of the *Bhagavata-purana.*

vii. Hara-mohana

This section of the *Kirtana-ghosa*, _the Charming of Hara‘, of 10 Kirtanas with 98 verses, is based on the *Bhagavata-purana*, VIII. It is one of the best pieces of poetry in all Sankaradeva. His descriptive power seems to be at its best here. Many of the pictures and situations have been developed through his own skill. Vishnu in his sphere, a part of Hara‘s prayers to Visnu, the highly erotic words that Hara addresses to Mohini, the hermits‘ words of shame and derision, Hara‘s repentance, and Hara‘s

explanation of his conduct to Parvati- all these are added by the poet-saint. The occasional dialogue makes the narration lively and homely. The pictures of Mohini and the illusion of a garden where she sppears to Hara seem to be of Sankardeva‘s creation, although they might have been suggested by a verse in the original. Sankardeva‘s Mohini shows what he could do in the way of painting with the colour of erotic sentiment; the garden is al imagination, where ‒all the six seasons appear in a flock‖. The description may be called eclectic on account of influences of pictures of Vaikuntha and Trikuta in the *Bhagavata*. Flowers are, however, simply catalogued here. Sankardeva at the end of the poem strikes a note of warning against ‒the dire illusion created by woman - the most hideous of all illusions‖ (ghora nari-maya sarva mayate kutsita).[30]

viii. Pasanda -mardana

The *Katha - guru - carita* ascribes the *Pasanda-mardana* (the suppression of the heretics) to Sankardeva‘s stay at Dhuwahat; while Daityari refers to its making in course of his description of events at Barpeta. It seems to be clear enough that this section was written when the hostilities against the Order were very much rife. There seems to be certain topical references to the ridicule that was harled upon the Vaisnavas by the hostile camp, and in places Sankardeva even employs mild invectives. In order to make his utterances effective, he cites the authority of acknowledged scriptures - the *Bhagavata-purana* (all the twelve books being quoted severally), the *Padma-purana, Uttara-khanda,* the *Brhannaradiya-purana*, the *Visnudharmottara*, and the *Suta-samhita*.

ix. Namaparadha

This section, in two Kirtanas containing 38 simple payara verses, has for its source the Svarga-Khanda of the Padmapurana. Sankardeva himself states that this sastra was obtained from Varanasi (Banaras). The materials for this section are taken mainly from Chapter 48 of the purana to which are added materials from Chapters 32 and 34. In the final and specially significant part Sankardeva enumerates seven effects of incessant repetition of Hari‘s name, which ultimately makes the devotee one with Hari, the All-concious and All-blissful.[31]

x. Sisu-lila

The eleven kirtanas with 165 verses, entittled *Sisu-lila*, the divine sports (of Krishna) as a child, describe the early life of Krishna in Vrindavana from his birth up to the quelling of the snake-demon Kaliya. Within its short compass this section covers all the activites of the child God, described in Chapters 3-8 of the Bhagavata-purana. X. It is one of the most popular compositions of Sankardeva. Some incidents of Krishna‘s life in Vrindavana are here only slightly touched upon, but some other episodes with a miraculous tone are elaborately treated. Philosophical matters are generally avoided. Assamese writer Lakshminath Bezbaroa considers this poem as having been written by Sankardeva at Belaguri-Dhuwahat.

xi. Rasa-krida

The *Rasa-krida* re-tells briefly the story of Krishna‘s Rasa sports with the cowherdesses of Vraja as narrated in the rasa pancadhyaya (chapters 28-33) of the *Bhagavata – purana*-X and other events in the three subsequent chapters. Being an adaptation from some of the most exquisitely poetical passages of the great purana, it is of much beauty. Along with the preceding and succeeding sections of the book, *Sisu-lila* and *Kamsa-vadha*, this was composed by Sankadeva at Belaguri-Dhuwahat. It has all the brightness of youthful writing. The narration is rendered in 18 kirtanas with a total of 218 verses, whereas in his later rendering of the *Bhagavata-purana, X*, Sankardeva describes the same events in 446 verses. It may, however, be noticed that many a line from the earlier composition is incorporated into the later one. The original passages describing Krishna‘s dalliance with cowherdesses, making for –Sensuous and glowing poetry which captivates the Hindu heart‖ (as Farquhar has said), are here faithfully reproduced though not so elaborately as the later verse-rendering of Book X. Sankardeva seeks to equate *rasa-krida* (the circular dance of one man and several women) with ananga-keli ‗erotic sport‘, and to call this section, of course after Sridhara Swami, kama-jaya, ‗the subduer of the erotic sentiment‘ (*ito rasa-krida keli name kama-jaya*).

xii. Kamsa-vadha

All the sections from –Sisu - lila‖ to *Akrurar vancha-purana*, it seems, were composed by the poet at a stretch. Daityari relates how after the union of Sankardeva

and Madhava at Belaguri in about 1521. Ramarama Vipra one day sang with others the Kirtana, describing Krishna‘s and Balaram‘s arrival at Kamsa‘s amphitheatre. It is thus possible that the *Kamsa-vadha* and other sections of the *Kirtana-ghosa* describing Krishna‘s early exploits were completed within the few years of Sankardeva‘s stay at Belaguri.

The ten kirtanas, comprising 214 verses that make this section, render succintly a considerable part of the *Bhagavata, X* (Chapters 37-45), which is later re-told elaborately in 452 verses in the sainst‘s *Bhagavata, X*. There is a dramatic character in all the pieces, and the narration is nowhere loose or diffuse.[32]

xiii. Gopi-uddhava-samvada

–Kujir vancha-purana‖, and –Akrurar Vancha-purana‖- These three very small sections (the meeting of the cowherdesses and Krishna‘s love - messenger Uddhava, the fulfilment of the desire of Kuji, the hunch-backed perfumer of Kamsa, and the fulfilment of Akrura‘s desire) consist of only one kirtana each, and 24, 11 and 12 verses respectively. It may be assumed that these were composed by Sankardeva at Belaguri in continuation of the three sections immediately preceding. The three kirtanas give only a running summary of the three chapters of the original text.[33]

xiv. Jarasandhar yuddha

Lakshminath Bezbaroa is of the opinion that Sankardeva composed the latest sections of the *Kirtana-ghosa* only after he had settled at Patbausi. It is related in the Katha-guru-carita how some of Sankardeva‘s associates at Dhuwahat came to him at Patbausi and found him making a kirtana with the following refrain (in –Jarasandhar Yuddha‖):

e hari narayana madhava gati
krsnara carane mora nachadoka mati.

–Jarasandhar yuddha‖ (Jarasandha‘s warfare with krishna) is the first one of the eight sections of the *Kirtana-ghosa* based on the latter half (uttaradha) of the *Bhagavata, X*. If *Jarasandhar yuddha* is considered as a work written at Patbausi, it will not be wrong to take with it the other seven sections ending with –Lila-mala‖ as Patbausi compositions. The *katha-guru-carita* refers the ghosa of the second kirtana of the

poem –Devakir puttra-anayana‖ to the early part of Sankardeva‘s stay at Patbausi. Bhusana, moreover, says that Narayana Thakura and Gokulacanda recited verses from the –Lila-mala‖ when they were bartered for horses by the Koc court to Bhutiyas. The first of these sections consists of three sub-sections. The first sub-section –Jarasandhar yuddha‖ consists of three kirtanas and altogether 47 verses, rendered from Chapter 50 of the *Bhagavata, X.* In the third kirtana the fight between Balarama and Jarasandha is skilfully depicted by means of nimble eight - syllable lines.

xv. Syamantaka-harana

The –Syamantaka-harana‖ (the carrying away of the gem, Syamantaka) adapted from Chapter 57 of the *Bhagavata, X,* is a popular piece of composition, and it is generally selected by novices for practising copy work or for copying as an act of piety. Two things account for its popularity: the story - interest and the appropriate rhythm of the verses. The swift, lilting vigorous eight-syllable verses, describing Krishna‘s fight with the bear king, Jambavat, and Rukmini‘s sorrow owing to Krishna‘s delay in coming back from Jambavat‘s place, have their special appeal for simple folk.[34]

xvi. Naradar Krishna-darsana :

The –Naradar Krishna - darsana‖ (Narada‘s visit to Krishna busy as a householder) is retold from Chapter 69 of the *Bhagavata, X.*

xvii. Vipra-puttra-anayana

The *Vipra-puttra-anayana* (the bringing back of life of the ten dead sons to a Brahman of Dvaraka), with four kirtanas of 52 verses is sometimes taken as one section with –Naradar Krishna-darsana‖. The tale of the Brahman‘s sons is adapted from Chapter 89 of the *Bhagavata X.*

xviii. Damodara-viprakhyana

The *Damodara-viprakhyana* (the tale of the Brahman, Damodara) is pleasantly retold from Chapter 80-81 of Book X of the purana in 4 kirtanas of 35 verses, with some very slight changes. The small dialogue between the ever-playful krishna and his old school-mate, Damodara, who is as poor as a church mouse and,

therefore, very diffident, possesses a dramatic charater, and the character of the poor Brahman persists in the reader‘s memory.[35]

xix. Daivakir puttra-anayana

In the three small kirtanas of the ―Daivakir puttra-anayana‖ (the bringing back of Devaki‘s sons) is given the story of Rama‘s and Krishna‘s journey to the underground Sutala and bringing back to Devaki her six sons, killed by Kamsa. It is based on Chapter 85 of the *Bhagavata, X.*

xx. Veda-stuti

The twenty-six verses of the ―Veda-stuti‖ render in soft and simple language a gist of the hymn that the Vedas sing to God Hari at the beginning of creation, as given in the *Bhagavata-purana*, X, 87. The original chapter of the purana is difficult of comprehension, and Sankardeva approaches it cautiously, for whatever philosophy he may incorporate into the verses must not be above the reach of the common people. In places he rests content with rendering Sridhara‘s *slokas* given in his commentary.

xxi. Krishna-lila-mala

One hundred and nine verses, divided into seven kirtanas, under the caption *Krishna-lila-mala*, narrate the activities of Krishna‘s whole life in brief. It is something like a synopsis of the tenth book of the *Bhagavata.* The idea of thus summing up the activites of Krishna was possibly suggested by Sridhara‘s note on the final chapter of the tenth book of the purana (carame tu punah proktah krishna-lilah samasatah).

xxii. Rukminir premo-kalaha

In some manuscripts of the *Kirtana-ghosa* including that of the Visnupur-Satra two additional sections the *Rukminir prema-kalaha* (Rukmini‘s love quarrel) and the *Bhrgu-pariksa* (Bhrgu‘s testing the Gods of the Hindu trintiy), are seen. The first section consists of four kirtanas and is only a reconstruction of chapter 60 of Book X of the Bhagavata. The *Bhrgu-pariksa* is, however, a misnomer for the single *Kirtana* of fourteen verses, which has only three verses just referring to the episode of Bhrgu‘s finding out that Vishnu was the greatest God among the trio, Brahma, Visnu and

Mahesvara. Other episodes, placed under subscription here, are Vasudeva‘s worship of Krishna as Vishnu incarnate, the prayer of the Vedas, the concourse of Krishna, Nanda, Yasoda, the Gopis of Vrndavana, and many sages at Kuruksetra, and krishna‘s mirculous feat of lifting king Nrga from a deep pit. Both the *Prema-kalaha* and the *Bhrgu-pariksa* were possibly written by Sankardeva at Patbausi, along with such other sections as are based on the latter half of Book X of the *Bhagavata*; but compared with any other section of the *Kirtana-ghosa*, these two are of an inferior quality. Even Madhavadeva, when he learnt from Ramacarana that the latter could not find out the *Prema-kalaha*, remarked : ‒It has gone where it should be‖.

xxiii. Srikrishnar vaikuntha-prayana

(The passing away of Krishna) gives the story of the civil war among the Yadavas which ended in the effacement of that race, Krishna‘s death and the death of the Pandavas. The poem also details Uddhava‘s expression of sorrow in the presence of the sage, Maitreya. Materials from different chapters of Books XI, I and III have been woven into this composition of 19 kirtanas in 235 verses. The Visnupur-Satra manuscript of the work aptly divides this composition into three sub-sections as follows:

(i) ‒Srikrishnar vaikuntha-prayana‖.

(ii) ‒Arjuna-yudhisthira-samvada‖ (Arjuna meeting Yudhisthira), narrating the tale of Arjuna‘s return to Yudhisthira‘s capital and the death of the five Pandavas.

(iii) ‒Uddhava-vilapa‖ (the sorrow of Uddhava), in which the devotee gives Maitreya the story of Krsna‘s life. This being retold from Chapters 1-4 of Book III of the purana.

xxiv. Caturvimsati-avatara-varnana

T‗the description of the twenty-four incarnations of God‘, is placed as the initial part of the Kirtana-ghosa. It is based mainly on the *Bhagavata-purana*, I, Chapter 3 (which speaks of the first incarnation as Purusa, enumerates twenty-two other chief incarnations and adds that there are numerous other such ‗descents‘ of God with different digits or fractions of his original power) and Chapter 7 of Book II (lilavatara). It is probably influenced also by Book XI, chapter, 4 of the purana.

Sankardeva summarizes the first five verses of Book I, Chapter 3of the purana in the following verse:

prathame pranamo brahmarupi sanatana
sarva avatarana karana narayana
tayu nabhi-kamalata brahma bhaila jata
yuge yuge avatara dhara asamkhyata.

There were three Purusa incarnations: the first controlled the female energy, Prakrti, at the beginning of the creation; the second Purusa entered the universe (brahmanda) and quickened it into action; and the third Purusa pervades all creatures. Sankardeva's *Brahmarupi Sanatana* is probaly a reference to the primal state, in which, according to the Advaiti, Brahman alone exists. The second and third lines above refer to the second Purusa, from whose navel Brahma, the creator, was born and who is the source of various avataras, various creatures and who is known as Adi Narayana.

xxv. Bhagavata tatparya

In many of the manuscripts of the *Kirtana-ghosa* the last two kirtanas are wrongly counted as a part of the *Uresa-varnana*. These two songs are based on the *Bhagavata-purna, XII*. This section, _the conclusion (or essence of the teachings) of the *Bhagavata-purana* besides giving what the great purana wants us to conclude, forms the essence of Sankardeva's teachings, embodied in the *Kirtana-ghosa*. It is devoted to the enunciation of his *Eka-sarana Nama - Dharma* by way of the enunciating or repeating of the message, contained in the twelve books of the purana.

This section is possibly the last portion of the poetical work to have been composed by Sankardeva.[36]

D) Works composed to suit prayer service.

i. Kirtan ghosa

Kirtan ghosa is considered to be a monumental poetic collection of Sankaradeva, often described as *Kirtana* in common parlance. It is a magnificent collection of versified prayers and anecdotes culled from the *Bhagavat purana,* the most sacroscant instrument of the *Bhakti* Movement sweeping the country. Kirtana

means prayer for the Godhead or the Almighty. Here *Kirtan ghosa* means prayer eigther in the form of a *Bhagavata* stories having two parts - (1) Ghosa (refrain) and Pad (the subsequent portion of the prayer, sung by the devotees). But by and large, *Kirtan ghosa* means a collection of versified stories and prayers especially drawn from the great scriptures.

Fig.2: Kirtan Ghosa

Sankaradeva, immediately after returning from his first pilgrimage, started composing the *Kirtan ghosa* at different times and contexts. The idea of the same might have come from his sojourn in Puri and Varanasi for a considerable period of time. In the second book of the *Kirtan ghosa* called Nam-Aparadh the saint says - he had drawn the idea of the collection from his stay in Varanasi. Every book of the collection is independent in itself, drawn either from the *Bhagavatpurana* or *Brahmapurana* or from other sources.

Kirtan ghosa as a collected book form never saw the light of the day since the saint did not find enough time to systematically integrate the verses into a single book. Most of the books or verses were found scattered in different places like Barpeta, Bardowa, Dhuahat, Hajo, Cooch Behar and other places. After the passing away of the saint in 1568 AD Madhabdeva, his chief disciple took every step to

collect all the scattered manuscripts lying in different places and to rearrange them into a single collection. Ramcharan Thakur, the nephew of Madhabdeva, helped his uncle in the collection, compilation and rearrangement of the texts finally integrated as *Kirtan ghosa* as we have it today. But this immortal collection survived only in an oral form for more than three hundred years within the sacred presincts of the *Satras* and *Namghars* or in the residential bahas (houses) of the adhikars (in charge of the *Satras*). The texts were subsequently brought out in a modern printed form by the singular effort of Harbilas Agarwalla in the year 1876. After that Harinarayan Duttabarua, another devotee of the order, took substantial pain to rearrange the texts from out of the old manuscripts and got the collection published. Thereafter a good number of editions of *Kirtan ghosa* are available for the reading public.

Sankaradeva was inspired to compose the verses of the *Kirtan ghosa* after having read the *Bhagavatpurana*. One Jagadish Mishra with whom Sankaradeva studied the *Bhagavatpurana* was also a source of inspiration behind this great composition. This was perhaps one of the earliest compositions of the saint for the promotion of the bhakti cult. He composed a major portion of the collection during his residence at Bardowa, while the rest were composed when he left his birthplace in favour a congenial social and literary environment for the pursuit of his avowed goals.

The original texts of the collection were composed in the old Kamrupi language, closely akin to Brajawuli, Maithili, Oriya and old Bengali. Most of the old texts, even prior to Sankaradeva, were also composed in old Kamrupi.

The cardinal objective behind the *Kirtan ghosa* is the glorification bhakti (devotion) and surrender to lord Vishnu or Krishna. The collection opens with the text Chaturbinsati Avatar Barnana

The first pada of this opening text it is stated that lord Narayana is the cause of behind all creations and incarnations:

Prathame pranamo brahmarupi sanatana
Sarva avatarar karana Narayana...

Thus Sankaradeva was our greastest literary genius and is amply projected in every verse of the *Kirtan ghosa.* The language is not only poetic, but also rich in imagery. Every word he used is appropriately and meaningfully placed with

symmetric proportion. The poetic excellence of the work is a perennial source of creative thoughts for the succeeding poets and thinkers. This sacred book is read and heard by the people of all hues and colours cutting across all caste and communal segments. Its appeal on people‘s psyche is deep and lasting.

ii. Gunamala

Gunamala is a smaller text of 377 verses, divided into 6 parts. Sankaradeva wrote this text when king Naranarayana asked him along with a group of scholars, assembled in his palace, to put in an elephant into a tiny pot. The scholars present in the palace started laughing. They said, how could an elephant be put inside a tiny pot ? For them it was an absured idea.

Sankaradeva could understand the inner meaning of what the king said. He silently worked out a tiny version of *Bhagavat purana* with only 377 verses or padas, and handed over the same to the king. The king was pleased with the way Sankaradeva tried to put in an elephant in a tiny pot. Such an event put the other pundits to shame. All such poetic verses were composed in Brajawali. This language is an admixture of old Assamese with Maithili and Avadhi. Instead of writing in the local Assamese the saint did choose to write in Brajawali, a concocted language because of the fact that the saint had the people of a bigger region, comprising the then Assam, Orissa, Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, in his mind. Besides, during his time Assam was only a geographical expression, a motely conglomeration of different ethnic communities with different cultural backgounds. Most of the tribal people did not undertand the language of the people living in the plains. Even amongst the tribal communities communication was a real problem. One tribal community did not understand the language of the other community. Such a state of affairs made Sankardeva to write in a language that is understood by the people of a larger region. The people of a larger geographical area understand Brajawali. Thus by writing in Brajawali Sankaradeva gave a national dimension to his literary works. The idea of restricting him within the local Assam boundary was not to his liking. He sought to take his people to national plane.[37]

(E*)* Drama or plays

The history of Assamese drama begins with the plays of Sankardeva who wrote in early sixteenth century, *Chihna-Yatra* being the first spark of his imagination. These plays are popularly known as *Ankiya nat* while their staging is known as *Bhaona*. *Ankiya* means *one act* and *nat* means drama, it is also described as *Ek Anka* or a *continuous act in one sitting*.

Fig.3: Actors using colourful costumes and traditional dresses during bhaona

The most important feature in the *Ankiya nata* is that all the characters move with rhythmic representation by dance from the beginning to the end with appropriate steps, gestures and abhinaya postures. It may be said that the *Ankiya-nata*-dramatic performance is mostly a play consisting mainly of the movement of the limbs, rhythm forming an essential part. It displays a prolonged series of dances by the *gayan-bayan* party with the *sutradhara* as its leader. This is called *dhemali* or ranga. It consists of singing and dancing of devotional nature by the *gayan-bayan* with the accompainment mainly of *khol* (drum) and *tala* (cymbal). The dhemali or, musical prelude very much resembles the purvaranga in the Sanskrit drama. It does not form a part of the drama, proper. According to Sanskrit dramaturgy, the purvaranga has twenty different constituent elements of which nine are performed behind the curtain and the rest on the stage.

The *Ankiya-nats* were written more with a religious motive than the secular enjoyment. They were staged in the *Namghar* or the prayer - hall on occasions like Janmastami, Nandotsava, Dolyatra, Rasapurnima and on sainsts‘ days. Later on, they came to be staged on festive occasions, as on full moon nights, during sowing and harvesting time; in fact whenever the villagers were free from agricultural work.

From the above discussion it is clear that though the Sanskrit natas were produced to provide enjoyment to the people, it was difficult for the common people to enjoy Sanskrit being not a common language for the general masses. But the *Ankiya - natas* were written in *Brajawali* which was commonly understood by the general people.

Further, Sanskrit dramas had given stress on entertainment where as the *Ankiya natas* had given stress on the religious faith of the order, in addition to entertainment among the common people. Though outwardly Sankardeva follows the idea of Sanskrit natakas, he bears a special characteristic in his *natas.*

In conclusion, it may be said that the *Ankiya - natas* have greatly contributed to the growth and development of art and literature of Assam. It is a popular reprsentation that breaks all social barriers. It not only provides enjoyment to the people with occasional recreation and diversion, but also acquaints itself with the episodes from the Epics and Puranas. The *Ankiya-natas* were source of delight, inspiration and wisdom to the Assamese people. Sankardeva is acclaimed as a master poet, and his poetic excellence has been acknowledged during the succeeding generations.

Sankardeva was the father of Assamese drama. For the propagation of his creed, besides using other media, Sankardeva took recourse to drama and theatre. He wrote six plays or dramas viz :- *Patni-Parasada-nata*, *Kaliya-damana* nata, *Keli-gopala nata*, *Parijata-harana nata, Rukmini harana nata* and *Rama-vijaya nata.*

i. Patni - prasada-nata

Patni-parasada, the smallest and probably the earliest of Sankaradeva‘s dramas, based on the materials of Chapter 23 of the *Bhagavata X*, seems to have been born out of mental heat to justify the superiority of bhakti to jnana and karma or sacrifices offered to Gods. Through this drama Sankaradeva has successfully recorded

his protest against the sacrificial cult of his times. He is here more a sermonizer and defender of his faith than a dramatist. Nandi slokas as well as bhatimas (initial and final) are also missing in it which was a regular feature of the rest of his dramas. Thus from Sankaradeva‘s dramatic technique also, it seems to be an amateurish work.

ii. Kaliya-damana nata

Kaliya-damana is based on two stories, the subjugation of Kali and drinking of the sylvan fire of the (*Bhagavata X* 15-17). The plot is constructed loosely and both the stories, which form the main plot, are distinct. This simple dramatic adaptation of the puranic stories has also been embellished with minor details from Sridhar Swami‘s commentary to prove the divinity of Krishna and his mercifulness towards his devotees. The word *Kaliya-damana* has also an allegorical meaning in the drama.

iii. Keli-*gopala nata*

Materials for the plot construction of *Keli-gopala* have been borrowed from the rasa-panchadhyayi (*Bhagavata X*. 29-33) and the story of Krishna‘s killing the yaksha Sankhachuda (Bhagavata X 3) has been interlocked as a comic interlude in it. Its final bhatima, twelfth sloka, and the character of Gopi Radha possess traces of influence of Jayadeva‘s Gita-Govinda. The whole drama is action oriented. Hardly any dialogue goes without any action, but ―there is not much of characterization‖. Almost all the lyrics of the drama possess qualities of fine poetry. The Ujjvala or madhurya - bhakti - rasa is prevalent throughtout and it is heightened by the sense of dasyabhakti-rasa finally.

iv. Parijata-*harana nat*

There is not even the least to disagree with view point of Dr. M. Neog that ―the *Parijata - harana* is Sankardeva‘s masterpiece with its well devleoped dialogue, bold and almost realistic characterization, finally developed plot and humour which permeats into the very action‖. Two independent stories, the killing of Naraka and the carrying away of the divine parijata tree from Indra‘s garden, have been interwoven in a single plot of the drama. Sankaradeva has outlined its plot on the materials of the Bhagavata (X/59), but for most of its details he is indebted to the Vishnu-purana (5/29, 30). He has also borrowed atleast three facts from the Harivansha. Dr. B.K. Barua and K. Medhi are of the opinion that this drama might have been influenced by

Umapati Upadhyaya's *Parijata-harana*, but actually not even a single trace of influence is there according to B. P. Chaliha. Almost all the important characters, i.e., Rukmini, Satyabhama, Sachi, Narada and Krishna have their own speciality. Sankaradeva seems to have enjoyed much liberty in making the character of Narada lively. Krishna, Rukmini and Satyabhama have also been symbolized as the spureme Brahma, the bhakti and the maya respectively. Really this is the Manikuta amongst his dramas.

v. Rukmini-harana nata

This drama is more or less an abridged adaptation of his narrative poetry of this name composed earlier. Nothing new is noticeable here. In the words of Dr. M. Neog –the main interest of the drama lies in rich poetic beauty of the lyrics set to different classical ragas and talas (tunes and rhythms). It is not primarily the element of human love in the story which interests the dramatist. That the relation between Rukmini and Krishna is mainly looked upon as that between Rukmini and Krishna is mainly looked upon as that between the devotees and his worshipful is made clear by Sankadeva‖. On the whole the drama is good.

vi. Rama-vijaya nata

Rama-vijaya is not only the last of his dramas, but also his last work written in 1568. Its plot covers a wide range, i.e., Chapters 16-72 of the Book I of Valmiki's Ramayana in mercilessly abridged form with certain minor variations. There are some traces of influence of the Bala Ramayana (Raj Shekhar) and the Mahanataka (Hanumata). A few of its scenes have also become the prototype of his own drama Rukmini-harana, written earlier. From purely literary point of view it is not so important an achievement as his Rukminiharana.[38]

(G) Lyrics

i. Bargits

The *Bargits* (great songs) were composed by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva in different places and under various circumstances. They can be called lyrical strains; they show how the religious sentiments of the poets reacted to different surroundings. At the time of great mental stress we find them uttering the names of God or

meditating on his four - armed form or on the resplendent beauty of the child – God, Krishna. In times of happiness again the poets would remind themselves that such happiness is not the be-all and end-all of life, but that it is a mere illusion. The biographies of the saints relate on what occasions these songs were composed and what were their effect upon different people, attracting them to the personality and creed of their authors. When Sankardeva set out for his first pilgrimage in 1401. Saka/1479 A. D., he stayed at a place; Raumari (midway between Barpeta and modern Cooch Behar) and composed the song *Rama meri hrdaya-pankaje raiche,* (Rama dwelleth in the lotus of my heart). In course of this pilgrimage Sankaradeva visited Badarikasrama in the North. There he composed *mana meri rama-caranahi lagu* (rest my mind, rest on the feet Rama) in about his fortieth year (1488). These seem to be the first bargits of Sankardeva as well as the first compositions in the *Brajawali* idiom.

As recorded in the bio-graphies-*katha-guru-carita* Sankardeva composed 240 nos of borgits out of which 34 songs are available now.[39]

Taking the cue from both Sankardeva and Madhavdeva their disciples too composed similar kind of songs under similar contexts. But for obvious reasons they are not designated as *Bargits,* especially in terms of quality and devotional fervour. Now a days *Bargits* are often treated as satriya sangeets just like Satriya nrityas since they are nourished and practised within the precincts of the Satra institutions.

Contents of Bargits

The contents of Bargits are by and large restricted to the following themes:-

1. Songs relating to transitory nature of human life.
2. Meaninglessness of man‘s physical existence and mundane life.
3. Delineation of the youthful pastimes of Lord Krishna.
4. Dashya bhavana, i.e., servility to Lord Krishna.
5. Deep philosophical and ethical values.
6. General Devotinal and prayer songs.

Musical components of Bargits

Bargit has rag or raga attached to it for performance. Then there is the specific mention of a specific tal or rhythm. The Master and his disciple - in - chief have clearly mentioned the names of the ragas and he accompanying tals against each *Bargit*. Such rags include *Ahir, Asowari, Kalyan, Kedar, Kanada, Kour, Gouri, Toor Basanta, Toor Bhatiyali, Nat Mallar, Belowar, Bhupali, Dhanasri, Mallar, Mahur Dhanashri, Lolit, Shri, Shri Gandhar, Basant, Sindhura, Suhai, Sareng, and Emon* to name a few.[40]

Timing for Bargits

There is an ideal time for every classical song, Hindustani or Carnatic *Bargits* too have its own ideal time. The concept of ideal time however changes from Satra to *Satra,* depending upon their local practices. The ideal timings attached to each *Satriya* ragas are shown below:

i. Early in the morning - *Ahir, Shyam, Lolit, Kou, Shyam Gera*.
ii. Day time - *Gouri, Basant, Gandhar, Shri Gandhar, Dhanshri, Kedar, Shri, Mahur, Borari, Bhatayali, Toor - Basanta.*
iii. Early night - *Suhai, Kanara, Mallar*.
iv. Late night - *Bhupali, Kamod and Madhyali*.
v. At dawn - *Bhupali, Puri* and so on.

Tal or Rhythm

Tal or rhythm is an integral part of any musical performance, vocal or instrumental. The interesting part of the *Bargits* is that both Sankardeva and Madhabdeva have not made any mention of any specific tal or any specific rag. This is not the case with the songs incorporated into their plays, popularly described as *Ankiya nats*. There are tals and upatals. For example, *aktal, pantal, kharman, rupak, sutkala, domani* etc. are tals, while *suta, rupgnjal, sudhaganjal, unsathi, sabtal* etc. are upatals.

Language

Bargits were composed in *Brajawali*. It is a fabricated language drawing elements from Maithili, local Assamese, Bengali, Oriya and Hindi. It is a mixed

literary language, understandable and accessible to a major section of the Indian society, covering north, west and eastern parts of the Indian subcontinent. A section of scholars hold the view that *Brajawali* as used by the saint‘s duo is an outcome of the old Kamrupi Prakrit. Dr. Upendranath Goswami holds the opinion that the language of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva is rooted to the language of the Charjapada or Charjageets.

Sankardeva was a master of Sanskrit language. Naturally his speical choice for tatsama words was clear. The major portions of the words are tatsama, i.e., directly drawn from the Sanskrit language. He used words like *surjya, swamis, Narayana, koustav, putra, botya, arun and so forth. Mukuti, darasan* etc. are ardhyatatsama words. Tatbhava words or derivatives from the Sanskrit also abound. He also used some popular Arabian and Persian words in his *Bargits,* such as, sayeb, saheb, nafar, duniya, dokani and so forth. Besides, there are Maithilee and other words alongside the purely local and indigenous words drawn from the local ethnic communities.

Thus, by and large, *Bargits* constitute a major literary segment of the creative treasures left behind by the great Master.[41]

ii. Bhatimas

The *Bhatimas* (panegyrics) constitute a typical form of Assamese Vaisnava poetry. It is a class of lyric, which like the English ode is ‒often in the form of an address, generally dignified or exalted in subject, feeling and style.‖ A *Bhatima* is primarily a song or saying of a bhata (Skt. bhatta), a panegyrist or a man belonging to a class of people, whose profession it is to sing, praises of kings and rich men. In old Assamese literature Natas and Bhatas are counted among attendants of kings. Sankardeva came across wandering minstrels or bhatas in course of his sojourn outside his own country.

Sankardeva‘s Bhatimas may be classed into three divisions—*Dramatic bhatimas, Deva bhatimas or eulogy of God (Krishna)* and *Raja-bhatimas* or *panegyrics* of the king (Naranarayana). To these Madhavadeva added a fourth division, *Guru-bhatima,* or panegyric of the preceptor. On the basis of their use the *Dramatic bhatimas* can be divided into following three classes:

i. The initial *Bhatima* panegyrize the hero, Rama or Krishna, and are sung by the Sutradhara, not generally with rhythm (tala). The singing is supported with gestures of the hand (hasta, or mudra) and it alternates with bits of dancing. Sankardeva‘s dramas contain each a *Bhatima* after the *Nandi* (invocation) except of course in the immature *Patni-prasada*. In this drama the initial *bhatima* of the *Kaliya-damana* or that written by Sankardeva, but later cast into Ramacarana‘s Kamsa- vadha, is sometimes inserted at the beginning. But this insertion seems to have been made by latter day performers of the play. The latter lyric at least does not even mention the incident of the play.

(ii) At the end of each of the five dramas there is a benediction known as *mangala hatima* (benedictory ode) or *mukti-mangala Bhatima* (benedictory ode wishing everybody final emancipation). It corresponds to the *bharata - vakya* of Sanskrit dramas.

(iii) In three of the dramas, the *Patni-prasada*, the *Rukmini-harana* and the *Srirama-vijaya* there are *Bhatimas* thrown into the body of the action. In the *Rukmini-harana* Surabhi, a bhata from Kundina sings in front of Krishna in praise of the heroine‘s beauty while Haridasa, a second bhata of Dvaraka, recites another *Bhatima* in eulogy of the hero. In the *Srirama-vijaya* the sage Viswamitra and the heroine‘s confidant, Kanakavati, play the roles of pengyrists by singing praises of Sita before Rama and of Rama before Sita respectively.

In point of contents the *Deva - bhatimas* or panegyrics of God (in Sankardeva, invariably of Vishnu or Krishna) are at one with the dramatic ones. But as they are not included in the dramas they deserve treatment as an independent class. The *Bhatima* (*jaya jaya yadava / daitya - parabhava - / kari madhava*), included sometimes in the *Patni-prasada* and by some in the Kamsa-vadha of Ramacarana, belongs to this class. It has the early life of child Krishna as its theme. Another Bhatima (*vando govinda/gopi-janamananda*, I salute to Govinda, the pleasure of the life of Gopies‘) also runs on a parallel theme. This lyric along with two others on the life of Krishna (*jaya jagadisa isa bhayahari*, _Glory be unto the Lord, the master of the world and remover of fears‘, and pekhiye canura sabha maha, Canura having seen (Rama and Krishna) in the arena, centre around the incident of Krishna‘s killing kamsa. It is

stated in the *Katha - guru carita* that Sankardeva recited the lyrics *bando govinda and pekhiye canura* on the first two days of his visit to Naranarayana‘s court and the other one, *jaya jagadisa*, on a following day. On the first day of his visit to the Koch court, Sankardeva recited the Bhatima, *jaya jaya malla nrpati rasajana*, _glory be unto Malla, an appreciator of sentiments (in poetry),‘ in praise of the king‘s valour, his love of learning and poetry, his religious - mindedness and his physical beauty. Another day he had another panegyric to be presented to the king, extolling his heroism with reference to his warding off of an attack of the Muslims (under the Hindu renegade, Kalapahar, as Gait surmises) of Bengal.

Strings of different types of alliteration are a very marked feature of the dignified style of the Bhatimas. The metre in some of these songs follows a complicated pattern.[42]

iii. Totaya

Totaya composed in totaka metre is a hymn which, glorifies the attributes of Vishnu-Krishna and ends in salutation.[43]

Cultural contribution of Sankardeva

The cultural history of Assam in respect of music, dance, art and paintings since the beginning of eighteen century till the advent of the British developed centering round the vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva who played an important role in enriching the Assamese life socialy, culturaly and contributed a great deal to the realm of classical music, dancing, fine arts, craft and painting.

The tradition of classical music

The emotionalism of *Bhakti* inspired poets all over India to lyricism and the emphasis on prayer as the chief mode of worship patronised popular music. It has been marked that the *Bhakti* movement promoted the culture of the *dhrupad* style of singing in particular in many parts of the country. In Assam too neo-vaishnavism brought in its train a wide culture of music. The viashnava music of Assam is rich and remarkable in its tone and variety.

Among the different forms of this music, introduced by Sankardeva himself, the two tuned to classical Indian *ragas* (melody-modes) are *Bargita*, and *Ankiya gita* or songs of the *ankas* (drama). The name of the *raga* in these two types is indicated at the top of the text. In all the *Ankiya gitas* only three *Bargitas* talas (rhythm) are also named. A *Bargita* doesnot always have to keep time in its singing. When an individual bhakta pours forth his devotion in public or in the domestic temple in the measures of a *Bargita*, his singing is not generally controlled by the time beats. At other times, especially in congregations, tala is maintained in the performance of *Bargitas.*

From quite early time in the history of the Indian music attempts were made to visualise the melody-modes in the form of persons. This tendency towards deification of ragas took definite shape in the 16th century, and was particularly popularised by the *ragamala* paintings of northern India. In Assam we have such visualisation of ragas in the form of *raga-malita* (small poems giving the mythological origin of a raga).[44]

Musical instruments generally associated with the *Satra* institution can be classified into four types:

(i) Tata Yantra; i.e. string instruments, is mainly tokari.

(ii) Ghanayantras are mainly *tala* (cymbals), *Bhor - tala* (cymbals of large size, probably taken from the Bhutanese), *Khuti tala* (made of a split bamboo and the sound is produced by rubbing a cowri across the notches of a stripped bamboo), *Rama-tala* (a kind of musical clapper made of two pieces of split bamboo and the sound is produced by claping one against the other), *Ghanta* (bell), and *Kah* (Jong)

(iii) Anaddha - yantnas covered with skins are *Daba* (kettle drum), *Nagara*, Mrdanga, *Khol* and *Dhol.*

(iv) Susira or wind instruments used, are *Sankha* (conch) and *Kali* (long pipes)[45]

Khol (a kind of long - shaped drum**):**

The *Khol* is the prime instrument used in vaisnavite musical performance of Assamese society. It is a long shapped drum with animal skin streteched over both the

hollowed edges. In order to produce a sober and symmetrically harmonious sound iron dusts are cemented on the parchment festened on the edges.

Fig.4: Khol

***Tal* (cymbal):**

The brass - plates of circular form used as musical instrument and played upon in pairs are called *tal* (cymbal). When one plate is caused to strike the other it produced a clanging sound, but the tone varies according to it‘s size and shape. It is also to be noted that as the middle portion of the plates, used as tal are hollowed and shapped like a cup, the sound produces by a big size cymbal (*Bar tal*) on slapping becomes deep, grave and resonant.

Fig.5: Tal

Three types of cymbals are of general use in Assam. The big-size cymbal (sometimes as big as one cubil across), looking like a hemisphere with the much flattened rim of a helmet, gives a roaring, deep sound, and is known as *Bar-tal* (big cymbal), *bhot – tal* or *bhod-tal*. It is believed to have been introduced by Sankardeva from Bhutan which land still possesses the instrument. This instrument is rarely used in solos, but it generally accompanies mass singing. The middle-size cymbal sometimes looks like a *Bar-tal*, but more often it is conical at the top and its thin rim has a upward twist. It is known as *Pati-tal* (flat cymbal). The small - size cymbal, variously called *Saru-tal*, *Khuti-tal*.

***Dava* (kettle** drum**):**

The kettle-drum or the *Dava* as is known is a large drum shaped like a hollowed hemisphere, made of brass or copper with animal skin stretched over the edge. It is notable that, as is customary every erection for public worship (*Namghar*) or the Vaishnava cult of Assam has a kettle-drum to be beaten in each evening.

Fig.6: Dava

The sound of this big drum (*Dava*) is roaring but very grave and alarming. Evidently it‘s sound may be heared as ‒Doom, Doom, Doom, Doom....‖ which as if delcares, as the English term ‒Dooms - day‖ implies, that with passing away of each day we are treading one step more along the path approaching the final end of our life‘s journey or the day of final judgement of our life. Hence, in real practice, the

alarming round of the *Dava* calls upon people to chant psalm in praise of God at the close of each day, so that they may be relieved of the bondage of worldly life.

Kanh **(** a gong **) :**

A gong is a metal disk with turned rim and middle portion being looked like a cup. It is played by striking on the prominent tip at the middle with a club-shaped stick, the top of which is usually covered with threads or fibres. The gong produces a profund and resonant note when struck.

Fig.7: Kanh

Nageda **(earthen** drum**):**

Two small earthen drums of separate size consitute a unit of *Nageda.* The *Nagada* is similar in it‘s shape to that of the big kettle drum. When played it produces a grave groaning sound and arouse a sentiment of appeasement and rejoicing in the mind of listeners.

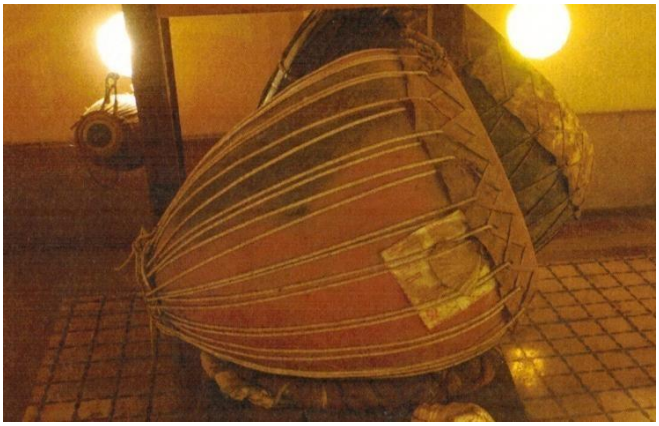

Fig.8: Nageda

***Kali* (clarinet** or a fife**):**

The wind instrument used in Vaishnava orchestra is called a *Kali*. It is an instrument of the shape of a modern clarinet and generally made of brass with holes and keys in it. But the shape of the fore-end of a *Kali* resembes most with that of a cornet or a trumpet. The clarinet of the indigenous type of Assam produces a clear and high pitched sharp sound which excites the sentiment of listensers to a great extent. It is used with drums and cymbals, primarily in dramatic performances of *Ankiya Nat.* Sometimes it is also used in public ceremonies along with certian private celebrations of Assamese Society.

Fig.9: Kali

***Sankha* (conch** shell**):**

The *Sankha* has its use in connection with the workship of various forms of Vishnu Krishna images in different *Satras*; it can of course, hardly be called a musical instrument.[46]

Fig.10: Sankha

***Prasanga*:**

This type of Music presents a different spectacle. This part in singing the verses from the *Kirtan ghosa* or the *Namaghosa* conducted in and outside the *Satra.*

In prasanga the pathak or the nam loguwa responsible for conducting the chorus sets the ghosa (refrain) and the assembly of singer repeats the same in oneness of voice.

Fig.11: Prasanga

This popular variety of music is regular spectacle of each *Satra*, in the morning, afternoon and evening hours of the day. It is stated that Madhavdeva for the first time set the method and mode of conducting *prasanga* in a systematic way introducing fourteen *prasangas* and rows of singers while he was at Sundaridiya. The instruments employed in conducting *naam prasanga* are *Khol*, *nagara*, *cymbals*, and clapping of hands maintaining tall.[47]

The tradition of classical dancing

Sankardeva who refers to his father, Kusumvara, as a gandharva incarnate, has also left a rich legacy of a style of classical Indian dancing. This school has some features in common with the Manipuri style recognised as one of the four all - India classical schools.[48]

(i) Satriya dance

Satriya dance or *satriya* is one of the eight principal classical Indian dance traditions. As the form grew within the *Satra* it came to be known as *Satriya* dance. While some of the other dance traditions have been revivals of recent times, *Satriya*

dance had remained a living tradition since its creation by Sankardeva in 15th Century Assam.

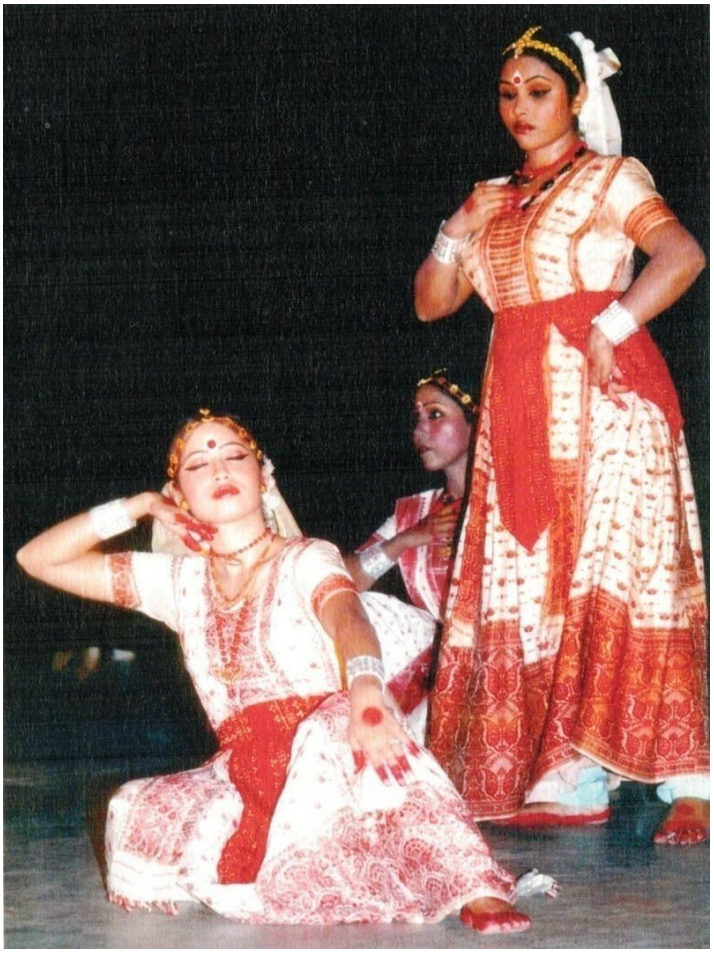

Fig.12: Satriya dance

Satriya dance began primarily as accompaniment to Sankardeva's *Ankiya nat*. Sankardeva drew elements from various folk and ethnic traditions around him, and refined them to create his dance form. Like *Kuchipudi* and *Kathakali*, Satriya dance is born of the dramatic tradition the characters use dance movements to illustrate various *bhavas* (sentiment) and *rasas* (flavour). *The abhinaya (*acting) is indispensable but *Bhakti* is the object or goal of the entire performace. The *Satriya* dance tradition also has a separate stream of dance movements independent of the central dramatic narrative. The core of *Satriya* dance is to present mythological teachnings to the people in an immediate and enjoyable manner. Traditionally, it used to be performed by male bhaktas (monks) in Satras as part of their daily rituals and during special festivals. Now a days, it is performed by both men and women and also outside *Satra*

precincts. The dance is accompained by *Bargit*, and the instrument played is *khol, tal* and the *flute.* Other instruments like violin and harmonium are recent additions.

Costumes are made of *paat* a traditional Assamese silk, women with intricate local motifs. Ornaments are of traditional Assamese design, such as *Gaamkharu*, a large bangle with a clasp, *Doogdoogi*, heart - shaped locket made of gold and studded with pearls, *Lokaparo*, two sets of twin pigeons placed back to back in gold, Satsori and *Golpata*, neckless made in gold and many more.

The *Satras* had maintained certain regid disciplines within their walls, and the dance was performed in a highly ritualistic manner by male dancers alone. This classical rigidity, adherence of centain principles and lack of organized research on the dance form all contributed to its delayed recognition as one of the classical dance traditions of India. Finally on 15th November 2000 the Sangeet Natak Akademi accorded it its current status. The other 7 traditions are: *Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, odissi, Mohiniyattam, and Kathak*. Among the eight, *Satriya* dance is the only one that can be traced back directly to an individual.

The musical component of *Satriya* dance is rich in its tonal quality. Circumstantial evidence points to the culture of dance and music before Sankardeva‘s time.

By late 19th century Satriya dance had emerged from the confines of Assam‘s *Satras*, from monasteries it moved to the metropolitan stage. *Satriya* is now performed by both men and women, nor affiliated to *Satras* and on themes other than mythological. Its fame and popularity have spread beyond the boundaries of the country.[49]

(ii) Sutradhari nritya

This type of nritya is associated with *Ankiya Bhaona*. Dancing is one of the vital features of the Sutradhar, the man who plays the master role in the representation of *Ankiya Bhaona, Sutradhari Nritya* connected with *Ankiya Bhaona* may be divided into three parts such as -

(a) *Saru - bhangi* (Lesser rhythm**):** which is the initial part of the Sutradhari dance.

(b) ***Nandi sloka*****:** It is the second part of the Sutradhari dance through which he gives the expression to the sentiment and content of the sloka.

Fig.13: Sutradhari nritya

(c) Bara - bhangi (higher rhythm)**:** The Sutradhar interprets the whole story and sentiments embodied in the sloka of the *Ankiya nat* through different style of *nritya* and mudras (gestures) to cope with the situations remaining in the stage from the begining to the play. Almost all the *Ankiya nats* of Sankardeva, Madhava and Gopal Ata of Bhawanipur were composed in the Barpeta group of *Satras.*

(iii) ***Natuwa or Natua nac*** **(dance):** This is also another important form of *Satriya* dance performed by *natuas* (dancer boys) wearing a special white costumes in order to depict some devotional sentiment.

(iv) ***Cali nac*** **(dance):** This form of dance is derived from *Ankiya nata* and is considered one of the characteristic forms of *Satriya* dance. According to Dr. M. Neog the term *Natuwa nac* is sometimes applied specifically to the *cali - nac* (dances). The word *natua* generally means an actor in the begining, as we so find it in the biographies of the saints. In would thus indicate that this form of dance was derived from *Ankiya drama*.

(v) *Oja pali*: *Ojha pali* was a pre-Sankardeva institution which celebrated manasa Goddess (serpent Goddess) with the help of music and dance. It consisted of a band of singers, the leader is known as *ojha* (expert), the few other singers, being knwon as *palies* (helpers). It was such a popular institution that Sri Sankardeva could not afford to ignore its impact on the socio-cultural life the people of Assam. . He, therefore, adopted this to his purpose, retaining its form, but changed its contents to suit his needs.[50]

Art of Painting

Painted ceiling and walls of *Namghar* and *Manikuta* of some *Satras* give ample proofs of artisic faculty of Assamese artisans. Medieval biography of relegious saints and the *Satra* chronicles contain descriptions of a few *Namghars* having painted ceilings and walls where the stories from epics were portaryed and painted with various decoration and designs. The walls of the *Namghar* of the Barpeta *Satra*, constructed under the supervision of Madhavadeva were covered with thin sheets of tin (ran) and mica (balicanda). Beautiful creepers with floral designs were carved on the panels of front doors and the gate. The chronicle of the *Maya-mara Satra* gives a vivid description of painting and decoration drawn on the walls of the *Satra* - *Namghar* at khutiapota. Various incarnation of Vishnu, Principal Gods (devas), great mythological kings like Mandhatr, Dhruva, Sagara etc. and their deeds venerable sages, Gandharvas and Kinnaras were painted on the walls. On the beams and posts of the structure, animals and birds of all descriptions were portrayed. Similar descriptions of wall - painting on the walls of *Namghar* and *Manikuta* of *Satras* are still to be found in those *Satras* where the ancient types of structure are extant.

The art of book - illustration by means of miniatures was largely cultivated in the seventeeth and eighteenth centuries of the Christian era. All the illustrated manuscripts have not yet been published, and therefore, no serious attempt has been made to study the technique of Assamese religious painting of the medieval period.

The fine art of manuscript-painting was cultivated in the royal court of Rudra Singha (1696-1714) and Siva singha (1714-1744) as well as in *Satras*. There are reasons to believe that there was a close liasion between the court and satras with regard to the cultivation of this branch of the fine art. Almost all the illustrated manuscripts definitely known to be the products of the court painters such as Ananda-

lahari, Hastividyarnava and Gita-govinda have been recovered from the Satra libraries.[51]

All the manuscript illustrations are conventional in style and technique and almost all of them are religions in motif. What has been said by Dr. N.C. Mehta with regard to Gujarati painting is equally applicable to Assamese miniature painting : *The artist is more concerned with his narratives than with the exhibition of his accomplishment. Mere technical skill is held in reserve in subordination to the narrative flow of pictures.* In these illustrations the use of turban or muglai pag (head - dress worn by muslim nobles and princes), long flowing garments (angaraksa) like those worn by Muslim nobles of medieval times, ornas wrapped round the upper part of body and covering the head as well as skirts or sari (lower garment like petticoat) worn by female figures as those of the Rajasthani painting, is frequently seen. Men are usually depicted as wearing three pieces of cloth, viz dholi waist band (Kamarbandh), Scarf (dopatta) and women are also seen to put on three pieces of cloth, viz, ghagra or Sari, waist band and a gaily coloured scarf or chaddar with both ends hanging lossely over the two sides of the body. The use of bodice (coli) by female figures of confined is noble - class ladies.

Facial features are uniformly drawn in profile. The long almond shaped eye of the Indian canon of beauty has been stressed. The human figures, both male and female, are depicted showing thin waist and broad chest. The facial appearances, conventionally or flatly drawn, appear all alive. Raksasas have been painted in black with monstrous appearance, while Asuras or Danavas are generally shown either in black or in red colour wearing muglai pag, long flowing garment (chapkan) and pyjamas and containing beard like those of Muslims, Devas with certain exception are painted red or yellow; Madhava, Balabhadra, Brahma and Brahmanas have been painted in white and Vishnu or Krishna black or green colour.[52]

The birds and animals are realistically portrayed. Trees of different kinds are conventionally but charmingly painted. Birds of different colour and species have been depicted in both static and moving position. Trees are usually painted having each leaf clearly differentiated. Elevation or depression of the sites is clearly indicated by subtle use of line and colour. Commenting on the medieval landscape painting as seen in amnuscripts of Assam. Dr. S.K. Chatterjee remarks. –One thing marks off the

eighteenth century paintings of Assam there are beautiful landscape, mostly green and undulating plains with flowers, trees and hills and rivers. It is a wonder how the beauty of nature as spread out over the face of the earth could captivate these artists of Assam in a way it never did artists in other parts of India. Water is generally indicated by broad wavy parallel lines of green colour interspersed with thin white lines. Houses have been indicated by showing the frames of facades and gables. But in the court paintings, notably in Dharma-puran and Samkhacuda - vadha ponds and lakes with lilies and lotuses are more realistically portrayed. Palaces containing superstructures and dome - shaped templex with spacious *mandapas* have been ably painted by the court painters. These architectural drawings by the court - painters showing houses, palaces and temples resemble those of the Raj-put painting. Lying or sleeping position is indicated by drawing the figure horizontally.

Things of the Assamese life are not altogether absent. Drums (*Khol)*, cymbals (*Tal*). Assamese trays (*Sarai*) horn pipe (*Pepa*). Bihu drums (*Dhol)*, Sitting stools (*Tamuli - pira*) and bed steads (*Chal-pira*) and country - made Sun Shudes (*Japi*) have been dipicted in many a scene.[53]

In Assam also vaisnavism brought in the practice of illuminating the holy books with small illustrative paintings. Sankardeva is also believed to have been a painter. On one occasion he is said have painted on tulapat or ginned cotton paper scenes of *Seven Vaikunthas.* On another he painted with vermilion and yellow arsenic the picture of an elephant, and pasted it on a wooden bookcase to be presented to his royal patron, Naranarayana. He had scenes of Krishna‘s Vrindabana woven into a sheet of cloth, 180 feet (54 metres) long with a caption for each miniature. The illustrations in a copy of Sankardeva‘s rendering of the first half tenth Skandha of the *Bhagavata purana,* found in the Bali - *Satra* of the Bardowa group have been reproduced in print in the publication, *Chitra - bhagavata*.[54]

The Assamese painting, whether cultivated in the court or in *Satras,* is basically of the same category and technique, cannot be doubted; they only differ in degrees of perfection. Assamese miniatures, according to Dr. S.K. Chatterjee Shows a happy blending of eastern Indian style of religious miniatures with more sophisticated Mughal and Rajasthan paintings and possibly also of Kangra art. The date 1539 A.D. assigned to the pubilished illuminated Bhagavata is doubtful, because most of the

paintings of the same style are definitely known to be products of the eighteenth century and after. But it cannot also be denied that tradition of medieval painting in Assam could be denied that tradition of medieval painting in Assam could be traced back to Sankardeva (1449-1568) and his times. It is uniformly stated in all the biographies of Sankardeva that he introduced for the first time in painted scenes as background of a dramatic performance known as *Cihna-yatra* possibly this attempt of Sankardeva marked the beginning of the religious painting in medieval Assam. It is further told in bio-graphies that a sanyasi taught him the art of painting. The art of painting received further impetus and took a definite shape during the reign of king Rudra Singha (1696-1714) and Siva Singha (1714-1744) whose portraits are appended to a few illustrated manuscripts so far recovered. Probably they also imported painters from northern India to do the work of painting. The names of Dilbar and Dosai, the two Mahmadan painters of the Hastividyarnava help us to form such an opinion.[55]

Fig.14: Chitra - bhagavata

Crafts

The growth and popularity of *Bhaona* gave birth to a class of artisans who specialised in the art of preparing costume, decorations and accessories of the performance. The making of masks and costumes necessary for the *Bhaona*

performance required specialised professional skill and in course of time it become a sort of hereditary art confined to a few families at different localities. But in *Satras* where celibate devotees in large numbers permanently reside, these crafts of making and preparing decorative materials and accesories of dramatic performance were cultivated by a section of celibate inmates of *Satras*.

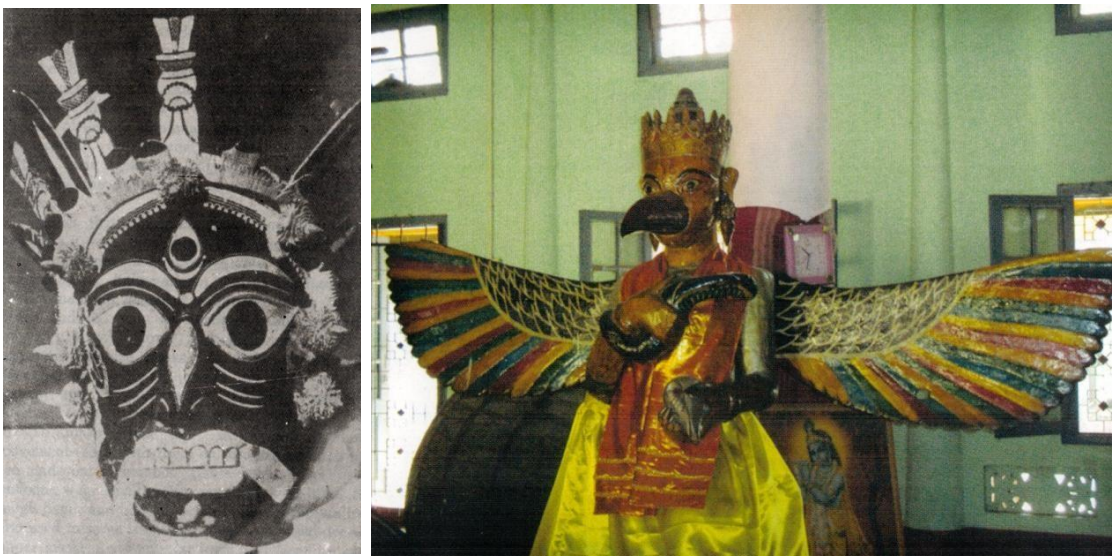

Fig.15: Mask

Besides the craft connected with *Bhona*, there were a few more crafts which found suitable atmosphere for their growth and development in *Satras*. Some of these crafts are still lingering in a few *Satras.* Thus , the art of carving miniature images of deities, thrones and seats (asana) of ivory, beautifully decorated and painted with various designs, are still in existence, in a few *Satras* at Barpeta and Majuli. Finely earned and chislled wooden images of Gods, Goddesses and incarnations adorn the shrines of many a Satra. Images of Vishnu, Narayana, Vasudeva and ten principal incarnations of Vishnu, no doubt, form the bulk of these wooden carvings. The class of people professionally devoted to this type of works is known as *Khanikar*. The earliest reference is found in the bio-graphies of Sankardeva who in order to induce the Brahminical section to embrace his faith caused ore Karala Barhai to carve out a wooden Vishnu image and installed that with appropriate ceremony. The wooden and ivory images serve two-fold purpose. Ceremoniously installed images are generally worshipped as deities and others are kept fitted to walls or panels of the Shrine (*Manikuta*) and prayer halls (*Namghar*) for decorative purpose.

Wooden and copper thrones (Singha-sana) consisting of one to seven tiers supported by four to thirty-two lions painted and decorated with various designs, adorn the Shrines of *Satras*. One these thrones, images of the deity or copies of sacred scriptures are kept. In a manner less gorgeous but artistically made are the *karanis* (Sk..*Karandika*) where necessary materials for daily worship are kept. Another note worthy artistic thing most commonly used in *Satras* as well as in the house hold of nobles and kings on all ceremonial occasions is *Sarai* (Sk. - *Sarava*) of various sizes and types. The *Sarai* is a kind of tray having an artistically carved stand and made of both wood and coper. To offer anything in a Sarai, whether to deities or to guests is considered to be an expression of the highest honour and reverence in Assamese life. The craft of making artistic fans with finely split canes decorated and painted with *hengul* (vermilion) and *harital* (yellow arsenic) is exclusively confined to *Satras*. The celibate bhaktas in their offtime engage themselves in such crafts, which attract ready customers also.[56]