CHAPTER XI

SANKARADEVA:
THE FOUNDER FATHER OF MODERN ASSAM.
personally visited the grand-daughter of Kaviradasa, paid her abeisance and utilised his catholicity in his own movement in the rugged foothills of Assam. The whole of Assam and her adjacent parts were illumined and rejuvenated by the strenuous efforts of Sankaradeva and his devotion to the Almighty which kindled lights in the hearts of religious minded simple people of Assam.

Condition of Assam before the advent of Sankaradeva:

Political Condition:

Geographically Assam was surrounded by the hills which made the country fortified and the rivers in rainy season used to inundate the vast land. The geographical condition created a congenial atmosphere of peace in the heart of Assam and resisted ill-design of the foreign invaders. Yet the people of Assam feel insecure in the reign of Chutiya (abbreviation from Chantiya) kings as they were ruling the state from the thirteenth century. They were followers of Saktism and worshipped the Goddess Kali various forms. The important form in which they worshipped this goddess was that of 'Kecaikharti' (the eater of flesh and blood) and they used to sacrifice human beings at her altar. 3. The major civilized people of Assam,

3. Ibid.
the Ahon belonged to a Shan tribe and before their conversion to Hinduism they used to worship different tribal gods. In the Brahmaputra basin, there were the Kacharis and their kingdom. They were of a tribe and they followed their own customs. At the time of Sankaradaiva the Kacharis maintained their own concept of religion. Other sides of the Brahmaputra there were the Bruya chiefs predominant. They were independent chieftains. The Bruya chiefs were in the fold of Hinduism but maintained different caste entity. Some of them were Brahmins. There were non-brahmins, Kayasthas, and Kalidas. But most of them followed the rules of Saktism in their life. The western part of Assam was called Kamrup, which also included whole of Coebihar now in West Bengal. In the fifteenth century the Ahom dynasty ruled over the Kamrup. Hussain Shah captured Kamrup and dealth the year 1498. The fall of some powerful kings of several kingdoms in Assam created a void in the field of political administration and constant fighting for power and wrangling led to murders of political nature. The branch of Bado race, the Kochas formed a dynasty and same to the power of whole part of Western Assam. The Kochas were finally absorbed in the fold of Hinduism and placed in the Saktivits school.
The condition of religion in the time of Sankaradeva in the Western part of Assam:

The political feud and conflict for supremacy among power mongering men of Assam and her adjacent parts also created an unstable condition for religious practitioners. The people spoke different dialects and practised their religious cults according to their own version without placing their thought on the argumental base of philosophy. The majority of the people of Assam were of tribal origin. They used to worship their deities prescribed by the sects. The number of Vaisnava community was small and number of Saivite group including Tantrics increased in a scriding manner.

Saivism:

The worship of Siva was prevalent in Assam from time immemorial. The royal dynasty of Kamrup, for a long period of time from the seventh to the end of the twelfth century remained saivite. They used to worship Bhairava (a horrified form of Siva) with a turn towards Saktivite cult. They thought Siva was tribal and his particular entity as they established was Kirti. Naranarayan (1540-1584) legalised the tribal worship of Siva on the banks of the Brahmaputra.

Saktism or worship of the universal God was recognised both as a male and a female. In the
Svetasvatara Upanishad says:

Tam stri tam pumanasi
Tam kumara ute be kumeri
Tam jirno dandena banicasai
Tam jato bhavasi Visvatomukha.

Svet. Upanisad IV. 3.

'Thou art woman; Thou art man, Thou art youth, Thou art maiden; Thou art the old man tottering on his staff; Thou dost appear born in manifold forms in the world (i.e. manifestation of all things).

But it was the practice of common men not to go with the hotch-potch of philosophy but to worship his divine beloved one in anthropic shape as mother goddess or a god in the male form. The Eastern part of India, particularly in the different parts of Assam, worship of the goddess Durga in different names and worship of snake goddesses, Manasa were much popular among the common inhabitants. One may have to worship his god or goddess according to his free will, but any one's personal thought should not be allowed to impose on the society. It was a wide practice among the Sakti (Power goddess) worshipper to sacrifice human being at the altar of the deity. There is
No doubt that the custom of human sacrifice was unethical. And random sacrifice of the animals like goats, pigeons and duck created an imbalance in environments of Assam. The country was in much need of a religious reformer in that moment to turn the minds of the mass to an ethical process of religions. In the medieval age like all others countries of the world, Assam was also controlled by the rules framed by the religious conception of the people.

Advent of Sankaradeva:

Sankaradeva was not a lone vaisnava who propagated the non-violence of Vaisnavism in the soil of Assam. There were remnants of vaisnavite thought in Assam even in the days of Sankaradeva. Worship of Vasudeva was in vogue. There are also evidence of land grants by the kings of Kamrup. The Vasudeva cult was a living cult even in the age of Sankaradeva in the fifteenth century certain important translation of the epics and some important scriptures into the popular language by the great savant like Madhava Kandali (Ramayana), the court poet of Kochari king Mahamanikya of the fourteenth century and several important cantos of the Mahabharata were translated into the local language by Haribara Vipra. Kaviratna Sarasvati and man like Rudra Kandali paved the way for Vaisnavite movement to become popular among the people of Assam.
Sankaradeva was highly inspired by the ideal of some of the important characters of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. But he loved the Bhagavata Purana much. He was imbued with high ideals of love which are depicted in that scripture and practically he translated these in his life.

Sankaradeva had regard for tentative rites as it is stated by the different historians of mediaeval age. M.I. Dora narrates some enchanting evidence by quoting from the works of Muslim historians in his book 'History of Assam as told by Muslim historians' (P.49). Haft-Iqlim, Ain-i-Akbari, Bharistan-I-Chaibi and the authors of Alamgirnāma and Fatihastate horrified situation of medieval Assam, which arose out of religious pressure and persecution. Most of them refuted the vulgar practice in the name of religion.

Haft-Iqlim states about a class of people who voluntarily sacrifice themselves to the deity Ai (mother) and they dwell in caves. Ain-i-Akbari narrates the story of child sacrifice. Bharistan-I-Chaibi speaks about sorcery and magic influence on important occasions.
Early life of Sankaradeva:

It is said that the forefathers of Sankaradeva were the inhabitants of upper India. They shifted their place of residence out of apprehension of Muslim persecution in the early step of Muslim invasion in the mediaeval era of Indian history. They settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra river. The earlier hagiographers of Sankaradeva were shy in mentioning the date of his birth. After strenuous search historiographers have asserted his date of birth. Sankaradeva was born in the bright dasami of Asvin in 1449. In the middle of the fifteenth century at the obscure village in Alipukhuri in the district of Nowgong on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. His father’s name was Kusumbara Bhuya. They belonged to the Kayastha caste. The Bhuya’s were the powerful men of the Society. His father was also the chief of the Bhuyas (Siromani Bhuya) and enjoyed the landed property including the privileges from the king. Sankaradeva lost his mother at the stage of his infancy within three days of his birth. His old grand-mother Khersuti reared him in the stage with full of her affection.

Early education of Sankaradeva:

There was a Sanskrit Scholar at Alipukhuri Mahendra Kandali by name, who maintained a Sanskrit School in his...
village, Sankaradeva was sent to him at the age of twelve and he learnt Sanskrit and prepared himself with the high ideals of traditional heritage of India. He thought to translate the best scripture of Sanskrit language in his mother tongue for the benefit of the common people of Assam before his embracing the monastic life. He was bestowed with the power of composing poems from his boyhood and during the days of his schooling he composed a book of poems depicting the sacrificial life of king Harischandra, the name of the booklet was 'Haris Chandra Upakhyana'. He also compiled a treatise on the devotional approach of life of the Vaishnavas and named it 'Shakti Ratnakara'. It took twelve years and he came out as a finished scholar at the age of his twenty-two in 1470.

He shouldered the official responsibilities of his father's estate and subsequently he was pressed to marry a girl of his clan, Suryavati.

Turning point of his life:

Suryavati proved her worthiness as a consort of Sankaradeva, but she died four years of their marriage, leaving behind a girl named Haripriya (dear one of Lord Hari).
The death of his wife came as a turning point in his life, which plunged him into the deeper corner of spiritualism. Now he determined to finish his household duties. First he gave his daughter Haripriya in marriage with a Kayastha boy Hari and then he handed over the care of his estate to two trustworthy men, Jayanta Dalai and Madhava Dalai. He set out on a long tour of pilgrimage with his teacher of educational life, Mahendra Kandali. He toured all over India, circling Puri to Rameswaram and northward of India, to Badarikasram. He made himself a store-house of knowledge by intermingling his thought with other vairavite thinking the catholic approach of Suri saints. He met the Vaisnavas savants like Rupa and Sanatan, the two direct associates of Srikrshna Caitanyya in Vridavana. Some hagiographers assume that Sankaradeva took spiritual initiation and inspiration from them. He turned back to his home state Assam later than 1495.

**His propagation of Vaisnavite religion in Assam:**

Soon after his return from pilgrimage Sankaradeva seriously thought over propagating the Vaisnavite faith for the welfare of fellow brethren in Assam that at this


7. Ibid.

8. The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement S N Sarma, Gauhati, 1966
juncture he was pressed for marrying for the second time, but he did not agree. He choose the life of a propagator with a fresh impetus and with an extraordinary enthusiasm. He shifted his residence from Alipukhuria to Bardowa and engaged himself in the movement for mass conversion. He took the views of the Bhagavad Purana as his highest ideal. He placed the scripture as his preceptor and started his preaching based on the Commentary of Sridhara. A hagiographer of Sankaradeva states Sankaradeva as saying to one of his followers that after he had visited the temple of Jagannatha, he resolved not to bow down his head to any other deity having once bowed to the image of Jagannatha. This may lead us to surmise that Puri was a place for him for illumination. However he preached his vaisnavite faith making the charms of vedanta philosophy and sayings of the sages of the Bhakti era combining the thought of Sufi saints.

His Formation of Satras :

'Satra' means a rest house for the pilgrims as it is still used in North India, but Sankaradeva used this word as a monastery, a shelter for his followers. Satras

having no image or deity or any worshipping image of god in any form. But there was a scope or worshipping the images in the 'Manikuta' in the smaller form or having images according to Brahmical order of Visnu or Krishna for the preliminary stages of the vaisnava devotee but finally image was replaced in favour of the sacred scripture or Sankaradeva's other writings.

Namaghara:

Namaghara was a congregational house and a community prayer hall for the followers of the new faith propagated by Sankaradeva, where the devotee chanted the constant repetition of the name of their deity i.e. the god Almighty. The devotee performed their duties in a gathering without making the distinction of Castes, as vaisnava has no distinction of caste.

Religion of Sankaradeva as preached by him:

The religion, which was preached by Sankaradeva was nothing but a religion of monism. Observing the low standard of religious life and their unethical habits and to check the tribal influence of worshipping without any
philosophical base, which had repercussion on the society and for other reason he tried to discard the system of sacrifice for the benefit of the society. His religion was the religion of supreme surrender to one God. The official name of Sankaradeva was 'Ekasarana Dharma' (religion based on surrendering to one God). About the system of 'Eka-sarana system', Dr. Baikonta Kakati said: 'It is not a religion of bargain and barter between god and men or of sacrifice and easy recompense; it is one with exclusive emphasis on slow, spiritual regeneration, on the growth of a new spiritual outlook by laying flesh and spirit in the hanus of the Lord'.

Sankaradeva preached a religion of surrender (Sarana) to one God. The name of same Vasudeva Krishna also known as Visnu, Narayana, Rama, Hari and for this reason the sect created by Sankaradeva is known 'Ekasaraniya nama dharma'.

11. Sankaradeva : Vaishnava Saint of Assam - B K Barma...
   p 92.
The worshipping of other gods and godesses is strictly forbidden in this sect.

Sankaradeva had clearly stated the philosophy of religion in his 'Bhakti Pradipa':

Eka citte tumi moka matra kara seva /
Parihare durate yateka ana deya //
Huyoka Saranapanna aka mote matra /
Moke bhaja huiba teve mukutire patra //
Nama musuniba tumi and devatara /
Yana mte nuhibe bhakati vyabhicara //

"Devote yourself to me with a single mind,
Forsake from a distance all other gods
Surrender yourself to me alone,
Devote to me, then will you be fit for salvation.
Never listen to names of other gods,
that your devotion may remain unsullied".

[tr. into Eng by J. K. Sarva]

Sankaradeva's philosophical outlook regarding his conception of Krishna is nothing but the manifestation of supreme Brahman (Parabrahma). He took this idea based on the tenth canto of the Bhagavata.
Once he said:

Nahi janma tomar tathapi janma dhara /
Sahi janme jivar janamar dur kara //

'Thou hast no birth, yet Thou doest adopt them; and thereby removeth the birth of creature'.

The philosophical basis of the religion propagated by Sankaradeva was in tune with the philosophical aspects of Sankaracarya, Ramanuyacarya.

Tumi paramatma jagatara Iss ek /
Eko bastu nahika tomata bystirek //

'You are the supreme self, the only Lord of the universe, there is nothing except you'.

Again he said:

'Prathama pranamo Brahmarupi Sanatana /
Sarva avatarar karama Narayana //

'First I bow down to Narayana, the Eternal one, in the form of Brahma, the cause of all incarnation'. 
On the metaphysical plane, he maintained the non-dualistic view, it was his speciality where other vaisnavite savant failed to make bridge between the dualistic and non-dualistic philosophical thoughts.

In his 'Shaktiratnakara' (an Ocean of devotion) he maintained his monistic thought of Sankara and also of Islam:

'Aponara namar sange nacarata Hari /
Yeyi nama seyi Hari jana nista kari //

'Hari (Almighty) never avoids the company of His name. It is certain that (Nama) name of Hari is Hari himself'.

Ways and means of his propagation:

Sankaradeva was a man of high intellect and he had a power of foreseeing. He had also the power of vision. It is matter of astonishment the he used a vehicle to carry his missionary zeal for the rejuvenation of his country was his literary works which he had used five hundred years ago, the states
of modern world are adopting the same method for political propaganda. Sankaradeva was a Sanskrit scholar, but he wrote all his religious poems in the vernacular, the living language of the mass. The aim of his life was to teach this lesson of true vaidnava religion which had been interpreted by the Sanskrit lore of the scripture Bhagavata Purna for sake of uneducated masses. He used the literary works, wisely in the practical field of daily life of the people of Assam. He tied the philosophy of Vedanta with the lore of the Bhagavata Purna (Purna Surya maha Bhagavata vedantaro it paramatattva). He thought the Bhagavata Purna was the best scripture (the sun among the Purnas) of his age.

The 'Bhakti Pradipa (light of devotion) was one of his treatises, a collection of different ancient scriptures of devotionalism written in Sanskrit and composed them slightly mixing his own tune in Assam at the time of his schooling, 'Bhakti ratnakara' (Ocean of devotion) was also one of his best works based on devotionalism. These two works of his are still popular in Assam. The Bargas (long songs) composed by Sankaradeva revealed his lofty thoughts of devotionalism and greatness of his ideals and personal ability of ornamenting a literary work. His another book 'Anadi Patana'
was a book of translation from the Bhagavate, book III. The book revealed the nature of cosmological matters according to his version and not a book for common men. His composition of the gunamala (garland of praises) was the last work of Sankaradeva, it was also a book composed by him based on theme of the Bhagavata from the cantos 10 and 11. The composition was full of alterations. The outstanding literary production of Sankaradeva was the 'Kirtana' (a book of songs praising the Almighty) on influential literary works in the basin of the Brahmaputra comprising 2261 couplets knitted with diverse metres in Assamese language. The 'Kirtana' is still used for recitation in the common gathering in the community prayer hall, each separate poem as it was attired with a brief pause system, generally called 'Ghosha'. The leader of the congregational prayer repeats the 'Ghosha' (refrain) other pay clappings of hands in the 'Namaghara' (the prayer hall).

Another remarkable creation of Sankaradeva was a unique type of one act play in Assam and colloquial language of the land. In the Buddhist era 'Buddha nataka' (a drama based on the life of Lord Buddha) was introduced to satisfy the spiritual need of the common people. But technique of Sankaradeva was a wonderful thing to think. He
composed such six one-act plays in Brjabuli. He like Guru Nanak of Punjab, introduced the incantation which are usually used in the Indic songs as Ragas and Raganis.

Dr. S N Sarma, an erudite scholar in the field of neo-vaismavite movement rightly accesssed the literary works of Sankaradeva and his contributions may be summarised in such manner:

1. Boldness of Sankaradeva in propagating the monism in the Assam valley.
2. He replaced the costly rituals by introducing simple manner of worshipping god.
3. He placed the glory of desireless ways of devotion, and defended the Nivrttimarga (the path of desireless) in lieu of Pravrttimarga (fulfilling the desires through the praying and worshipping of the Almighty).
4. He advocated for a casteless society and upgraded the lowest people of the community by introducing the devotion in his missionary work. Equality of men was his criterion.
5. He rejuvenated the course of literary and cultural life of Assam.
6. Foundation of Satras (shelters) invoked much inspiration for making human life blissful.
He was the founder father of folk-lore research in India. Like the dramatic entertainment of Ramila to other local folk tradition in all other parts of India and in Assam, he had shown a courageous appeal in implementing the folk-substances as media of propagations and awakening of masses. As he was a Sanskrit scholar, he acquired knowledge of writing acts according the laws led by Bharata-Muni. But his ability of combining the thought with folk tradition made unique in the field of mass propagation.

His scope of his missionary service:

Sankaradeva was a man of saintly personality and he had the power of endurance. He was not a Brahmin by birth but really a Brahmin in term of spiritual arguments. He was oppressed much for the reason of his caste. He had to shift his residence in the different parts of Assam. He was bound to leave the eastern part of Assam owing to the constant feud generated between the Bhuyas and the Kacharis. Crossing the Brahmaputra he settled in the north part of the river at Gangmukh. But he could not live there in peace, he was compelled to leave his residence under the Ahom monarch and settled Dhuahata - Belaguri. There he was opposed by the orthodox Brahmins.
But Madhavadeva, a Kayastha disciple came in contact of Sankaradeva and turned a devoted follower of him. He also took part in the propagational activity. He was born at the village Narayanapura in 1490 in Lakhimpur district. An unhappy incident pressed the Sankaradeva to leave the land of the Ahom king (Cuhungmung Dihingia Raja - 1497 - 1539 A.D.). Finally he settled in Kamarupa. Here he got three of his admirers from the Brahmin Community.

He, on his return from the pilgrimage for the second time, propagated the faith of vaisnavism engaging all his power of physical and mental strength. He defied the arguments of orthodox section. He roamed all over the different parts of Assam by force of circumstances but all the events turned into a historic records and paved the ways of his influence on the masses of Assam.

His love for mother country:

In a preface to the book Sankaradeva, Dr. Birinchi Kumar Barua said: "The conception of India as our mother country was conceived by Sankaradeva five countries ago. He wanted the people to feel proud of
being born in this holy country of Bharatavarsha, as he provides an immense opportunity for development of man's moral and spiritual potentialities. Repeatedly did he emphasise the glorious and spiritual experiences of India. In many of his verses he spoke of the great heritage of this ancient Bharatavarsha:

'Dhanya dhanya kalikal dhanya nar tanu bhai / Dhanya dhanya Bharatavarsha'.

'Glory to be born as man in Bharatavarsha in the Kali age'

Sankaradeva widened the geographical outlook of the Assamese people by his travel from Kamarupa to Kanyakumarika and linked up Assam with the rest of India in diverse ways.

Sankaradeva also had love for all beings:

He said in one of his poems:

'Yata dekha bhuta prani gava visnu hena jani / Himsa eri kara upkara'.
"You should treat all the being as the visible forms of Lord Vishnu (the protector of all the Lord of the universe) and avoid violence".

Social reformation of Sankaradeva:

Alike his love for the living beings, he also devoted to the humanity's sake. According to the philosophy of Sankaradeva: "The service of the humanity is the service of God". When Sankaradeva was born in Assam then there was prevailing the Casteism, but when Sankaradeva preached his sermons, he advised his followers not to follow the rules of casteism in the Satras and in the Namaghares. He also prohibited untouchability and preached the ethics of equality of all human beings, saying that they are the manifestation of the Supreme pervador Vishnu and asked all of his disciple to keep an equal eye on a Brahmin and a candal. The problem of untouchability was rare among the aboriginals of Assam. So it was not a problem manner but had only to serve them with the unified love of bondage through the preaching of the vaisnavite religion of love on the equality in Bhakti religion he said:

Candalo Harimano love matra /
Kariba ucita yajnara patra //
Bhakties parama Suodha nirupama /
Prakati dekha pramana //
'If the Candala gets only the name Hari, you should respect him properly. By his devotion he would into a purified soul, it has been proved by the different human groups like the Kirata, .... you should serve them all in proper manner by purifying your heart. If you serve them in this way, the devotion will touch you and you will cross this worldly life and must attain the Vaikuntha (the abode of Lord Visnu)'.

He again said: 'That Candala is considered superior on whose lips the names of Hari constantly abide. As soon as he utters the name of Hari, he earns the merit of performing sacrifices. He is real Kulina (i.e. of good high origin) and he knows the Vedas whose lips utters the name of Hari. He earns merit of abolition in the holy places and performing various sacrifices, meditation and deeds of gift'.

12. Kirtan : Sankaradeva Sec. 3. Verse no. 112
Sankaradeva broadened the ideas of his thought from the vaisnavism or the religion of devotion preached by the saints of medieval age like Kabir, Nanak and Dadu. He challenged the system of casteism openly in the society of the fifteenth century in Assam. He also admitted the Muslim in his fold of devotionalism.

In a matter he was a heterodox. He forbade all the relation with non-vaishnavite groups. His uncompromising trend was only to save his own followers from contamination. He had deep sense of regard towards the women folk, but in the latter stage it was dropped by his followers.

But he praised the practice of non-violence in highest order. He recommended stern steps to check moral vices. Good conduct and high morality were essential parts of his vaisnavism. He said: 'Paradharmaka nihimsiva kadacit' (hurt not the religious feeling of other people) and also said: 'Nakariba ninda āna panthi samastaka' (censure not the followers of other sects or religions). Tolerance was the main inspiration of Vaishnava religion, but it
was introduced by a particular shape in the Bhakti movement by Sri Sankaradeva in Assam with an intention not to make clash with other existing creeds of the Buddhistic branch and the Tantrantic worshipper of the mother goddess in Assam.

'Nahi bhaktite jāti ajāti bicār
Krishnata bhakti samastare adhikēr'

(in bhakti, there is no scope for distinction of castes, everybody has equal right to chant the name of Hari).

He embraced even Muslims and the aborniganals in his fold. Among his disciples Gobinda Atai was garo, Boloi Atai was an aboriginal from Mikir tribe, Rama Atai was a Kachari and Narottama Atai was a Naga, Narayan Atai was Miri and Damodara Atai was Bhutia. His Muslim follower was candsai. They are all notable souls who contributed to the development of socio-religious field for the regeneration of Assam on equal footing.
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3. (A) Cultural History of Assam. v.1. B K Baruia 1951
