CHAPTER II

INFLUENTIAL AND INSPIRATIONAL FACTORS
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2/1 Introduction:

Śankardeva (1449-1568 A.D.) and Tulsīdāsa (1532-1623 A.D.) were amongst the great men of the medieval bhakti movement. Their thoughts brought about a new consciousness in their society and still continue to help crores of people to find out a proper course of life in the midst of the perplexities of the modern age. Their ideologies assumed definite identities and in the long run became more popular than the thoughts propagated by the medieval saints. However, they were influenced by the political, social and religious conditions of their period and got inspiration from their own life as well as literary and cultural traditions of their society. A study of the factors that influenced and inspired them will, therefore, be quite helpful in a proper assessment and full understanding of their thoughts. In the present chapter some of the factors that influenced Śankardeva and Tulsīdāsa will be discussed as background for the study of their thoughts under different heads respectively.

2/2 Influential Factors:

A. ŚANKARDEVA

1. Political conditions:

Śankardeva (1449-1568 A.D.) lived at a time when there was
hardly any powerful central administration in Assam. The whole state was ruled by small kings and feudatory- Princes. While Koch and Bhuyān kings ruled the west and middle Assam respectively, east Assam was ruled by the Kachārī kings, Āhom and Chutiayās. Quarrels among these kings over pretty matters were quite frequent. Many dynasties did not survive for more than two or three decades. References to confrontations between Kachāris and Bhuyāns are found in different 'Guru Caritas'. One of the causes of demolition of Śankardeva's 'Bhuyān - kingdom' was the confrontation with Kachāris. The royal force of koch under the leadership of Narnārayaṇ and Chilārāi in the west and of Āhoms in the east became very powerful. Small principalities merged in them and the Koch and Āhoms became dominant powers. It was in the Koch kingdom that Śankardeva passed his last twenty years and received royal patronage. Even the koch State (Darangī - kingdom) came under the rule of the Āhoms after the sixteenth century.

The above discussion makes it evident that the Assam of Śankardeva's time was politically disturbed. The life of the people had become insecure due to prevalence of crimes like slaughter and killing, robbery and ravaging etc. Meanwhile Muhammadan invasions were taking place from the west. It appears that the society was divided in groups and tribes and States followed after castes. Brute force became synonym with power. These factors dominated the political conditions of the
period of which rivalry and chivalry were the main
tendencies. This rule of the jungle in the political life
of the people contributed to insecurity and disturbance in
the society. It was but natural that a desire for a strong
and powerful king emerged in the minds of people for material
peace and security. In turn it probably created a congenial
atmosphere for the achievement of spiritual peace under the
shelter of an omnipotent God.

2. Social conditions:

Śāṅkaradeva's Assam was inhabited by both the Aryans
and non-Aryans. The society was divided in tribes and commun-
ities. Tendencies of separation and conflict characterised the
society. A glimpse of the variety of the people living in Assam
can be had in the words of Dr. Vijayendra Snātaka, "The amount
of variety or peculiarity found in the different castes inhab-
itating Assam is rare and not to be found in any other part of
India. Probably in no other part of the world so many different
peoples live together. The Aryans of the vedic period have been
living by the side of the different primitive tribes like Asura,
Yakṣa, Rākṣasa, Śaka, Huna, Kuśāna, Nāg etc. Their ways of
life, customs, manners, religious beliefs widely vary from each
other".²

Brāhmanas were regarded as the most respected persons in
the society. They occupied a prominent social position amongst
the orthodox caste. They were well versed in various sciences
and arts. They were the custodians of sacred scriptures and acted as religious teachers. Besides, they occupied important offices in the Court. According to various Carit-Puthias the Brāhmaṇas had accessibility to the royal courts; their views were greatly respected by the kings. The harrassment of Sankardeva by the brāhmaṇa scholars derived from the dominant position of the latter in the society.

As the State was experiencing continuous turmoil, the role of Ksatriyas, as warrior caste was significant. Although there were no distinct class of Ksatriyas based on Varnāśrama, the soldiers in general may be included in this class. On the basis of power and dominance they occupied an important status in the society almost second to brāhmaṇas.

The occupational castes of the period included goldsmiths, carpenters, oilmen, the breeders of silkcocoons, washer-men, barbers, boatmen, timber-merchants, traders of alum, tailors etc. In his Uresa-Varnan Sankardeva has referred to the different occupational castes like oilmen, flowermen (māli), stone breakers, belmetal workers (kahār), watermen (kundār), doctors etc. However, the main occupation of the people of Assam was agriculture. The cultivators and labourers worked mostly in the paddy fields. They were divided in communities on the basis of their occupation and were accorded respective position in the society.

There prevailed system of slavery in the society. The
slaves had to render their services in the household affairs, besides working in the paddy fields. They were bought or sold in the open markets - the price ranging from twenty rupees for an adult male of high caste to three rupees for a low caste girl.\(^5\)

The position of women in the society was comparatively better. Sometimes they were allowed to participate in the administrative affairs of the State. And on the other hand beautiful young girls were kept as concubines (ligiria) in the royal families or attached to the household of nobles or princes. Girls were employed as devadāsis in the temples for performing dance etc.\(^6\) The girls of the villages helped their family in cultivation and engaged themselves as weavers.

Education centred round the Guru-arha known as "tola" or "Chātraśāla" which was generally conducted by brāhmaṇa - scholars. However, even non-brāhmaṇas were admitted as students in the schools. Sāṅkara-deva himself received his education at such a school maintained by the brāhmaṇa guru Mahendra Kandali. As education was mainly based on religion, students had to study Vedas, Astronomy and different branches of Philosophy and Yoga.\(^7\) The knowledge of accountancy (Kāithelī-vidyā) was also imparted in these schools. Sāṅkara-deva's disciple, Mādhab-deva, was educated in this system. Sāṅkara-deva's own son was taught accountancy by Chakrapani Mazumdar.\(^8\) Under discipline of education, wrestling was quite common in Assam.\(^9\) Several other sorts of training
were imparted under the royal patronage. These included military education, navigation, Ayurveda and medicine, veterinary and weaving etc. Different degrees were conferred on the students after the completion of their study. These degrees were Acarya, Kandali, Misra, Upadhyaya, Bharti, Saraswati, Bagis, Kaviratna etc.

We find a vivid description of the contemporary society in Sankardeva's Kaliyuga-Varnana. This society had become unstable because of recurring invasions. The society was invested by narrow mindedness, violence, fear and superstitions. As a result the social life had become stagnant. The society was in need of a strong personality which could eradicate the social evils and bring the people together to live a life of peace and prosperity. It seems that Sankardeva appeared as a God sent messenger to fulfil this need of people.

3. Religious conditions:

Religion in the Indian context is related to those necessary aspects of life that can be termed as duty. It reflects the internal and external natures of man. It finds expression in various forms- customs, manners, rituals, social relations etc. Assam during the medieval period was stratified into different small and big units along the line of distinction between Aryans and non-Aryan tribes. Their customs and manners differed and different religious rites were prevalent. There were distinctions between worships and systems of prayer. The
most prevalent religious cults were Śaiva, Śākta, Vaiṣṇava, Tāntric etc. Both mythological and tāntric practices were in vogue. Meanwhile new islamic religion entered into the social life of the period.

The Śaiva religion was started in Assam during the period of legendary king Jalpeswar. The Kirātas, the pre-historic inhabitants of the region were Śaivite even before Narkāsura settled in Kāmrupa from Mithilā. Viswasimha, the founder of Koch-kingdom, his twelve mahā-nobles were devotees of Śiva. By popular tradition, the birth of Viswasimha is ascribed to the grace of Śiva. Both paurānic and tāntric methods were followed in the worship of Śiva. It is noticeable that in Guru-caritas it is said that Śankaradeva was born as a result of the devout prayer of his father Kusumbara to the Gopeswar Śiva of Singari. The name Śankar is related to this fact. Ramchandragiri, who was the elder brother of Mādhabeva, a disciple of Śankaradeva, was a devotee of Śiva. Another follower of Śankaradeva, Vyāskalai, was a worshipper of Śiva and, strangely enough, he was boycotted from the Śankari-mission for it. Thus it is clear that Śiva worship was prevalent during Śankaradeva's period.

Another old tradition in Assam is that of Śakti worship. According to Kālika Purāṇa and Yogini-tantra this tradition goes back to very ancient times. Probably it was Narkāsura who introduced Śakti-worship in the region. The Kāmākhyā has been
known as the Saktipith since times immemorial. Here the Yoni of Sati has been worshipped. In course of time tantricism was attached to the worship of Śakti. The chanting of Durgā-hymns by Koch king Naranārāyan and his general brother Chilarāi, the reconstruction of Kāmākhyā-temple, the sacrifices of buffalows, goats, ducks, pigeons etc. even of human beings to the goddess were expression of the Śakti-cult.

Even Vaisnava disciples of Śankardeva were ordered by Naranārāyan to chant Durgā-hymns after their bath. There were four forms of Śakti-worship in Assam: (1) Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā, (2) Pārvatī in the form of wife, (3) Virgin form of Tripura-sundari and (4) the destroyer form of Tāmreswāri. The first three goddesses belong to Kāmpith and the last one to Saumārīpith. Here it may be mentioned that Śankardeva's forefathers like Candibara, or Devidāsa were Śaktas. An idol of Durgā was kept by Śankardeva's father Kusumbara at his residence and Śankardeva's preceptor, Mahendra Kandalī advised his disciples to begin their lessons with Durgā-hymns.

Two other forms of Śakti-puja prevalent in Assam were of Manasā and Śitalā. The description of goddesses is found in the Assamese folklore. Different forms of Manasā have been described by Mankar and Durgābar, contemporary poets of Śankardeva.

A book on tantricism entitled Dhātutāmrakshari was kept by the Bhuyāns. This book was inherited by Aniruddhadeva, the
founder of mahāmārī satra. There are references to the conventional aspect of tantric hymns and Powwows till the time of Śankaradeva.

The introduction of Vaiṣṇava cult in Assam took place sometime in the fourth century. It can be inferred from the Umācala inscription of Surendra Varma (280-320 A.D.) on the erection of cave-temple of Bhagavat Balabhadra Swāmī. Different shrines are mentioned in Kālikā Purāṇ which indicates that till its compilation there were nine Vaiṣṇava shrines in Assam. They are: Manikuta, Pāndunāth, Citrahara Parvat, Dikkarvāsini, Bhagawān Parvat, Manikarna, Nandan Parvat, Janārdana giri and Barāh Parvat. The presence of names like Durlabhnārayan, Satyanārayan, Lakshminārayan, Balabhadra, Hari etc. in the different epigraphs show the influence of Vaiṣṇava cult. Some images of Viṣṇu belonging to the seventh, ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries have been recovered in excavation. This influence can further be verified from the writings of Assamese Vaiṣṇava Poets like Harihar Vipra, Kaviratna Saraswati, Madhava Kandali etc. But it should be remembered that Vaiṣṇava cult was confined to temples and shrines and had not yet reached the masses. During Preśankarī period Viṣṇu worship was performed according to Pāncarātra and tantric rites. It has been found that non-Aryans made important contribution to the development of tantricism in Assam. Such Vaiṣṇava shrines are Hayagriva Madhava, Umānanda, Pāndunāth, Vāsudeva Thān etc.
Gods like Surya, Ganesa etc. were also worshipped during the time of Sankardeva. Many Surya images have been discovered in different places of Assam. The Surya pahar of Goalpara and Citracal of Guwahati were probably the main centres of Surya worship. The popularity of Ganesa worship can be inferred from the inscriptions found in ancient cities and religious places of Assam. Besides, many images of Ganesa have also been discovered in Assam.

There were many minor religious sects like Buddha, Nath, Sun-worshippers, Dharma-worshippers, worshippers of necromancy etc. The Buddhist Vrajrayani preachers propagated the practice of Vamacar and waylaid the people from their right path. Sankardeva also happened to meet such preachers at Dhuwahatá Belguri. These preachers were strongly condemned by him in Pashanda-mardan of Kirtan-ghosá.

References to Nath cult are found in Carita puthis, and Kamarup was the main centre of such sects. The Sahajiyá Nath sect followed the Kaul-jñana nirnaya. Dharmapala (1090-1115 A.D.) was influenced by this sect. Shrines of this sect are there at Yogighopa, Pancaratna and Surya-pahar of Goalpara district. Madhava Kandali mentions Nath sect in Ayodya-kanda. The imprint of Yogis of his sect can be found in folklore and folktales. Sankardeva practiced yoga in his early life which is reflected in his Anadipatana.
By the end of fifteenth century Islamic religion made its insurgence into Assam. The western part of Assam was invaded by Hussain Shāh in 1498 A.D. who built the first mosque at Rangāmāṭi near Gauripur. Later on Gayāsuddin Auliā took initiative to erect a mosque at Hājo. The credit for propagation of Islamic religion in Kāmrup goes to Auliā. After Hussain Shah's return to Bengal, his general Daniyal was killed by Bhuyāns and Āhoms. But the Islamic religion had got foothold by then in different parts of Kāmrup leading to the beginning of a new trend of religion. Chāndsāi, one of the disciple of Sankaradeva is also considered as Muslim.

Thus it is apparent that the Pre-sankārī period was one of political and religious upheaval. The disintegration of Kāmrup in the beginning of thirteenth century, decay of Pāl dynasty, occupation of small sectors by Bhuyāns and frequent invasions of Āhoms and Kachāris disturbed the social life and made it insecure. Assam became an "exhausted kingdom without inner vitality and external cohesion." Religion was corrupted by tāntricism and Vāmācārī. In the name of religion various malpractices like the worship of various gods and goddesses, Sabarotsava, Virgin-worship, dance of devadāsis etc. prevailed. Moreover, many temples of Kāmrup including Kāmākhyā were ravaged by Kālāpāhār. A vivid picture of social, moral and religious degradations of the contemporary society is given by Aniruddhadeva in the fifth canto of Bhāgavata.
There was no powerful king to administer proper religious policy and justice nor was there any great personality who could integrate the various religious assumptions and beliefs and who could propagate a new religion of humanity by removing contemporary vices. The entire religious atmosphere had become suffocating. There were, no doubt, many thinkers who rejected the corrupt and defective religious practices on personal level. But they were not able to translate it at the social level and give it a powerful voice. This work was efficiently done by Sankardeva.

B. TULŚĪDĀSA :

1. Political Conditions :

Tulsīdāsa (1532-1623 A.D.) was not born like Sankardeva in royal family nor did he any association with administrative work. However, Tulsīdāsa was not unaffected by the contemporary political environment. He might not have had any contact with the royal court. But it should be kept in mind that the eyes of the rulers were always there on Kāfīrs like him.

Tulsī's life was spent during the Mugal period. His life span stretched to the times of three Mughal emperors like Humāyun, Ākbar and Jāhāngīr including the intervening period of Sher Shāh Surī. Politically the period before Ākbar was one of turmoil. But with his foresightedness Ākbar not only brought in stability in place of political instability, but also converted the military rule into the Islamic rule. Ākbar, however,
was engaged in the first ten to fifteen years of his rule in subjugating small kingdoms and merging them in his dynasty. Ākbar’s liberalism was quite helpful to him in converting the early Islamic political invasion into a diplomatic aggression. The Islamic domination appeared in the form of Dīn-e-Ilāhi. Tax on pilgrimage and the Jājīā were abolished although Hindu ladies still continued to be part of the royal palace.

The contemporary Islamic rule adopted religion as a means to stabilize the Islamic rule to achieve its political goal. This is one of the reasons why many Hindu temples were destroyed and with the same materials mosques and maqbarās were erected on a large scale. Guided by their vested interest many Hindu kings gave their daughters to the emperor of Delhi. Majority of the population was Hindu and mostly agricultural. It made them easy prey for exploitation. As a result the economic condition of the people deteriorated. In other words, for the sake of political stabilisation the society was allowed to drift towards weakness in several ways. The contemporary religious and economic conditions can reasonably be ascribed to the Islamic political rule.

2. Social Conditions:

In the formation of Indian society various castes and tribes have played important roles. For the discussion of Tulsīdāsa’s society we have to consider mainly the society of Northern India. The society was result of a long process
stretching far back to thousands of years and including not only Aryans but also Kirātas (Yaksha, Gandharva, Kimpuruṣa etc.), Niṣādas and many other races of Vindhyā region like Savara, Pulinda etc. Besides, the people of many races who came at different times from other lands were assimilated within this society. They were Persians, Yavanas, Pahlavas, Śakas, Kuśānas etc. The traditional society of Tulsīdās’s time was no doubt known as Hindu, but they followed different customs. There was an increase in the mixed races. Differences among the traditional Śūdras widened due to lack of integration of the traditional non-vedic people and the process of assimilation of the foreign races made the Hindu society weak. The āśram and Varna systems were disappearing. They were practically confined to small sects and sub-sects in the form of rigid observance of untouchability. In a way it was moving towards social division and disintegration. Above all it was facing the threat of growing power of Islam. Many high caste Hindus always adopted Islam for their self interest or out of fear.

From the religious point of view the society was divided into two groups- Hindu and Muslim. But on the basis of social status and economic prosperity there were three classes - the King, nobles and the royal employees; common men; and saints. The four fold caste system continued in one form or other. But the economic factor became more important for social status. The status of king and his officials, both Hindus and Muslims,
was considered highly dignified. The main sources of income of the nobles and officials were land and feaudatory states or the high salary from holding royal office. The soldiers also received sufficient income from the royal treasury.

The second class consisted of peasants, traders, brāhmanas, painters, workers etc. The employees of low income can also be included in this category. The condition of this category of people was economically pitiably. They were exploited by nobles etc. both economically and physically. Poor parents had to send their children on employment for bread and sometimes even sell them as slaves. The traders had to pass their days like labourers, some were employed in the workshops established by Ākbar for preparing costly goods. This of course was insufficient to absorb large number of people. These economically weak people had nothing to fall back upon during epidemic and famine. Tulsī himself witnessed the famines of 1555-56, 1573-74 and 1595-98 followed by epidemics. While people were living a measurable life, the king and feaudatory chiefs were indifferent to their conditions and were engaged in their life of amusement. Tulsīdāsa was highly moved by the tragic condition of the people, he was almost shocked by it -

dārīda - dasānana davāi dunī, dīnabandhu
durīta - dahana dekhi tulsī hahā karī.

The third category was of the saints who were indifferent to worldly life and turned themselves spirituality. They were
They were least concerned with their societies. Even those people who were economically distressed or were disappointed joined the company of these saints for mental peace. Most of the sādhus were fake and not real seekers. This led to corruption in religious life which was criticised by Tulsīdāsa in many ways.

The condition of women was very pitiable. They were usually treated as objects of lust of kings and royal officials. Prostitutes and women dancers were flocking around assemblies of pleasure-seekers. Child marriage and purdāhm system prevailed; the Sātī-system was encouraged and polygamy was practised. Aestheticism was given weight to animal lust. Women were, therefore, realising that their lives were meaningless.

Hindus and Muslims clearly differed in their conventions, manners and customs. As most of the officials were Muslims, the Muslim community was well protected. They were given feudatory states and high-paid offices. But the Hindus did not enjoy this advantage. The Muslims were well united as a community. But besides the economic deprivation, the orthodox caste mentality and the system of untouchability contributed to the weakening of the Hindu community.

Education was primarily religion-based. The guru-grha, math-mandir etc. were the centres of education. These centres were supported by the contributions of disciples or grants of feudal authority. During Tulsī's days lessons on Arabic and
Persian were also imparted under sponsorship of Mugal kings. Hindus were becoming the students of Persian language after it was announced as the language for royal accounts by Todarmal. Persian also became the court language during Mugal administration. As a result the number of Maulavī and Hāfiz in place of traditional gurus was increasing and the Madarsas were growing in place of traditional centres of learning. Education was becoming bread-based in place of religion-based. Parents were encouraging their children to take up the new education. Tulsi has commented adversely on this pattern of education.

Thus it becomes clear that the society of Tulsi's days was incoherent and polluted. There was no justice and the indigenous people had no basic rights. Hindus were mostly exploited by the rulers and nobody had any sympathy for them. It should, however, be admitted that the Mugal administration ventured to make the society politically and socially stable and regenerate it for peace and happiness. Still these efforts were not sufficient to bring about ideal conditions for social happiness and prosperity. Most of the Muslims and some Hindus influenced by them lived a life of indiscipline and licentiousness, deception and drunkenness which contributed to the pollution of social life. These social evils are well reflected in Tulsi's literature.

3. Religious Conditions:

From the religious point of view Tulsi's society consisted
mainly of Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu society was divided into two classes; they were grouped along the brāhminic and non-brāhminic lines. The latter did not believe in Varnāśrama- vyāvasthā as a means of salvation. They rather believed in akāla sannyāsa. They considered themselves beyond Varnāśrama. It appears that tradition of the Sannyāsīs of this group had its origin in ancient times. The opposition to the Sannyāśrama of the first group and the advent of unbelievers of Yajñānic rituals had started even before the birth of Buddhism. The anyāśramī people followed Śvetāsvatara-upanisāda. Sankarācārya referred to them as the most reverend inhabitants of āśram and as Paramhamsa Sannyāsi on the basis of Smṛiti. The Buddhist who opposed Vedas, diverted the ativarnāśramīs in a new channel, which continued to flow till the advent of Kumāril Bhatta and Śankarācārya. Till the ninth and tenth century the believer of the six-fold philosophi collectively opposed the non-believers. Kumāril Bhatta reestablished the vedic concept of Karma for the fulfilment of the human goals (Puruṣārtha). Following the lines of Nāgarjuna, Sankarācārya interpreted the vedic ideology through logic and organised the Śaiva Sannyāsīs. These attempts contributed to the rejuvenation of religion in Hindu society. However, certain sects still survived which latter organised by Gorakhṇāth into Nāth-panth under the ancient Māheswar- ideology in which āśram-vyāvasthā is not accepted. It is, therefore, known as 'ativarnāśram' or Pancamaśram. The followers of this discipline
had disintegrated by Tulsī's time in forms of Saiva and Sākta.

Under the influence of Nath-yogis and Vairavānī siddhas, illiterate and frustrated people were misguided on a large scale, leading to artificial and corrupt behaviour. The society was passing through a critical phase because of the adoption of Islam by the anti-brähminic Buddhists in a large number, and the sexual promiscuity of the Jainis. The mention of Saravaga, sewarā, aghorī, bhutpujak, bheriādhasān, smaśānevi sādhak etc. by Tulsī can be understood in this context.

Of the post-Sankarcārya leaders, Rāmānanda's ideology was quite popular in Northern India. Besides, the nirguna form of worship developed along with the saguna one. Religion was disintegrating. Saiva and Vaiṣṇava sects developed into hundreds of forms like the anti-vedic sects of Kabir, Nānak, Dādu etc. The Sanatana Vedic religion had lost its hold. The Sākta sect got divided into the dakshina mārga and vāmamārga, and candī, bāsulī, bisahari etc. were worshipped. Islam had two branches, sarā and besarā; the Sufi sect coming from the latter. It influenced the medieval bhakti movement. It is in this unhealthy atmosphere of religion that Tulsidāsa laid stress on the Saguna worship of Rāma. Sectarianism in religion had been on the increase. The benevolent form of religion and its power to unify the society had disappeared. Tulsidāsa felt as if religion had ceased to exist. The disappearance of social decency, rejection of social organisation, ignorant talks, unfounded claims of devotion and goodness were
being concealed under the guise of criticising the sacred books. The soul of Tulsīdāsa was deeply hurt by these things. It is quite possible that under these circumstances Tulsīdāsa was inspired to establish those religious disciplines which could bring about social welfare.

C. Conclusion:

From the above discussion it is evident that there was a similarity in the political, social and religious conditions of Śankardeva and Tulsīdāsa, although they were born in different regions of India. In the latter parts of their lives both Śankardeva and Tulsīdāsa got the opportunity to fulfil their missions due to the political stability in the reign of Naranārāyan and that of Ākbar and Jāhāngīr respectively. However, it may be noted that the Hindus were exploited and discriminated against during the Mugal period.

The Bhāgavata-based bhakti was flourishing. Śankardeva accepted the Śrīdharī interpretation of this discipline possibly because he found it more suitable under the prevailing social and religious conditions of Kāmrup. In Northern India, Braja had become the centre of Bhāgavata-based bhakti. Moreover, Rāmabhakti as propagated by Rāmānanda was also gaining popularity in nirguna and saūgana forms. It is quite reasonable that Tulsidāsa accepted Rāma as his Lord as means of freedom from political, social and religious insecurity. Thus, besides the goal of salvation, Śankardeva and Tulsīdāsa were also concerned with the
problems of social salvation for which they evolved new devotional patterns.

2/3. Inspirational Factors

In the preceding pages the political, social and religious background of Sankardeva and Tulsidas was discussed. But a poet is shaped by his own life and personality as well as literary and cultural traditions and other ideologies. It is, therefore, necessary that a study of the factors that inspired the thoughts of Sankardeva and Tulsidas be made for understanding them in proper perspective. With this end in view, a study of their life and personality, literary traditions and cultural heritage is presented in the following pages.

A. SANKARDEVA:

1. Life and Personality:

Many scholars have studied the life and personality of Sankardeva in detail. The discussion and conclusions have been based on external and internal evidence and legends. Here, only those aspects of Sankardeva's life will be discussed which help us in understanding the basic current of his thoughts.

Sankardeva (1449 - 1568 A.D.) was born in the family of Siromani Bhuyan of middle Kamarup. His parents died when he was very young. So he was brought up by his grandmother, Khersuti. As a child he was naughty and difficult to control. He joined the tola of Mahendra Kandali at the age of twelve and completed his study of different sastras in eight years. It is discovered
from the available accounts that he practiced manayoga as well as sarirayoga. After completing his studies he re-married and entered into the domestic world and took up the responsibility of Siromani Bhuyan. After sometime a daughter, Manu, was born to him. Shortly after his wife died, It was easy for him to forget the deaths of his parents as it was efficiently compensated for by the warm love and affection of his grandmother. But the bereavement in the death of his wife at the young period of his life rendered a great shock to him. It possibly led to the realisation of transitoriness and meaninglessness of the world. He, however, did not renounce the world and still remained attached to it for the sake of his young child, Manu. It was after her marriage that he launched on journey of a seeker. He travelled to different religious places of the country for twelve years after which he came back to his village. On the insistence of relatives mainly his grand-mother, Sankardeva re-married and became father of four children. Here, he started the propagation of Bhagavata-based bhakti which remained his life-long mission. In this form of devotion Namakirtana was given more emphasis. Visnu-Krisna was considered as the only deity. The goal of devotion became the submission to Sri Krsna. That is why the doctrine of devotion was not always uninterrupted. Many impediments came in the way of Sankardeva's propagation of his doctrine because of the contemporary political instability and the prevalent
forms of Saiva, Sakta and tantric worships. Sankardeva had to leave his home state along with his followers and wandered about sometime in the Ahom kingdom and sometime in Koch kingdom. He had to face mental as well as economic, family and religious difficulties. He took a second pilgrimage with a group of his followers. But this time it was limited to Puri.

Finally, opposition to his doctrine of bhakti came to an end. The form of devotion preached by Sankardeva was accorded royal recognition by Koch king Naranārāyan. However, by then he had reached the fag end of his life. He left this world after entrusting his responsibilities to his able disciple, Mādhavdeva.

This life-sketch of Sankardeva shows that his personality developed in the midst of upheavals, both external and internal. The child Sankar was an orphan and was deprived of parential love. This perhaps made him more eager for love and affection. In the absence of proper guidance he might have developed the qualities of selfdecision, courage and dauntlessness. His marriage and his status as Siromaṇi Bhuyān indicate his affectionate nature and the quality of leadership. The loss of wife at an early age and the sight of motherless daughter, Manu, must have reminded him of his early childhood days leading to the realisation of impermanence of the world. His pilgrimage to various religious places of India brought him in contact with the saints and preachers of different parts of the country. He also got acquainted with the contemporary new Vaiṣṇava movement.
He also learnt about the political, social and cultural events of the country. Thus Sankardeva had a first hand feel of the unity of India in diversity. It dawned to him as a sort of reflection of the infinite and omnipotent form of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. It ultimately took the form of consciousness of Kṛṣṇa, the God. He accepted the submission to the infinite Lord Kṛṣṇa. It became a source of support to him and also led to stability of his spirit and attachment to the Lord.

For the propagation of his bhakti, Sankardeva used various literary forms like Kirtan, Ankiā-nāts, Baroits etc. For the performance of Kīrtanas he founded Kirtan-ghar. Sankardeva propagated the concept of one form of worship, one God and India as one nation implied in which is an ideal of unity. Thus the whole of North-East India was once again linked with the Indian culture and Sankardeva's bhakti-movement became a part of Pan-Indian neo-Vaiṣṇava movement. The opening of Kirtan-ghares and Sattra-institutions became a means of revival of mass conciousness and vitalised the democratic spirit. Thus due to untiring efforts of Sankardeva the entire Brahmaputra Valley was swept by new waves of cultural and religious conciousness and even today the Jñānamīrā bhakti introduced by Sankardeva, still continues to inspire the whole North-Eastern region.

2. Literary Traditions

Sankardeva inherited the prevailing trends in Assamese language and literature. Besides, he also gained the knowledge
of different genres of Sanskrit literature. He presented slokas from twenty-two Sanskrit works in his Bhakti ratnakara. It gives an idea of his deep learning of the Purānas. He drew widely from the Śrīdharaś interpretation of the Bhāgavata. He might have come into contact with the literary trends of other Indian languages during his pilgrimage. It may not be possible to mention them all here. We will refer only to the literary trend in Assamese literature before the advent of Śankardeva. Important writers before Śankardeva are mentioned below:

Hem Saraswati: Prahlād carita and Hargourī Samvād.
Kaviratna Sar- aswati: Jayadrath bahī.
Rudra Kandali: Sātyaki Praveś
Haribar Vipra: Bāhrubāhanar Yuddha and Lava-Kuśa Yuddha;
Śrīmadha Pārva (Māhābhārat)
Mādhāb Kandali: Rāmāyana.

Besides these, some folk-literature and Nāth-literature were available. Here it is noticeable that the Vaiṣṇava literature was dominant. Among the predecessors of Śankardeva, Mādhāb Kandali is noteworthy, by whom Śankardeva's literary style was influenced. The Pre-Śankari Vaiṣṇavite literature propagated Pāñcarātra bhakti, but Śankardeva's Vaiṣṇava doctrine drifted away from it. However, Śankardeva was indebted to his predecessors for rendering traditional mythological narratives in Assamese.
He also benefitted from the literatures on Śiva and Śakti. He either rejected them or used them as a means of developing unified vision. He received from the existing Assamese literature various poetical and metrical forms and improved upon them. However, in the development of his dramatic form the traditional Assamese folkdrama played an important role.

3. Cultural Heritage

Like literary tradition, cultural heritage has its significance. Śankardeva got considerable inspiration from his cultural background.

Different races and tribes like Aryans, Astro-Asiāns, Tibbeto Burmise etc. inhabit the land of Assam. Their customs, social behaviour, religious rites etc. are different. With the assimilation of different tribes and intercourse between the races a new Indian culture developed in which Śankardeva played an important role. This process has been reviewed by Dr. S.K. Chatterji as one of progressive Indianisation or Hinduisation of Mangoloid people, which brought them within the fold of Sanskrit culture. It is directly or indirectly reflected in the works of Śankardeva. The word bāmānaya, used by Śankardeva was a result of that culture. If Śankardeva had depended on Bhāgavata, he would have used the term upadharma, not bāmānaya. Similarly, the word Kātyāyani used for Subhadra in his Oresā Varnan reflects the contemporary Vāmmārgi Śākta worship in Assam.
A different form of elements derived from the cultural heritage is also available in the literary works of Śāṅkaradeva. Elements from ojā-pālī of Assam, Kuttīyātām of Kerela, Rās of Braja and Sangītāka developed in royal-courts are present in his ankiā-nātas. The form and structure of Śāṅkaradeva's bārgīta are influenced by devotional local songs and those of Braja. Śāṅkaradeva did not adopt idolatory and insisted on hymns in the praise of the Lord's name. It may be attributed to some extent to the destruction of idols in northern India during the Mugal period and of different Hindu temples by Kālāpāhār in Assam. The use of words of Persian and Arabic origin in his writings shows the influence of Islamic culture. In his poems, Śāṅkaradeva tried to demolish religious differences through advaita, caste through omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience of the Lord and the oneness of the physical elements. He also tried to establish the superiority of moral qualities and character over statecraft. Its origin can be traced to his response to the cultural life of the time. It can be said that Śāṅkaradeva's thinking received sufficient impetus by the due harmony of the contemporary cultural traditions. In the concept of harmony he converted diversity into oneness. He neither adopted the ancient tradition in a blind way nor did he reject the local culture as such. He, in fact, ushered in a new ideological revolution by bringing them together which gave a new lease of life to Assam.
8. TULSIDĀSA

1. Life and Personality:

In comparison to Sankardeva the facts relating to the life of Tulsidāsa are of doubtful veracity. However, attempts have been made by scholars to draw his life-sketch on scientific lines based on internal and external evidence as well as numerous legends. Here, it may suffice to mention that the recurring and emotional description of the Citrakuta in his literature points out to his birth place somewhere around it. He probably came from some mendicant brāhmin family. He refers to himself as 'Sukul' which may mean a sub-caste of brāhmin or noble family. He also refers to celebration of his birth. But due to some reason he was deprived of parental affection. His childhood name was probably Rāmbolā. He passed his early days in hardship. He had to satisfy his hunger by begging. In this process he chanced upon guru-Narahari (God in human form). The Rāma-kathā that Tulsi had learnt about in childhood was repeated to him in a new form by his guru at Sukarkhet. Tulsi might not have systematically studied the various scriptures, but his guru's sermons must have left deep impression on the fertile and inquisitive mind of Tulsidāsa. Probably he was named Tulsi at that time and the word 'Dāsa' was added later when he became famous as a devotee. Young Tulsi had married and established his household and was lost in the love of his wife. It is difficult to prove that he remained unmarried. The reason for the renunciation of domestic life cannot be ascertained, although
it is certain that he gave up domestic life. He had already selected the worship of *Saguna* Rāma under the guidance of his guru from amongst the various forms of worships and religious ideas. He travelled to different religious places. He began the composition of *Rāmcaritamānasā* during his stay at Ayodhyā. He composed many other works also. After being renowned as Rāmabhakta he received social respect and came to be known as Gussāin and Mahāmuni. The last days of his life were spent at Kāshi. The different religious places that influenced him include citrakut, Prayāq, Ayodhyā and Kāshi. During his stay at Kāshi he gave a new form to Rāma-līlā with the assistance of Medhā bhagata for propagating Rāma-kathā and Rāma-bhakti. He spread the worship of Hanumāna for the moral and material prosperity of the country. It is said that he got many idols of Hanumāna installed in Kāshi and encouraged the art of wrestling there. Amongst his acquaintances were many great personages of the period. In this context the names of Abdul Rahim Khānkhānā, Todarmal Khatri etc. are mentionable. The last days of Tulsi were of comparative suffering. Till the end of his life he continued his struggle for his goal, the service of humanity and social organisation while keeping his single-minded devotion to Rāma intact.

From the above life-sketch of Tulsīdāsa it is evident that like Śāṅkardeva his life was one of struggle. In many ways Tulsi's life was of greater suffering than of Śāṅkardeva.
Rejected by the parents in childhood and neglected by the 
society, Tulsī might also have faced disappointment for his 
wife. It is reasonable that Tulsīdāsa turned to Rāma as a 
source of protection and security. It gave him the confidence 
to rejuvenate the society through virtuous thoughts and actions 
and to spread the idea of Rāma-bhakti as the solve way to the 
Supreme. He was able to propagate the doctrine of Rāma-bhakti 
in Kāshī, which was the stronghold of the orthodox Šaivas, with 
the help of his dauntless faith and human service rendered by 
him at times of epidemics. Besides physical sufferings, the 
obstacles presented by different sections of society added to 
his mental agony. Through the declaration of nisicara 
hīna karaun mahl (Mānas, 3/9) by Rāma, Tulsīdāsa indirectly 
challenged the contemporary Mugal administration. He also 
assured the society by generating faith in the possibility of 
eradicating dārīda-dasānana and moharupī Rāvana. This could be 
possible because Tulsī's personality had developed out of the 
conflict between the external and the internal, the physical 
and the spiritual. It was from this conflict that he derived his 
conviction and sense of determination which became a source of 
that inner strength which enables a man to chalk out the proper 
path of his life.

2. Literary Tradition:

Like Śankardeva Tulsīdāsa too had an established literary 
tradition behind him. The Prākrit and Apabhāṣā tradition exerted 
great influence on Tulsīdāsa. Some scholars have preferred to
look at the form of Rāmcaritmānas as a part of the development of the tradition of apabhraṃsa carit kāvya. There are sufficient proofs that Sankardeva studied the Sanskrit scriptures in a systematic way. But it cannot be proper to say that Tulsīdāsa’s study also followed similar pattern because we do not have sufficient evidence in this respect. However, he had been able to assimilate a vast body of knowledge with his sharp intelligence, power of observation and deep experiences. Sankardeva had a comparatively less established tradition in Assamese behind him. For Tulsīdāsa there was a long and well established tradition of Hindi literature. The religious writing of Siddhas, Nāths and Jains; the bardic literature; various non-vaiṣṇavite devotional works; the writings of the sufis; Kabīr’s nirguṇa Rāma-bhakti with its distinguished tradition; the Pustimārgī Poetry of astachāpa etc. were already there. Thus it is seen that there existed a large body of bhakti-poetry before Tulsī.

Moreover, there were many works related to Rāma-Vṛitta and Rāma-bhakti in different traditions:

**Literatures in Vaiṣṇava tradition:**

- **Chanda Bardāī**: Rāmcarita (Dasāvatār carita of Prithvirāj Rāso - Second canto)
- **Ramānanda**: Rāmrakshāstrotra and some Hindi short poems.
- **Viṣṇudās**: Rāmāyaṇa, 1443 A.D.
It is quite possible that Tulsidśa was not acquainted with Rāma literatures of non-Vaiśnava tradition. But he was certainly well-versed in the literature of Vaiśnava tradition relating to Rāma. A comparative study of ViśnudŚa's Rāmāyana and Tulsidśa's Mānas confirms this view. There are references to Vāmamārqi Śāktas, nirguṇa and Sufi poets etc. in the works of Tulsidśa. His idea of oneness of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa might have...
enabled him to draw upon the literature of his predecessors like Sūrdās etc. Some scholars find a reflection of some verses of Sūrdās's. Even his Kṛṣṇaśīvātāvalī shows the oneness of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. It also expresses a sympathetic attitude towards Kṛṣṇa-bhakti. Different poetic forms, style and metres of Tulsī were already in use. The equal command in his Awadhi and Brajī indicates his attitude towards contemporary poetic language. That he had a broad literary perspective and knew about different linguistic traditions is evinced in his Arabic and Persian vocabulary.

At first glance it may appear surprising that Tulsidāsa wanted to propagate Rāmalīlā in a new form, and did not use the dramatic medium for their purpose. But the prohibition on dramatic performance during the Islamic rule explains it for a proper evaluation of thoughts, language, style and versification of Tulsidāsa. The preceding literary tradition must be kept in the perspective. This enables us to realise the extent of the contemporary literary intercourse and union. The novelty and uniqueness of his religious, spiritual, literary and social approaches resulted from his assimilation of healthy literary tradition.

3. Cultural Heritage:

The North-Indian society of Tulsidāsa was passing through a phase of conflict between two opposite ideologies and cultures. Islam had gained political power of India but not cultural. Many
Indian ācaryas like Rāmānuja, Mādhva, Ballava etc. were trying to compensate political loss into cultural regeneration and victory. Many saint poets were helping in the renaissance of the people. The contribution of Tulsī in this respect was of the highest importance. For the growth and revival of the ancient Indian culture Tulsī asserted:

   a. Karaba Sādhumata lokamata nripanaya nigama nicori.
      "Mānas, 2/258"

   b. loka veda mata manjula kūlā.
      "Mānas, 1/38/6"

Through the conjugation of Sādhumata and Lokamata he tried to establish the Śrutisammat Path and dislocate the non-vedic ways. He derived this attitude mainly from the scriptures and also from the contemporary situation. The idea of oneness of Śiva and Viṣṇu and according equal significance to nirguna and saguna worship are its examples. In fact, the literature of Tulsī is a new horizon of Indian culture, specially Rāmcarit-mānas is in the countenance of Indian culture. It has been said that Tulsī's Rāmcaritmānas by itself is capable of carrying on the burden of Indian culture in future.92

Besides the god and goddesses of scriptures, Tulsī also praised the different gods and goddesses of folk-culture and various holy rivers and religious places. It shows him as the leader of mass consciousness, for he gave sufficient importance to various gods and goddesses although he himself was a devotee...
of Dāsarathī Rāma. A balanced view of his thoughts can be had in the context of the contemporary North Indian culture.

C. Conclusion

After a perusal of the lives, literary traditions and cultural heritages it can be concluded that Śankaradeva and Tulsīdāsa were on the one hand influenced by the conditions around them and on the other their lives were moulded by the literary and cultural traditions as also by the happenings in their personal lives. In this respect there is great similarity between the two. Both were deprived of paternal affection. Both of them adapted spiritual attitude towards woman as māyā. The quality of determination, self confidence and courage grew in them from their lives of struggle. Both of them discovered a simple form of devotion in the midst of various sects. They were gifted with the power of observation, sharp intelligence and thoughtfulness.

We find them as saint-poets in their writings which represent the best of the preceding literary traditions. The presence of variety and depth, the conjugation of *loka-mata* and *sādu-mata*, the rejection of inessential from the various forms of worship etc. and the retention of the essential and establishment of 'One God and one worship' were results of their search for unity in diversity and their attempt to propagate it. Śankaradeva and Tulsīdāsa derived the content and form of their poetry as well as their thoughts from the struggles in their
personal lives, from literary traditions and cultures. They expressed it in their writings in their own unique ways.

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