CHAPTER III

MYSTICISM IN ASSAMESE POETRY BEFORE THE ROMANTIC AGE

Mysticism in Assamese poetry began to germinate in
the Charyapadas composed by a number of devotees among whom
Minnanath and Matsyendranath belonged to ancient Kamrupa.
The time of composition of the Charyapadas or Dohas falls
between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. It has been estab-
lished that these songs were composed by the Buddhist Siddha-
charyas of 'Mahayana', 'Vajrayana' and 'Sahayana' sects. The
'Charyyas' are the lyrical hymns intermingled with spiritual
craving meant to be sung in tunes by the devotees. In ancient
Kamrupa, mainly the 'Vajrayana' and 'Sahajayana' schools of
Buddhism flourished.

A good number of eminent Assamese scholars like
Dr. Banikanta Kakati, Dr. Surya Kumar Bhuyan, Dr. Maheswar
Heog, Dr. Satyendranath Sarma and others have delved to
unearth the storehouse of ancient Assamese literature. Dr.
Bhuyan, while speaking of the 'dark age' of Assamese litera-
ture observes,

Books of this kind (Shastri's 'Buddha Gan-O-Doha')
may still be discovered throwing light on the very dark period
of Assamese literature where there was needed scholarship and talent.¹

Along with the practice of Mother worship or 'Shakti' cult, there was also a simultaneous growth of Buddhism in ancient Kamrupa. It is also said that Luia Pas and Saraha Pas, two others of the eighty-four Siddhas belonged to ancient Kamrupa.

As the earliest specimen of Assamese poetry, the Charya Verses bear the truly mystic elements centered around their spiritual themes. This is very much in tune with the 'esoteric' doctrines of 'Sahayana' and the 'erotic' doctrines of the Sahajiya Vaishnavite Siddhas, who had attained 'Siddhi' or enlightenment. In this connection Dr. Maheswar Neog observes, "In form the 'Caryas' may be termed lyrics and stand comparison with the songs of Mankara, Durgavara, Sankaradeva, and other poets of the following ages."²

Dr. Maheswar Neog, further observes that Kamrupa or ancient Assam has been variously connected with subsequent

developments of Buddhism of 'Vajrayana' and 'Sahajayana' which are associated with some siddhapurushas.\(^3\)\(^{2}\) In spite of all the controversies regarding the composition of the Charyapadas, one may agree with Dr. Neog that "at best some of the 'Caryas' and 'Carya' writers in some way or other had something to do with Kamrupa."\(^4\)

But these Charyapadas are based mainly on the 'Sahajayana' school. In their philosophical standpoint, these songs are in tune with the monistic doctrine of the Upanishads, for the realization of the 'Supreme Reality'. At the final stage of the realization of the 'self', the extended objects of smell, touch etc. become inactive and the knowledge of the whole work becomes just like the objects of a waking dream:

Sandha parasha rasa jaison toison\(^1\) (Song No. 13)

Luis Pas says in song No. 29 that "existence does not come, neither is there non-existence." "Bhava na hoi abhava na jai."

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The predominant note of the songs of the 'Sahajiya' is a protest against the formalities of life and religion of the Vajrayanis or the general school of the Tantric Buddhism. Saraha Pas, for example, speaks of the natural path as the easiest way to realize God:

"Uju re uju chadi ma lehu re banka" (Song No. 32)

This implies that the path to the realization of Truth is easy ('Uju'). He asks the yogins not to take the curved path (Ma lehu re banka). The words like 'Uju' meaning easy, 'dapana' (mirror) are still in use in the modern Assamese language with the same meaning. Further, in the same song, the singer tells the yogins that 'bohi' (bodhi) lies near them. He forbids them to go to Lanka for this purpose. He also insists on the fact that one should not take up a mirror (dapana) to see the bracelets of the hands (hathers Kankana).

At times, the 'Charya' songs make references to the female power called 'Candali', 'Savari', 'Yogini', 'Sahaja Sundari' etc. The Yoginitantra is supposed to have been composed in ancient Kamrupa. Dr. B. Kakati furnishes some details about 'Tripura Sundari', the virgin goddess.
According to the yogini-tantra, a 'shakta' devotee contemplates on the image of a girl of sixteen and concentrates his mind on every organ of her body so as to think himself as one with her. The female figure represents the "Primordial Energy Embodied as Mahadevi (The Great Goddess)." The virgin (Kumari) then reveals herself as 'Tripura' 'Gauri', 'Rama', 'Bharati', 'Kali', 'Chandika', 'Durga', 'Bhagavati' etc.

The 'Natha' cult, too, had made significant contributions during the Dark Age Of Assamese literature. Dr. S.B. Dasgupta observes,

The Nath cult is essentially a yogic cult, but among the innumerable yogic sects of India the cult is characterized as the 'Nath cult' due to the fact that its stalwarts generally bear the title of 'Nath'.

The word 'Nath' has been generally associated with a philosophical concept for the state of Supreme Existence. There seems to be a blend of esoteric Buddhism and Saivite mysticism with the Natha Yogins. The prominent exponents of this kind of literature in ancient Assam are Minanath, Gorakhanath, Matsyendranath and others. In the Sanskrit commentary

5. B. Kakati: Mother Goddess Kamakhya, 1948, Ch. IV, p. 192.

by H.P. Sastri on the Charya song No. 21, there appear a few lines ascribed to Minanath. The language bears a striking similarity with the language of the Pre-Vaisnava language.

Kahanti guru paramarthara Bata

The Tibetan Lama Taranath's Siddha Charitavali rendered into English by Bhupendra Nath Datta, speaks of two 'Kaivarta' siddhas of Assam, who are none but Minanath and his son Matsyendranath who were fishermen by caste.

In brief, the Charya songs or the Dohas are devotional mystic songs composed for spiritual purposes. Dr. Satyendranath Sarma observes that each 'Charya Song' is like a riddle. The literal meaning of these songs is simple. But the depth of their spiritual import lies hidden in the layers within them.

Another prominent school of poetry emerged mostly in the Northern Indian literary scene which is known as the 'Niranjana' school. It was known in Bengal as the 'Dharma Cult'. The epithet 'Niranjana' means the 'Stainless one'.

8. B.N. Datt: Mystic Tales of Lama Taranath, 1944, p. 56.
The word 'Dharma' literally means which is "to be held fast". The *Sunya Purana* regards the Supreme Lord as 'Niranjana', because His body has been washed clean. This epithet for the Ultimate Reality was used in the popular vernacular literature of mediaeval India. This is akin to the Hindi 'Niranjana' school of poetry represented by Nanak, Dadu, Kabir, Raidas, Surdas and others. The word 'Niranjana' signifies that God is like 'Sunyata' or Vacuity. The *Sunya Purana* of Ramai Pandit is associated with God 'Dharma'.

In this context it would be pertinent to mention that the mystic element is very much present in a number of folk songs and the traditional Assamese 'Peha Vicharar Geet', i.e., the songs for the welfare and glorification of human physique.

'Debhicharar Geet' sung by a class of wandering minstrels known as "Varagis" are an esoteric sect. They do not believe in the common customs and manners of life. They want to interpret this life with their own spiritual insight and conscience. The meaning of these songs are often hidden in the inexplicable mystery.
In this context the advent of the 'Zikir' songs which are almost similar in thought and theme to 'Dehribharar Geet' is also noteworthy. Azan Pir a Muslim devotee composed the 'Zikir' which means 'spiritual chant' during the reign of King Gadadhar Singha (1681-96). The dominant theme of these songs is the futility of life. The worldly affairs hardly have any attraction for them. A sense of mystery prevails throughout these songs.

About these songs Hem Barua observes as follows:

The principal motif of these songs is spiritual absorption that speaks in general terms of the futility of man's life and the presence of a higher impulse that guides man's destiny.10

Man, in this earthly life, is captivated by various illusions. In one's lonely journey of life, one's sincere faith in the Almighty and devotion to Him alone can pave the way to the spiritual world. In a song, there is the echo of the message of *Srimadbhagavadgita*:

\[ \text{Anitya Sharir Jalar akar} \]
\[ \text{Jano najama mane.} \]11

11. Babul Das: Dehabisbarar Geet, Song No. 1, 1985, p. 6
This means that the human body is as good as a water vessel, yet the human mind is unaware of it. In another traditional song of this kind, there is a message that gods dwell within man’s body:

‘Chunā Sharirata āchhe jata devagana’

Right after the Charyapadas some elements of mysticism are traced in the compositions of the Pre-Vaishnava poets. Among these poets, Hema Saraswati, in the very early part of the fourteenth century, composed Prahlad charit, a small narrative devotional poem that glorifies Lord Vishnu who was much sought after by Prahlada, the son of the demon King Hiranyakasipu. Prahlada’s devotion was such that his mystic feeling made him forgetful of this mundane life and took him to the union with the Supreme one. On this ground, this work is the first 'Assamese book on Vaisnavism'.

In this connection, perhaps, a reference to the Srikrishna Kirtana of Vadu Chandida’s may be made, because the book, as observed, bears some traces of the Assamese language.

12. Ibid., Song No. 26, p. 23
language. Dr. Kakati's observation about the book is as follows:

If it be allowed to represent the pre-Bengali and pre-Assamese dialect groups by the unknown quantity $x$, then it may be said that Krishna Kirtana preserves the specimens of latter day $x$ dialects which in later times developed into distinctive Bengali and Assamese language.\textsuperscript{14}

The Krishna Kirtana is, however, a mixture of dialects which did not then start on the course of a fully independent language. Dr. S.N. Sarma in his \textit{Asamiya Sahityar Samikshatmak Itibritta} includes Shri Krishna Kirtana and Ramai Pandit's \textit{Sunya Purana} as belonging to both Assamese and Bengali languages.\textsuperscript{15} The former work deals with Radha's pining of love for Lord Krishna. Radha's desire for union with Krishna symbolizes the soul's aspiration for complete union or merger with the Absolute. The later work deals with the Dharma worship of the Niranjana School, which has been prevalent in Assam, now in decadence, as a part of worship of goddess 'Manasa' and god 'Dharma' or 'Yama', especially in the undivided Goalpara district. Though the historians of Bengali literature like Asit Kumar Bandopadhyya

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} B. Kakati: \textit{Assamese: Its Formation and Development}, 1972, p. 12.
\item \textsuperscript{15} S.N. Sarma: \textit{Asamiya Sahityar Samikshatmak Itibritta}, 1984, p. 85.
\end{itemize}
and Sukumar Sen have claimed that they are Bengali in
diction and language, yet there are very reasonable grounds
to believe that these books belong to a time when Assamese
and Bengali languages were just in the making. Of the four
controversial 'Chandidasas' in Bengali literature, according
to A.K. Bandopadhyay, Vadu Chandidas' Shri Krishna Kirtana
discovered and published by Basant Ranjan Roy in 1916 (1323
Bengali era), is the first specimen of medieval Bengali
literature. But it should be borne in mind that like the
'Charya' songs, the Shri Krishna Kirtana, too, presents a
language which transcends the barriers imposed by an inde­
dependent Bengali literature. Dr. Upendra Nath Goswami has pointed
out some close resemblances between the languages of this
work with the modern Assamese usage.

The pre-Vaisnava and Vaisnava periods of Assamese
poetry saw numerous translation or adaptation works of
artistic excellence like the great Indian epics, the
Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Puranas as well.

16. A.K. Bandopadhyay: Bangla Sahityer Sampurna Itihas,
1963, p. 26

17. U.M. Goswami: Bhasha Aru Sahitya, 1972, pp. 11-12
Some elements of devotional mysticism are to be found in the Assamese versions of the Ramayana by Madhava Kandali and in the Mahabharata by Rama Saraswati who tried to enrich and envisage the idea of devotion and its utility for the realization of God in their works. Rama Saraswati, a devout follower of Sankaradeva, made his valuable translation of his epic in the royal court of the King Naranarayana (1540–1585 A.D.) for the propagation of "eka sarana nama dharma". There are 'Parvas' (cantos) and 'Upaparvas' (sub-cantos) dealing with the glorification of Lord Krishna's childhood days. In his "Bhism Parva", Rama Saraswati deals with the Bhagavadgita in fiftyseven verses. The elements of devotional mysticism are quite clear here. Another poet, Govinda Mishra's version known as Krishna Gita, too, is a popular work bearing the traces of mystic elements of the devotional kind. Even the Assamese versions of the Pauranic literature reveal the traces of devotional mystic element. As Dr. S.N. Sarma observes, "From the earliest times, Assam has never been culturally isolated from the rest of India." 18

The mystic elements of the "Bhakti School" are much vibrant in Sankaradeva's Bhagavatapurana, an adaptation of Sanskrit Shrimadbhaqavata. He tried not to translate the entire Bhagavatar. In book-II, Sankaradeva describes the process of creation of the Universe. In book VI, the poet narrates the episodes of Ajamila Brahman, a hardened sinner, who ultimately seeks for the salvation of his soul in 'Harinama'. However, the most important and popular part of the 'Bhagavata' is the tenth book. For this very reason the whole of Sankaradeva's work is popularly known as a Dasama. The entire book deals with the minute details of the life and deeds of Lord Krishna, the Divine Being in human form. In the Adi Dasama the poet deals with the glory and charms of the Supreme Deity.

The most luminous mystic fervour underlies the poetry and songs of Sankaradeva as well as Madhavadeva. In his various works he saw the Supreme Reality in the human forms of Lord Rama and Krishna. This very trend was followed especially by his chief disciple Madhavadeva. Sankaradeva's celebrated Kirtan-Ghoasha deserves a special mention. The work is a collection of twenty-six poems with two thousand, two hundred
and sixty-one couplets in different metrical forms. The spiritual aspiration went very deep into the minds of the contemporary writers. The spirit of revolt as it was evident with the "Bhakti Cult", against the caste-ridden society and polytheism, the monotheism of one Ultimate Reality, whether in the form of Rama or Krishna, reflects the essence of two aspects of the same truth (Harinama). His work Bhakti Pradipa deals with the importance of 'Shravana' (hearing) and 'Kirtana' (Hymns) for 'Bhakti' (devotion) to the Lord. Besides, his Bhakti Ratnakara in Sanskrit deals thoroughly with the mystic aspects of life.

As for the theme, the first section of the Kirtan-Ghoshas deals with the twenty-four incarnations of God. The fourth section deals with 'Dhyana Varna' (Description of Meditation). Also, he depicts the picture of Vaikuntha, the celestial abode. The 'Rasakrīsā' of the twelfth section describes the beauty of natural objects in the autumnal night. The earnest desire of the 'Gopis' for Union with the Lord has been beautifully portrayed. While speaking of the 'Rasa Līlā', Laksminath Bezbarua observes that there is a "great difference between kama (Lust) and prema (Love)".
In Besbarua's words, "Kama's nature is to roam from one thing to another for the satisfaction of its own cravings, premas is undeviating and true to one."19 Similarly, Dr. Bisranchi Kumar stated that Kirtana besides being a book of grand verse of religious and noble thoughts, depicts a full picture of mystical and spiritual aspects.20

The religious ideal of the "eka sarana nama dharma", i.e., 'devotion to one Supreme Deity' and the 'love of one Absolute Lord', represents the devotional mystic fervour of 'dasya Bhakti', that is, attitude of servitude to the Omnipotent God, common to the mediaval 'Bhakti' poets of India.

The luminous mystic fervour of great artistic excellence is reflected through the Namaghoesa, a collection of the one thousand 'gnosal' bearing solemn spirit that leads to the emancipation of human soul from the bondage of mundane life. Madhavadeva's Namaghoesa opens with the couplet:

Muktita nispraha yito Sehi bhakatak name
Rasanayi magoho bhakati

19. Lakshminath Besbarua : The Religion of Love and Devotion, ed. Dr. M. N. Nag, 1958, p. 27

Sanasam-mastakamani nija bhakstare bashya
Bhujin hana Deva Yadupati.

It is the kernel of the entire Namaghosa and it contains the key to the whole work.

The first two lines of the couplet mark the poet's attitude to devotion, with an imploration that the poet has a reverence for the devotee who is bereft of the least attachment to life, even the desire for salvation. Madhavadeva, too, identifies Rama and Krishna as the same Supreme Reality. The mystic height of the poet's devotional feelings reach with

Piu, Piu, Piu, amaya madhurya Hari Nama Rama Rama
Duraita tejiya thaliya ana yata manakama, Rama, Rama. 21

The poem vibrates with mystic fervour with a variation of tone, such as, of self-reproach, self-questioning, prayers, advice to other devotees etc. The metrical forms of 'Ghahari', 'Dulari', 'Lechari' etc, have been used.

The Bargaits, i.e., the sublime songs in praise of the Divine Being, are much exuberant with the mystic flavour of God-intoxication. Dr. B. Kakati calls these songs 'Noble

Numbers" in line with the poem of Herrick, the English poet.\(^{22}\) However, they were composed by Sankaradeva, Madhava-
deva and others for illumination of the human soul. In the human soul's journey through life, a man receives the spiri-
tual guidance of God. Dr. Kakati refers to a number of two hundred and forty 'Bargits', which were burnt to ashes in the house of one Kamala Bayan in a village near Barpeta town. Late Harinarayan Datta Barua has compiled a number of thirty-
four 'Bargits' of Sankaradeva.\(^{23}\) All these songs of the Vaisnava saint-poet, with eleven different 'rāgas' like 'Gauri', 'Suhai', 'Basanta', 'Shri', 'Kedar', 'Maur Dhanashri', 'Tuxa Basanta', 'Kalyana' etc. reveal the poet's mystic feelings.

Madhavadeva is said to have composed one hundred and ninety-one 'Bargits', of which one hundred and eighty are so far extant in written form in another compilation made by the Late Dutta Baruah.

The exact dates of composition of the 'Bargits' cannot be ascertained. Those composed by Sankaradeva are prayer-
like. Most of Madhavadeva's 'Bargits' reflects the childhood


feats and glories of Lord Krishna. The *Bargita* of both the saint-poets reverberate with melody of spiritual and mystic songs of Surdas, Tulsidas and Mirabai, the Hindi saint-poets.

The language of the *Bargita*, unlike the language of the *Kirtana* and *Namghosha* is somewhat artificial. The language employed is 'Brajabuli' which is a dialect mixed with Maithili and Assamese. 'Brajabuli' was used as a medium for songs by some medieval poets of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. As against the everyday words, the use of such an artificial language, no doubt, elevated the grandeur and magnificence of musical melody of the songs. Dr. S.K. Sen observes,

Assamese Brajabuli seems to have developed independently through direct connexion with Mithila, but in Orissa we can legitimately expect Bengali influence in the matter. 24

Dr. U.N. Goswami rightly points out that Sankaradeva's religion spread a new message among the masses. 25 It is true that Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism created a new hope and solace in the peoples' heart. Herein lies Sankaradeva's genius and great achievement in winning peoples' heart with the help

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of a set of mystic songs known as 'Bargits' which are compared to "Noble numbers", as described by Dr. Kakati. Thus, for the messages of love and devotion, Sankaradeva composed the Holy Songs for the purpose of invoking the Supreme One. The devotion songs were sung in accompaniment with a number of musical instruments.

The theme of the Bargits of both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are replete with mystic elements. In the 'Bargits' of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva, the entire theme revolves round Krishna's charm and beauty. There is hardly any element of 'Sringara' or amorous feeling, except the devotional love, i.e., the 'Bhaktirasa'. Dr. Maheswar Neog observes:

This would look strange when we compare these poems with the vast mass of Vaisnava lyrics with the sentiment predominating, composed by the Maithili poet Vidyapati, Ramananda Raya of Orissa, Yasoraja Khan, Govindadasa, Jnanadasa and other Bengali poets.26

It may be stated in a nutshell that in 'Bargits' poetry, music and religion all combined to flow into the 'multitudinous sea' of the all-beautiful Supreme Being. The mystic mind of the poets of 'Bargits' aspires for salvation and run after

peace. They feel that the world is an illusion and in this desert of life, the only ray of hope is divine bliss, enkindled through prayer and absorption in the thought of God; the human soul weeps in agony, deep and penetrating. The human soul being weary of mundane bondage and fetters, seeks the bliss of divine light.

The Barga' No. 14 of Sankaradeva, i.e., "Raga Suhayi" expresses the poet's feelings of spiritual distress under the delusion of the worldly life. The poet has a firm faith in the soul's emancipation through 'dasya' i.e., servitude to the Lord: Hridaya Kamaie Hari baidhata

Ginto carana na tari' (L : 5-6).

These lines imply that 'Hari' sits on his lotus-heart and the poet feels a remorse for not submitting and surrendering himself to the feet of God. The power of magnetic attraction of the Divine Being pulls him towards the Absolute in the soul's lonely journey to the Alone. The absolute and unconditional surrender of self to God is the message of the Barga. This sentiment is enshrined in the following words of Sankaradeva:
Pawe pari hari karabe katari,
Prana rakhabi mora

"Prostrate at, Thy feet, O God, I beseech thee, save my soul."

It is needless to state the message of the Gita is the fountain-source of the Barqits.

Similar mystic experiences of the 'dasya' type strike the characteristic note of some of Madhavadeva's Barqits. Madhavadeva excelled in his lyrics describing Lord Krishna's childhood pranks, frolics and miracles. But all these are vibrant with mystic tona. In all the Barqits, Lord Krishna is identified as the 'Parama Brahma' or the Supreme One. Lord Krishna is none but the incarnation of the Supreme One in the human form of a cowherd boy who performs various miraculous feats.

It is stated that the majority of his Barqits reflects child-psychology.27

The mother Yasoda, 'Gopa balakas' (cowherd boys), and the 'gopinis' i.e., the women, as well, feel the pang of separation for Krishna's absence from Vrindavana. Dr. B. Kakati observes in this connection that like the Sun-rays

27. Ibid, p. 9
diffused over all the different vessels casting forth varying hues with soft and pleasant streaks of light, the Absolute Lord, too, makes His manifestation through the innocent creatures with His simple sweetness and attracts the minds of all.28

The sense of wonder at the Supreme Being's turning a cowherd boy runs through all these songs. Each of the lyrics is intoned with some 'raga', e.g., 'ahira', 'asowari', 'baradi', 'dhanshri', 'gauri', 'tuda', 'tuda vasanta', 'vasanta', and others. Tirthanath Sarma likens these 'Bargits' to the 'Bhajanias', "fitted to one or other raga."29 These devotional songs are, in fact, big or great songs of a novel theme.

The mystic poet Madhavadeva feels the personal touch of the boy Krishna as a manifestation of the Divine power in his transcendental state of mystic experience. This is very much revealed in the first two lines of the 'Raga Ashowari',

Re mana sebahu harikahu carana
Nikate dekhahu nija marana.30

In the verse "Rajani Vidura disha dhavali varana" (Raga-Shyan), Madhavadeva feels that the darkness of ignorance has been dispelled by the grace of God. Towards the end of his songs, the poet seems to have attained a state of "Samadhi" (Complete dissolution into the Absolute). For example, in the 'Bargit' No. 183, 'Raga Belwar', the poet makes a complete surrender to the will of God "Kahaya Madhava dina meri mana maja/Reha Hari pada aravinde" (Pada : L. 7-8).

The great devout Madhavadeva's heart, thus, bears the imprints of the lotus-feet of the Lord. The mystic poet Madhavadeva, in his ecstasy of joy, feels an ineffable experience of union with the Lord.

Some of the successors like Ramcharan Thakur, Gopal Deva, Daljayari Thakura, Yadumani Deva, Lakshmi Kanta Ata, too, composed several 'Bargits'. But such compositions gradually underwent a phase of decadence and failed to reach the mystic height achieved by their preceptors.

In brief, the post-Vaisnava poetry, beginning from the last decade of the sixteenth century became more or less merely imitative and saw a gradual decay of the devotional mystic
fervour and spiritual yearning of the 'Bhakti Movement' in Assamese poetry. The seventeenth century mainly saw the growth of Charita Puthis and prose literature while the eighteenth century predominantly saw the growth of eroticism and historical literature in the royal court of the Ahom kings like Rudra Simha and Siva Simha.

Later, it was only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, especially with the publication of the Jonaki, that mysticism in Assamese poetry received a new impetus under western influences.

Since mysticism in Assamese poetry bears some elements of the Sufi school of mystics, the attempt follows in the next chapter to make a brief review of the Sufi school of mystics.