CHAPTER VI

SANKARDEVA AND HIS ASSOCIATES WITH DISTANCE

MODE OF EDUCATION
CHAPTER VI

(a) Principles of Distance Education.

(b) Instances of Distance Education in the past.

(c) Sankardeva and His Associates As Distance Teachers.

(d) Institutions and Media of Distance Mode of their Time.

*** *** ***
CHAPTER - VI

SANKARDEVA AND HIS ASSOCIATES
WITH DISTANCE MODE OF EDUCATION

Distance mode of learning is one of the best modes of continuing education, one of the most modern thoughts on the line gaining a global support and increasing participation. With the establishment of Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) at New Delhi in 1985 under the Parliamentary Act of Open Universities, the theory of continuing education has been nationally accepted and recognised. A lot of schemes have been undertaken and many more are in the laboratory of experiment to teach adult and busy household learners for satisfying their desire of expanding their knowledge of the day by sending print materials for self study, giving feedback to assignments.
and time to time face to face counselling at the local study centres followed by term end examinations.

Existence of this kind of education in this or that form was also in the past even before Sankardeva and his contemporary associates. Of course it was not formalised as it is done now. Since from a long past people used to learn sometimes with the help of others and often times by themselves. This self learning system was unavoidable in some circumstances and effective in most of the cases for the pull of imitation of learning for the indomitable thirst for knowledge and perhaps for the strong call of compulsion for a kind of education. Akalabya had to be educated by himself as a distance learner at least. Till to this time many of the Akalabyas have to be deprived of wanted education either for their fate or for their fault. So distance mode of education is the only way to feed them with what they want. Unlike the present system, education in the past was informal, out of school and mostly non-formal. There was no examina-

Cont'd.. 196/-
tion and no syllabus even. There were methods but no fixed duration of time. That was a time when Sankardeva and his contemporary associates had to teach people in a manner that was designed by themselves. They had to accept the minds of the people around them and accordingly had to use their language, their interests and their abilities in their teaching and works. They had to write and speak, so that the common people could learn and read and understand and so they did and sang to amuse all the educated and uneducated and their art was also connected with the interest of the mass. A democratic leader Sankardeva with his other supporting and associating social reformers was a complete University in himself, all faculties of learning being in himself - art, literature, social science and culture. All these unique qualities made him and the others the fittest distance tutors for all sections of learners. From a distance they were always with their disciples. Each of them always says to his distant learners 'why am I to be in a picture while I am with you though at a distance? Why had you to meet me while I am
looking at you being unseen? Only you hear me, listen to me, it is I who am to meet you at your need.\(^1\) And really very often they meet the people of Assam from Heaven when they think it to be their time - at any crisis, political, cultural, religious or social. They come with what they keep for the people in the form of education.

They were the real educators with methods of education of their own, of course unlike present day education their education was not directed by any reports of commissions and dominated by any examination and syllabus. In their mode of education they were themselves the teachers, the commissions, the syllabus makers and the authority of examinations. Education for the welfare of the nation was also accepted at that time and it thought of economic independence and certain habitations of civic life. Their education also included training of citizenship, man's duties to the state, training of a social whole man, with his family and his neighbours, his work, his pleasures, his recreation, his health, his philosophy of life and his ethical values.

---

1 Avatar (Vol.1) Oct.1992 - Ed. Cont'd.. 198/- by S. Chaliha, Tarun Nagar, Gauhati, pp.4
Looked in the proper way we can see everything in the Vaisnavite leaders of Sankardeva's time. As distance religious educators they thought on the line of present day Open University system and their ways of preaching reflected the true aims of distance education of our age. Although, they do not give the mechanical details of school system with prescribed text books of limited subjects, yet they give us an education, an "art of living" which is the true essence of learning. The philosophies and teachings of Sankardeva and his contemporary associates chiefly Madhabdeva, Damodardeva and Harideva provide an inspiration for organis­ing a "Complete education" which would go a long way in making the lives of the people worth living. Through religion they introduced all education including distance education, of course in different forms peculiar to their time and need. They had the system of timely reward and punishment, term and proceedings and preparations, regular
hours of coaching and counselling, debates and discussions, prayer and amusements, literary activities and criticisms, counselling and guidance, extra curricular activities like sports and competitions and a rigid and declared form of distance education administration strictly related to and dominated by religion.

The languages and literatures of Srimanta Sankardeva and his associates also contributed a lot in making their works for proper distance learning materials. The Brajabuli language in Sankardeva's poetry, ankiya nats and bargits based on Krishna activities in Brajadhama i.e. Brindabana was not only interesting in nature and devotional in kind but also readable, acceptable and understandable to all learners even at a distance. Their dramas, translations, stories (upakhyans), bargits, bhatimas, totayas, chatihas and other devotional lyrics and works can still now serve the purpose of print media to distance learners of their fold.

Cont'd.. 200/-
without having any prior reading or basic knowledge of the matter. They are complete in themselves like any courses of distance education. The books have been clearly divided into readable units called chapters or adhyayas, each being independent of the other and most of all are the details on bhakti education and with moral teaching to all ages and all communities. From this point all their writings can fulfil the conditions of distance learning print media which are or can be used by the young and old and by any ordinary learners as well as scholars. Sankardeva's "Rukmini Haran" is praised to be his best writing, sweet and lucid as the fountain of nectar (amrit). The "Gunamala" is a small book to be read and recited within short hours of two dandas (less than an hour) which is like an elephant put into a small jar, the big Bhagawata being summed up to the small "Gunamala". Such kinds of works are quite comparable with the "Let us sum up" chapters of distance learning content or the
Bhagawata course of study. Besides, the whole course of Bhagawata has been simplified and summarised in his unique work 'Kirtana' which is made readable and understandable by even an ordinary reader without any prior reading to it. It is a beehive or kalpataru to all with beautiful stories for children, songs for singers and deep philosophy for scholars. To read and understand Kirtana no teacher is necessary as a guide and as such it is a whole course of Bhagawata Purana complete in itself to the satisfaction of varied tasters. In each Hindu home of Assam a copy of Kirtana as a symbol of the sacred guide is kept. In that sense it is no inferior to a complete distance education course for study. He also wrote six ankiya nats and to gain the minds of the people learning at a distance he discovered a better device and it was the bhaona. Above all it is true that dramatization has been the most popular means for any religious revolution and at the same time the best media of teaching without a teacher. Besides as a counsellor in the

Cont'd.. 202/-
local study centre of distance education under present Open University system there is the sutradhara to explain every thing before the audience. In one sense this kind of dramatization of ankiya nats for the purpose of devotional course of study can be called the present day visual media of open learning system. At the same time the bargits of Sankardeva and Madhabdeva and the fourteen lyrics of Harideva can also substitute for the audio aids in the other sense. Behind each Git or Bargit there is one Harideva or Sankardeva or Madhabdeva as the distance educator to teach those who are far away from them. They accepted the device of these kinds of songs as the media of spreading their ideals of education to distance and through a distance mode. In distance mode of Open University education there is a system of writing of the feed backs of the assignments by the evaluators some motivating remarks praising the writings of the distance students. The great Guru Sankardeva introduced this system
of motivating remarks more than 500 years ago by praising his disciple Madhabdeva calling him Barar-po at an incident when Madhabdeva could weave the Brindabuli bastra a little longer than Sankardeva declaring his disciple more efficient than himself. On the other hand Madhabdeva was the "all in one" from the course Director to text Designer and from Counsellor to Co-ordinator in the Sankari designed Open University. His 'University' was more open than the present day Open Universities in the sense that his fold of education was unfolded to all without the least restriction of caste and community, literacy and ability and 'race and face'. Like an open air it spread beyond Nagaland and Manipur to one side and present Cooch Behar to the other. In many other parts he imparted his educational philosophies through media of distance mode like arrangement of people's personal contact with the local Mahantas as counsellors.

The influence of the satras established by the four great Gurus Sankardeva, Madhabdeva,
Damodardeva and Harideva as the study centres like those of modern distance education programme cannot be left unmentioned. They had provisions for both face to face and distance modes of teaching the Vaisnavite ways of life through these institutions. Here the satradhikars, the heads of the institutions functioned as the co-ordinators as well as the counsellors, the bhakats, the qualified devotees were like the course completers after the term-end examinations and the sisyas, the disciples were the enrolled learners of the institutions, the Open Universities. They were the central Head Offices of the Vaisnavite movement and the local Vaisnavite Open Universities which had walls but no roofs, being strictly limited to informal mode of religious education with the highest ideals of life. And with this limited scope of life education the satras managed teaching within the walls and to a distance equally and at the same spirit. In one sense the satras centralised the fold of religion and culture from

Cont’d.. 205/-
distance and in the other sense they decentralised educational ideals to a distance. Through the Satra events, people learnt a lot at a distance and from a distance without physically attending the central institutions. Satra education was so open that it prescribed no age, sex, community even literacy. It prescribed no examination and no course of study. If there was any examination, it never declared any pass or complete and if there was any course it never did end anywhere. It was rather continuing education in the fullest sense and spirit. Of course there were unprinted written reading materials accompanied by verbal explanations and individual guidance.

The Vaisnavite leader Sankardeva and his associates always preached what they thought and did what they taught. They thought to the deepest and taught to remote distance. Their teachings crossed the bars of all distances the distance of place, the bars of hills and plains, the difference of castes and communities and the significances of profession. We all can remember Gobinda Garo,
Balai Mikir, Ram Kachari, Narottam Naga, Narayan Miri, Sri Ram Kaibarta, Damodar Bhuitya and Chand-sai Muslim with all regards due to an honoured Vaisnavite of the line of dignity. At a time when Assam was in water tight divisions of political parts like North Bengal, Bhutan, Naga and communal classes like Brahmins and Sudras it was not easy to teach through any distance mode. But Sankardeva and his associates discovered their effective devices like written scripts to read, theatrical performances (bhaonas) to enjoy, Satriya dances, bargits and other lyrics as audio and Video aids and Sarana as direct face to face teaching. Through all these techniques of their modes of teaching they being at a distance entered in every home and for at least five hundred years they have been there in every home of the Assamese people. These distance teachers felt that for distance preaching a first hand knowledge of face to face practical and on the spot knowledge is effectively helpful and so all the four great Gurus went out for travelling sometimes on compulsion and sometimes as a part of education. They

Cont'd.. 207/-
collected information of the first hand knowledge of Vaisnavite theology, mode of worship and management of institutions. They moved from place to place for preaching their religious ideals and had to establish satras and namghars in most of their stations. In this sense again they introduced the mobile University system for the people living in far remote places, an idea of the most modern line the Western World has only recently thought of. Throughout their long lives they could realise that the poor and the untouchable will never be able to come to a so called formal learning centre for removing their thirst for knowledge. So they made such devices as would make them learn and know from their homes, in her kitchen, in his field, with his wife and around her children. They made every home a University for those who wanted to learn and follow - "ekanta bhakata yohi". They prescribed learning at home and through work and advised to be at home with work in the family practising learning religion for self and the others around. Their teaching

Cont'd... 208/-
demanded no extra time and trouble, no strict rules and regulations and no social bindings and formalities. They always taught and spoke and wrote for the common people with common and easy examples as self-study materials. All their valuable works still act as the distance study materials without teachers and as such the mode of education applied by Sankardeva and his associates can be called a distance mode in a way of course different from that of today.