CHAPTER III

SANKARDEVA'S ROLE IN REFORMATION
WITH REFERENCE TO THAT OF HIS ASSOCIATES
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SANKARDEVA's ROLE IN REFORMATION
WITH REFERENCE TO THAT OF HIS ASSOCIATES

Srimanta Sankardeva was born at a time when Assam needed reformations in almost all fields of civilization including educational, social, political, cultural, religious and moral aspects of the people. At that time Assam was found on all sides by people mostly of Mongolian origin. The Tebeto-Bhutan tribes, the Singphos, the Misimis, the Adis, the Miris, the Daflas, the Akas and the Bhutias had their hearth and home on the North of Assam. The entire Assam was shared between two great simultaneous powers, the Kochas and the Ahoms. The old kingdom of Kamatapur was completely destroyed by the invasion of Alauddin Hussain Shah in about 1498 and the chief of the Koch tribe Biswasinha established a new kingdom from the ashes of the old in about 1515 A.D. with Cooch Behar as its capital.

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The Chutiyas and the Kacharis were the other dominant races with powers in their places. The Garos of the Garo Hills and the Mikirs of the Mikir Hills had lived in comparative isolation from the surrounding people of their own stock. The Ahoms on the other hand conquered the North eastern part of Assam in the first half of the 13th century and began to rule the Kingdom with vigour. Several other sub-tribes, most of them Buddhists, migrated into Assam after the Ahoms. A leading and powerful caste of that time as is indicated in the Katha-Guru-Carita was the Kayastha, many of whom were really scholars and leaders and reformers as well.

The political history of Kamrupa of the time immediately preceding the age of Sankardeva still remains away from clarity. Since long past the kingdom of Kamrupa had been a place of disintegration. The whole of Assam from Dikkarvasini in the east to the river Karatowa in the West was disintegrated into several kingdoms, some of which survived for years and others for decades only. In politics different
powers like the Chutiyas, the Kacharis, the Bhutias, the Ahoms and the Kachas were always struggling for supremacy. Besides social and political disintegration there appeared disintegration in religion also.

A mixture of Aryan and non-Aryan practices gave rise to some curious forms of worship where human sacrifices were also not exempted. A more irreligious than a religious form of religion came to be in practice. There were Buddhists and Buddhism began to be debased, there were Tantrics and Tantrism began to be corrupted. People were being misled by religions and religious preachers. This state of tension continued till the 15th Century. There was chaos everywhere in society, in politics and in religion too. It was the time for God to come in a form into this world to protect the honest by destroying the wrong doers.

'Paritranāya sadhūnām binasayačā dus-kritān'. And for this purpose Sankardeva was born

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1 Bhagabat Gita - Ch.IV, Jnana Jog, No. 8th sloka (Any Edition)
in 1449 as a Neo-Vaisnavite leader and a great reformer. He was the great grandson of the famous scholar Siromani Candibar. He was born in a family which was politically responsible, socially prestigious and intellectually talented. Sankardeva took the responsibility of the Siromani Bhuyan and could seek the kingdom of God among men. But the political atmosphere was so turbulent as could not allow him to live in peace with his friends and relatives anywhere until he had to migrate to Kamrupa, where he had a time of comparative tranquility. Biographers have not much more to speak on his political life and his contribution in the field of politics is of little mention.

But there was the greatest need of a social reformer and an educator of the masses at his time. Numerous tribes like kirata-Kachari-Khasi-Garo-Miri-Yavana-Kanka-Gowale-Ahom-Rajuka-Taraka-Kamara-Dimasa-Chutiya etc. were scattering in the scattered areas of Assam.
Assam was a centre of Siva and Sakti worship from the earliest past. All the Brahmins, even the forefathers of Sankardeva were said to be Sakti worshippers. Debased forms of Buddhism, stray traces of customs like Gapidhara, Barseva and Ratikhowa and many other numerous and varied creeds and faiths infected the societies of the remote corners of Assam. Evil forces became powerful over truth. It was the turn of God to incarnate Himself or send his representation to restore the supremacy of piety with a view to protecting the virtuous and destroying the evil doers. In the annals of humanity we come across instances how societies have been saved many disasters through the active intervention of God who gave unto mankind. His messages of love and right action with a view to obstructing the forces of sin and delusion.

The 15th century Indian Hindus were in a great social disorder. Tantrism in its naked form accompanied by animal sacrifices and other vices got the upperhand. Superstitions prevailed under reli-
gion, casteism was dominant, a bulk of the population was treated as untouchable. The all prevailing God was locked inside the temples. Devotion to God was substituted by debasing ceremonials and superstition. People started forgetting the reality of religion. Being deprived of social justice the down trodden people were awaiting the coming of a Messiah and the Messiah came into the person of Srimanta Sankardeva to rescue the down trodden and to establish truth and to reform the society.

Any Guru at any time commands a mass appeal and Sri Sankardeva was no exception. At his time unlettered villagers were the vast majority and they hardly knew what the scriptures said and the knowledgeable priests often tended to cheat or confuse for their own benefit. Besides Vishnu there were Siva and Devi who were also worshipped in a variety of forms and ramification. Sri Sankardeva had to educate these people that Srikrishna, as depicted in the Bhagavata Purana, was the greatest among all Gods, and that all other Gods including
Brahma and Maheswara, were subservient to Him.
He took the job whole heartedly and tried to prove it by writing books in local languages, using classical Vaishnava themes, holding religious congregations and prayers, applying the performing arts and many other things to propagate his tenets. Like all other great religious prophets of the world as Jesus Christ, Hazarat Mahammad, Gautam Buddha, Srimanta Sankardeva was also primarily a social reformer. Quite like all these great prophets and preachers he was also born into a society full of religious social evils that were about to axe at the superstructure of the society. And when chaos became the order of the day and all irreligious practices like debased Buddhism, Saktism and Tantrism predominated in the name of religion this superman in the sign of Sankardeva raised his strong head with the message of a new faith and social justice even at the risk of life. The ugly concept of casteism which is rather the most tragic outcome of the Vedic heritage created the so called upper classes who kept all wisdom and devotion reserved for them closing its door to the so called lower classes. But this great social re-

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former had very tactfully established the social recognition of man irrespective of caste, creed and status through his neo-vaishnavite faith. Perhaps for the first time in the social history of India the lower class people got recognition and for the first time man began to realise in practice that even dogs and foxes are also created by the same God who is also the creator of man. The social evil of the untouchability against which Mahatma Gandhi had to wage a crusade in the 20th century, India was struck at the root by Sankardeva in the 15th century Assam. Still today India should carry the message of Sankardeva to be spread among the misguided sections of the society where people like Harijans are inevitable but at the same time untouchable.

Sri Sankardeva established a new democratic social order in the society with the namghar at the base and the satra at the top. The namghar is still now the base of the Assamese society in many respects. He made it the common meeting place of the villagers not only for 'Kirtana' and preachings.

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but also for maintaining for social justice, art and culture.

As a successful social reformer Sankardeva kept his neo-vaishnavite faith away from politics of the time. His principle was that he would never be a guru of a king, though, of course he received patronage from Maharaja Narnarayan of Coochbehari of his time. For this, however, he did not have any immediate political gain, but the greatest gain of his democratic religion was that it remained pure and unshaken in the teeth of political storms that swept over Assam. His satra was all for him the centre of learning, the place of residence, the capital of religion, the politics of reformation, the democratic parliament and even the life and living of his. Here he preached the equality in the spiritual domain. He not only admitted but also preached that every body is equal in the eye of God and, therefore everybody has equal right to worship. He believed and taught that God does not want blood of man and animals and sacrifices of any kind

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are not at all the means of worshipping Him. That was a time when religion or the path of spiritual realisation was the monopoly right of a socially privileged few and the lower stratum many or the most were always deprived of it. But the satra institutions, which served as a religious organ of the Vaisnavite movement, supplied a common and simple form of religion based on ethical devotional codes and conducts. As the most important social contribution the satra institutions uplifted the backward classes and minimised the class distinction. Another notable social contribution of the satra institution is its services to the tribes during its long history of more than four centuries. It is really interesting to note that the path of Indian secularism as shown by Mahatma Gandhi appeared to have been established long ago by the Vaisnavite sayings of Assam. The Assamese are proud enough to feel that Sankardeva was born in Assam to lay the foundation of the Assamese language, literature, dance, drama, music, art and culture as mediums of his faith. He brought a

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religio-cultural renaissance to the people and history of Assam.

Through religion Sankardeva taught people a lot, rather all for life and living. As a leader of the Bhakti movement he had left a deep impression on Assamese culture and literature and on Assamese religion and way of life. He preached a religion of supreme surrender to one and therefore, his creed is known as 'eka sarana nama dharma'. In this form of eka sarana nama dharma there is only one God - Vasudeva Krishna and there is none else other than the one. His religion knows no caste, creed and colour and there is a universal spirit in his faith. Everybody has the equal right to chant the Harinama. His faith is also known to people by another name 'the Mahapurusia dharma', perhaps because the ideals have been expanded by the Mahapurusa, the most popular honour to Sankardeva or most possibly because this dharma is about the Mahapurusa, the other name of Lord Vishnu. His religion concerns with one supreme alone and with none else. He could only support the one form of devotion, one God, one holi-

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book, and one hymn.

Kirtan, Dasam, Namghosa and Ratnawali are the four Vaisnab Vedas where only Lord Krishna has been the central point of importance. He preached people about the 'eka sarana nama dharma' - the religion of taking refuge with the one God only. It is quite remarkable how Sankardeva's eka sarana faith concentrated on the dasya aspect of devotion to God which conceived of man's relationship to God as that of a faithful slave to his master. Bhakti was the principal ideal of Sankara's philosophy and to him God creates man to perform Bhakti and it is only Bhakti which can save life in this fearful earthly forest, where ferocious animals like tigers and lions in the forms of kama-krodha-lova-moha are waiting alert on the way of mukti. This mukti or everlasting union with the almighty was the only reason of God's creation. The religious reformer was no different from the holy Koran in this idea of mukti.

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Apart from all this the noble sage was a psychologist. He could study and understand the minds of the mass people and could device how to feed them. For this he laid stress on the major four elements in teaching people the ways of bhakti which were sravana (listening), kirtana (chorus singing), smarana (realising) and archana (individual prayer). The glory of the name of Hari in the form of Kirtana in the kali age as the only way to mukti is established by Sankardeva. Thus in the field of reformation, both social as well as religious, is the essence of Sankar's system of 'ekasarana-nama dharma, found explained in his wealth of scriptures including his Bhagavata Purana, incorporated in his Kirtana, a great contribution to the Vaisnava philosophy of India. Complete surrender of taking refuge at the feet of Hari, chanting His glories day and night, with purity of heart and detachment even for mukti leads the individual soul to absorption in parama Brahma. This is the easiest and highest, most straight and perhaps the only kind of religious practice to attain the goal of life. But it is better to mention here that in the field
of religion, Sankardeva did never preach a new
doctrine alien to the basic spiritual thinking of
the country. He only preached that one could rea-
liise truth and perceive God without having to
undertake vigorous practices and without arranging
any gorgeous and expensive worships, if one could
devote one's mind only in chanting the name of Hari,
who creates us all.

Like many other reformers he had also to
suffer a lot, sometimes escaping, sometimes arguing
and sometimes hiding but at all time waiting for a
chance for expression. He inaugurated a students'
society peculiar to his philosophy, a society of
devotees called Bhakatas and established a form of
teaching called 'Namkirtana' for all classes of
people irrespective of class or creed. His Kirtana
of twenty six chapters in verse in purely Assamese
language and culture illustrating teachings through
stories can be said to be the flying flag-in his
reformation revolution. Besides, songs, music, drama
and dance were his most popular agencies through

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which he expressed his slogans. As a man of mass psychology he used them to prepare the minds of the common illiterate people for his Bhakti movement.

It will not be irrelevant to mention here that he had certainly direct contributions to education in the modern sense also. The present curricula of education is not far away from his curricula of teaching which compulsorily included sense of equality among men in particular and among all living beings in general, development and training of good behaviour and manner, fellow feeling, brotherliness, co-operation, leadership and obedience, teaching-learning process and respect to elders and leaders. He was very particular in the primary process of education which he also assumed to be the capability to know how to read and write. He also encouraged the power of rote memory and used the art in the Ankiya Nat performance through the actors. He was himself a good artist and painter and also he suggested his followers to draw and paint as the best and easiest way of preaching and teaching others. Of course the centre of all his art and paint was the Lord Krishna and His different activities and for this alone he did and spoke, he wrote and taught.
Though most of his teachings were informal and out of school he also arranged for formal and institutional education. Often times he spoke and taught at any time and at any place, besides he did fix certain places like satras and certain hours of the day particularly the morning and evening hours for preaching. On the other hand he had certain systems for starting his teachings, he continued for a long time though he could not declare any end of the course, he administered evaluation work from day to day activities of the pupil - devotees and also he imparted severe types of punishments to those who made faults and tried to hide them. Byash-kalai, a devotee of his was one of the unfortunate wrong doers who performed the worship of Goddess Sitala praying for the cure of his youngest son Hridayananda who being attacked by small pox was in death-bed. It was against the will of Sankardeva and for this great fault Byashkalai was suspended from the right of being a Vaishnava and he was not granted pardon until death. He requested again and again for pardon from the guru and at last he lost peace of mind and died without

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food and sleep in the sea at Srikshetra. He was sure and correct with the view that as imperfect and false doctors are fearful to life so is a false devotee to belief. Perhaps great men think alike and so on the same belief the holy Bible had also uttered long long ago to be aware of false prophets.

Thus in the 15th century Assam had a great and unique social, cultural educational and above all a religious reformer in the name of Sankardeva, whose contributions the people of the soil are still enjoying. He died sometime in the past in 1569, but his death could not make him die in the true sense. Everywhere and at everything of Assam from culture to religion, from art to education, from the sky to the soil of Assam there is a Sankardeva.

"Gotei asom juri
bistrit jibani jar." ¹

MADHABDEVA's CO-OPERATION WITH
SANKARDEVA IN THE ACT OF REFORMATION

Contributions of Sankardeva's contemporary chief associates to reformation and organisation also counted much. The horizon of the Bhakti dharma initiated by Sankardeva was systematically expanded by his disciple Madhabdeva. The former only revealed the religion but the later made it known to all and everybody. Madhabdeva acted as an instrument in popularising and stabilising the new religious order by his organising power. He was a successful reformer with his literary and musical talent and unbounded zeal. He was a stern disciplinarian and a man of principles in the line of his religious faith and he expelled anybody immediately who violated the religious discipline. He did not even spare the wife of his guru in this respect. Madhabdeva organised the satra institution in a mode of his own in structural and institutional aspects.

The prayer hall or the namghar, gate or the karapat with the floral designs, mica finished pillars of the walls, the residential huts separately for marri-

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ed and unmarried devotees around the prayer hall and separate bathing ghats for householders and celibates were all under his plans and guidance and supervision. He also maintained the idea of co-operation amongst the devotees by making provision for a common store of essential daily needs of the satra to which all devotees had to contribute either in cash or in kind. Contribution of manual service was also granted to those who were unable to pay in cash and kind. He started appointing different functionaries to discharge various responsibilities of the satra. Worshipping the Guruasana (Seat of the Guru) in place of an image of the deity is a unique reformation of Madhabdeva. The Guru asana usually contains the Assamese edition of the Bhagavata or the Kirtana by Sankardeva or Namaghosa or Bhakti-ratnawali by Madhabdeva. He applied more importance on the valuable writings than the writers themselves. He did not find anybody to be nominated to succeed him, rather he recommended his Ghosa or the Namghosa where he would be for those who can seek. "My energy and my intelligence are all transmitted to the Ghosa. Devotees will find me there if they know how

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to seek". 1 To him the dasama and the kirtana by Sankardeva were the images of his guru and the Ratnavali and the Ghosa are his abode. 2

Madhaba was a life long celibate and with his example perhaps the kewalia or celibate class of devotees drew inspiration. The daily religious service called prasanga or the nama prasanga has been systematised and subdivided by him into fourteen units (Chaidhya prasanga) to be covered by morning, noon and evening prayer. All the Vaishnavite satras still perform these services daily under compulsion. By not nominating any body to succeed him as the head of the religious community he had sown the seed of democracy in the soil of Assam and still in his satra at Barpeta the head who is called the satria (Satradhikar, head of the satra)

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is not the son or nominee of any former head but is elected by formal democratic system of election. Still in Barpeta Satra the final power relating to the satra is with the people in general (the samuha). Thus Madhabdeva not only performed the tasks of religious reformation but also acted as pioneer of democratic organisation at a time when the idea of democracy and co-operative trend of living were almost unknown.

Decision of not nominating anybody as his successor by Madhabdeva is the first instance in the vaishnavite tradition of Satra management. It resulted both unity as well as diversity amongst the contemporary religious leaders. Rivalry began amongst the intimate fellows Purusottam Thakur, Gopal Ata and Mathuradas Ata who formed three more sub-sects like Purosha Samhati, Kala Samhati and Nika Samhati respectively. Each of them became the head of his own sub-sect.

DAMODARDEVA'S ROLE IN REFORMATION

The other opponent Damodardeva formed the Brahma Samhati as an independent sect and most of the Brahmans and many other non-Brahmins took initiation

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under Damodardeva. Damodardeva, however always agreed with the doctrines of Sankardeva. All the three associates Sankardeva, Madhabdeva and Damodardeva were identical and intimately connected. As a pioneer of reformation and organisation the place of Damodardeva was also in the line of the other two. It was Damodardeva who first organised the satras into formalities. So far as his contributions to Vaishnavite education is concerned it can be said that due to certain modifications introduced by Damodardeva in the Vaishnavism, a large number of Brahmins came to his fold and thereby Vaisnavism gained a firm ground. The introduction of the system of paying religious revenue or the dharma kar by the disciples to their respective satras probably owes its origin to Damodardeva. Later on Madhabdeva had to reconstruct and reorganise his Barpeta Satra on the pattern of the Satra at Patbausi founded by Damodardeva. The whole of Kamrupa got astir by his propogation which was largely due to his selection and posting of a handful of most capable young men to various parts of the eastern Kamrup and his personal association with western Kamrup during the last phase of his life. As an efficient organiser he selected his successor ignoring the claim of his nephew Krishnadeva.
He was right to select the celibate Bhattadeva for the purpose under whom the Damodara sect of lower Assam gained a firm footing.

HARIDEVA, THE DEMOCRATIC REFORMER

Harideva, the prominent and independent Vaisnavite leader and thinker of Sankardeva's time had a reformative attitude. He also wanted to live in a democratic way of religious life amongst the common people around him. When anything is talked of the Satra institution the name of Bahari as the first satra (Adi Satra) comes to the reference. Though the famous Vaisnavites Sankardeva, Madhabdeva and Damodardeva are said to be the pioneers of Satra movement in Assam it was Harideva who for the first time thought and did in the Satra cult of education. He established Bahari Satra in 1375 Saka at a time when child Sankardeva was only a boy of four years old and Madhabdeva and Damodardeva were not born. Besides Bahari and Maneri at present Barpeta district he also established Haripur Satra at Cooch Behar in the form of institution for organising the Vaisnavite religion. He was a teacher of the common people,
a janagana guru, and initiated all including kings, women, Brahmins, Malis and even the rascals of the society in his own way. Unlike Sankardeva, he did not hesitate to initiate the king Naranarayana of Cooch Behar, Kalindi Aie, the wife of Sankardeva a woman and many a Brahmin. He also initiated men like Khagara Mali of Hajo and Udar Govinda the son of his father's friend who were not Brahmins. He extended his area of organisation by initiating the twelve most wild rascals of the locality known as "bara Khat" who were brought to his control and fold and the same "bara Khat" (twelve rascals) became his devotees "bara bhakat" (twelve disciples) at last. He showed his notably liberal attitude of reformation of the religion of the mass by offering them the responsibility of the Satra when he left Bahari to Maneri. He walked in troubles and difficulties to Patbaushi to explain the deepest ideals of the Bhagavata before the scholar Sankardeva with the Vaisnavite Damodardeva. Not only that he also widened the horizon of organisation by going home to home for explaining the Bhagavata Purana amongst the illiterate common people and thereby he threw the waves of Vaisnavite revolution from the deep seas of theories.

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to the common and day to day sands of the shore.
In the real sense he was the most successful motiva-
tor of mass education (Gana Siksha) and perhaps
the first people's teacher (Gana Sikshak) of Assam.
Hariguru - Sankara - Deva Damodara are the three
mostly accepted names by all sub-sects of the Vaisna-
vites of Assam. They were all in one principle, in
the same ideals and the co-ordinating leading gurus
of that time. They were friends and partners in all
walks of life though none was the disciple of any one
and any one was the teacher to none. Both the other
two respected Harideva as the seniormost and learned
scholar. Once they decided to establish their res-
pect to the great guru by celebarating Dol festival at
Harideva's place which was then known as Haridevashram.
They performed there 'Nama' and 'Yatra' round the
clock for seven days and it attracted a large number of
people from far and wide. With this example of respect
towards the guru by Sankardeva and Damodardeva his
place came to be known as Maneri (Man meaning respect).
The disciples then constructed the road from Maneri to
Patbaushi by their own labour as the way from Harideva
to Sankardeva was long and inconvenient. Thus his
fame of Vaisnavite organisation echoed in the palace

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of king Naranarayan of Cooch Behar who took him there. There too he established his last satra Haripur from which he did a lot on the religion and taught people in the light of Vaisnavite education. He also sent his notable disciples to different parts of Assam for establishing satras and spreading the religion. Amongst them - Jadumanidev to upper Assam, Narayandev to Kamrup, Haricharandev at Jagara in present Nalbari and Jagannathdev at Bainakuchi are worth mentioning. Again after him, his devotees established new satras and their sub-satras on the Vaisnavite mode which are still at Dala, Baniyara, Bali, Adala, Jagara, Naptipara, Namati, Kaihati, Para, Bezkuchi, Khana and Kulbil.

His fame as a reader and explanator of the Bhagavata reached distant Puri and he had to stay there for long five years for reading and explaining the origin Bhagavata continuously in the temple of Lord Jagannatha. This memory of the great organiser of Vaisnavism is still being protected in the Sri Sri Harideva Bhagavatcharyya Moth at Puridham in Orissa. He always wanted to have talked on the Bhagavata as a way of life. For the want of sufficient number of
guests for Bhagavata discussion he had to leave Bahari for Kaladi. For this purpose he accepted people of all castes including Garo - Bhot - Jabana - Ahoma - Kachari. His horizon of principles of organisation expanded a little wider by not neglecting even the Sak-tas (the worshippers of Sakti) and Saivas (the worshippers of Lord Siva) as all the modes of worship are towards the same Vishnu.

He was always open and kind to all his friends and foes including the twelve ruscals (the bara Khats) who tried to dishonour him, Dhenukata who rebuked him as a blindman and the Brahmins who offered him poison for testing his guru quality.

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1 "Atithi Sevat Jana Sarbadharma pai ake jani aita thakibaka nujuwai "
   - Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva kirttana by Sri Damodardev Goswami, 559 Haridevabda,
     (Ref. from the Carit by Dibakar)
     Forewords pp. "1".

2 "Sarva deva namaskaram Keshavam prati gachsati"
   - Mahapurush Sri Sri Harideva Kirttana, by Sri Damodardeva Goswami, 559 Haridevabda, Forewords.
     pp."m". (Ref. from Pandavi Gita)
Thus Sankardeva, Damodardeva and Harideva were the trio co-ordinating associates of spreading Vaisnavism in Assam in the 15th century. They were friends and the three in one, the three incarnations of the same Vishnu with no difference of thoughts and ideals. With them started the revolution of decentralisation of education in Assam. Of course it was Harideva who made the land of devotion (Bhakti) fertile on which Sankardeva found it convenient to sow seeds of his bhakti Philosophy. And for that reason only Sankardeva could hear the name of Hari in the mouths of cow-herd boys and in those of boatmen when he came down the Brahmaputra to Kamrup. It was perhaps the influence of Harideva who was senior to Sankardeva by twenty three years and who used to live at Bahari-Maneri for long before his associate Sankardeva came to Kamrup. Sankardeva also recognised Harideva as to be a learned Vaisnavite and as powerful as the Fire, God Agni - Hariguru, the Lord Agni can burn all, can save all. ¹

¹ "Hariguru hutasan sabako karai Tran"
Mahapurush Sri Sri Haridev Kirttan,
- by Sri Damodardev Goswami. pp. 91
(559 Haridevabda)