CHAPTER I

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Sources of the study:

The two personalities connected with the neo-Vaisnava movement of Assam were Sañkaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.) and Madhavadeva (1489-1596 A.D.). Like Rāmānanda, Kabīr, Vallabha, Nāmadeva and Caitanya, Sañkaradeva, the religious reformer of Assam, had carried the message of bhakti to the common people. He taught the people about a religion of love and devotion and declared Visnu as the sole worshipful deity. Sañkaradeva's religious movement gained much popularity and gathered many followers with the association of a great personality like that of Madhavadeva, but for whom the movement would not have spread out in its glory and expanse.

Sañkaradeva's disciples and associates also did their best to spread the message of bhakti far and wide in the region. Some of them even seceded from the main body of the Order and formed certain schisms. Although a few others might have tried to unify and associate the fraternity, it was, as will be seen later on, the dominant personality of Madhavadeva, who could make a compact and organised body of the whole Order. Furthermore, the Vaisnava organisation received a concrete shape at the hands of Madhavadeva. He introduced different ways and modes of cultivating devotional practices. Not only this,
because of his forceful arguments and dignified mien, on different occasions as necessity demanded, some people belonging to other religious faiths were also readily induced to embrace the faith.

Thus it will be seen in the succeeding chapters how great was the personality, and how strong was the organising ability of Mādhavadeva operating, when Śaṅkaradeva was no longer alive. Even during the life-time of his guru it was this intelligent and stern Vaiṣṇava monk who could chalk out ways and means at different crucial stages to safeguard his own faith. After the death of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva was entrusted by his guru with the responsibility of preaching and propagating the Vaiṣṇava faith. Being a good organiser and a skilful propagator he was able to continue the movement to reach its desired consummation. Under his able guidance and supervision the movement reached even the far-flung corners of the region. Both Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva were poets and artists. Their contributions enriched the literary heritage of the Assamese people by bringing about a new awakening among the people not only in the matter of religion but also in various socio-cultural fields like literature and fine arts. From these points of view the life and activities of this saint-poet, Mādhavadeva deserve an elaborate and critical study.

To prepare an account of Mādhavadeva: his life, art and thought, we have to rely on materials (culled) mainly from the saint's writings and from different biographical works and
other similar records. Primarily, one has to depend on the biographies of Sañkaradeva, Madhavadeva and other Vaisnava saints. There are some similar works on certain Vaisnava institutions throwing light upon the subject of our study. With the growth of sectarian propensities and vested interests\(^1\), some works of doubtful authority, containing the biographies and accounts of activities of the two saints, Sañkaradeva and Madhavadeva, also came into being. One has to be much cautious and discriminating in either accepting or rejecting the views as expressed in these works. Some historical writings pertaining to that period, also throw some light on the social environment and the political and economic background of the Vaisnava movement.

The biographical literature may also be divided into two categories, viz., that of the earlier period and that of the later period. The former, however, is very few in number while the latter is devoted mainly to details about the history and development of the succeeding period. A noticeable feature of the latter group of works is that it deals mainly with one or two individuals or with the history of a particular sect, institution, line and the like. In almost all these works stray accounts of the initial period of the movement and the initiator and his immediate successor are only available.

Broadly speaking, the works on the subjects have two streams - one following the past tradition and the other with

\(^1\) SHT, p.1.
a critical and scientific outlook. The former stream consists of works like Santāvalī by Dvārikā Misra, Sat-sampradāya-katnā by Govinda Dāsa, Ratakā-mahantar Junā by Vibhunāth, etc. of the latter stream the most prominent writer is Laksminath Bezbaroa who dealt in detail about the movement as well as its first few leading figures. Bezbaroa was a pioneer in that line who adopted a scientific approach on the subject. He was followed by many others, of whom Dr Banikanta Kakati deserves to be mentioned first. Actually it was Dr Kakati who was able to bring Assam into focus outside his own state in such aspects as language, literature, culture and religion. Another scholar, Kaliram Medhi, also devoted himself to the task of exposing the message of Śaṅkaradeva and Madhavadeva through some of his books and papers. In the popular line, Dimbeswar Neog, Birinchi Kumar Barua and others published some papers and books both in English and Assamese. But the major share of the credit goes to Dr Maheswar Neog, who made a detailed and exegetic study of the whole movement including the life and activities of some prominent figures in his scientific work, Śaṅkaradeva and His Times. It was Dr Neog who has been able to draw the attention of many reputed scholars both in India and abroad by presenting papers on various aspects of culture associated with the movement.
Biographical literature:

It was after the death of Śaṅkaradeva that his life and activities were discussed in the Vaisnava institutions in all their different aspects as the master, who used to tell the glory of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa to his disciples. Mādhavadeva first introduced the tradition of telling his associates and followers about the eventful life of his guru, Śaṅkaradeva. After the death of Mādhavadeva his followers continued the process and in course of time narrations of the lives of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and other chief Vaisnavas became an important part of sattrā ceremonials. Even today it is a living custom in the sattras. This practice of narrating the tales of the saints inspired some of the biographers to compose their works in verse. The early groups of biographers composed their writings in verse alone, while the latter group used prose as well as verse in writing biographical works.

The biographies of the saints are called caritas or guru-caritas. The early group of caritas are most authentic and are usually more reliable than the later caritas. This was so because the earlier works were composed at a time nearest to the saints. A general characteristic of all the caritas is that these want to place Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva as the incarnations of the Lord. Almost all the caritas include some

2. Dāityārī, vv.1700-1702
3. Dāityārī, vv.1692-1693; KGC, pp.26-27, 65-70

The bifurcation of this biographical literature into early and later caritas is done in SHT, p.3
miraculous and supernatural stories. Another feature of the caritas is the reflection of the political, economic and social conditions of the period of the country. These are the only recorded history of the neo-Vaiśṇava movement initiated by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, and as such these are most valuable documents for the study.

Among the early group of biographers, the names of Daityārī Thākur, Bhūsana Dvija, Rāmānanda Dvija and Vaikunttha Dvija are specially counted.

Early group of biographies:
Daityārī Thākur:

Daityārī Thākur composed in verse a book on the life of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. His father was Rāmacarana Thākur, son of Mādhavadeva's sister Urvasī. The probable year of Daityārī's birth was 1596 A.D. He was the author of a play, Nṛsimha-yatra, and was placed by Mathurādāsa Budhā Ātā of Barpēta as the adhikār of Sundarīdiyā-sattra.

Daityārī undertook the task of writing the verse-biography of Śaṅkaradeva with the help of Budhīr-po-Govinda, the head of Madhupur-sattra in Koc Behār and Rāmacarana.

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4. SHT, p.7
5. Jagannāth Mahanta, pp.114-f
6. vv. 1707-f
Thākur, his father. Daityārī's work does not give a detailed picture of Śaṅkaradeva's early life, but dwells on main events of the whole life and activities of Mādhavadeva.

Bhūsana Dvija:

In his Śaṅkara-carīta, Bhūsana Dvija introduces himself as the son of Vaikunṭha and grandson of Cakrapāṇi, a brāhmāṇ scholar who was a disciple of Śaṅkaradeva. Bhūsana was the family priest of Nārāyaṇadāsa Thākur Ātā and lived in the village Janiyyā, enjoying financial support from him. As a boy Bhūsana met Mādhavadeva and later came into contact with Śaṅkaradeva's grandsons, Purusottama and Caturbhūja. Bhūsana's Śaṅkara-carīta is a sketchy work without much elaboration. He says that he completed the work without any model of guru-carīta before him and without the help of any authentic sources. We find, therefore, a lot of doubtful information in his work. The accounts given by him of the death of Śaṅkaradeva's parents and first wife, the names of places visited by Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva in their pilgrimage, all these are in conflict with the corresponding sections in other biographies of the saint. Bhūsana, in his work, devotes

7. v. 1705
8. vv. 716-ff
9. v. 43
10. vv. 114-ff
11. v. 124
12. v. 693
more space to Narayana Thakur's activities and association with the two gurus, and touches briefly on the lives of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva.

Ramananda Dvija:

Ramananda Dvija was the son and disciple of Sri-Ramadeva, a disciple of Gopala Ata of Bhavaniapur and the adhikar of Kaljar sattra. After the death of Sri-Ramadeva he succeeded to his father's place and later on established sattras at many places such as Khakaruubhi, Bhedeli-bhandar, Bahjeengani and Sarucakuw. He finally settled at Ahatguri in Majuli under the kind patronage of the Prime Minister (Budhagohain) Atan Bangadiy Sandikai (1648-69). With the encouragement given by the Prime Minister, Ramananda started writing the life-stories of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva. Ramananda's work is much at variance with the works of Daityari and Bhushana. He has created some confusion in giving the details of Sankaradeva's life and Madhavadeva's early days. He seems to be on firmer ground in the latter part of his account dealing with the later career of Madhavadeva. Madhavadeva's encounter with Sankaradeva at the first meeting is a bright and lively picture of Ramananda's work.

Vaikuntha Dvija:

In his Santamala, Vaikuntha Dvija gives accounts of the lives of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, Purusottama Thakur and...
Caturbhūja Thākur. He was asked by Purusottama Thākur to write a brief account of the lives of the two gurus. He admits his inability to place the events in a chronological order, but his work is reliable to some extent and devoid of the supernatural elements.

The later group of biographies:

Rāmacarana Thākur:

Saṅkara-carita, attributed to Rāmacarana Thākur, son of Mādhavadeva’s sister Urvasī, and Rāmadāsa, is a little controversial regarding its authorship and some parts of its contents. It has been noticed by critics that Rāmacarana’s son Daityārī, in his biography of Saṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, says nothing about his father’s work. Daityārī has further stated that he found no model to prepare that biography. Some matters in Rāmacarana’s work, which are placed in the form of prophecy, are actually matters of a period later than that of Rāmacarana. It is, therefore, believed that this biography was written in the days of Kanaklātā Āl who died about 1668 A.D. The author of this biography subscribes to views favouring the Purusasamhāti group. In several passages it invokes the authority of Purāṇas and other works for certain episodes.

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13. vv. 11-18
14. v. 696
15. Daityārī, vv. 1705-ff
16. SHT, p.23
incorporated into it. Most of these references are of doubtful character.

The Kathā-guru-carita:

The author of Kathā-guru-carita does not subscribe his name in this work, nor is its place of writing mentioned. It has been considered from circumstantial evidences that it was written in the Barjahā-sattra of Nowgong in the early decades of the eighteenth century. It is a voluminous work written in dignified and lively prose. It gives detailed account of the lives and careers of Saṅkaradeva, Madhavadeva, the nine Ātās and the two Thākurs. With the reflection of the Vaiṣṇava faith and movement of Assam in its social, economic and political perspective, the Kathā-guru-carita is the most trustworthy among the later group of biographies of Saṅkaradeva and Madhavadeva.

The Guru-carita (Bardowā)

This carita is generally known as Bardowā-carita. It is probably the summary of an old biography. It has the influence of Daityāri Thākur's work on it. It was redacted in modern times by a Mahanta and published in a monthly, the

Bāṇhī, and has since been edited and published by M. Neog.

Śaṅkaradeva-carita:

This small work in prose deals with the chronology of events in the lives of Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva. It comes down only as the end of Mādhavadeva's life in Kāmarūpa. Probably written in the Barpeta sattra, it seems to be the copy of an earlier work, which had been utilised by budhā-bhakats in charge of carit-tolā (ceremonial narration of the lives of the saints). ¹³

Aniruddha Dās: Śrī-guru-varpanā ¹⁹:

This work is small handy volume of 435 verses. It gives a brief account of the lives of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva, Purusottama, Caturbhūja, Dāmodara (1604-9), and Ramākānta (1651-1717). It is a biography coming in between the earlier and later groups. Endowed with many sober qualities of the earlier group of caritas, this small work was completed in Phālguna, 1594 Śaka. This is probably the first biographical work to give the date of Śaṅkaradeva, namely, 1385 Śaka/1463 A.D., which, however, does not agree with the date (1371 Śaka/1449 A.D.) given in later accounts and held by the Śaṅkaradeva fraternity.

¹³ SHT, p.22
¹⁹ D.H.A.S., MS No.82
Caritas of later times:

The caritas of Dāmodaradeva by Rāmareya and Nilakantha Dās, the caritas of Gopāladeva of Bhavanīpur by Rāmānanda Dvija, Purnānanda, Rāmānanda Dās, Rāmagapāla and others; the caritas of Purusottama and Caturbhūja Thaku by Vidyānanda Ojā (Thākur-carita), the carita of Vamśīgopaladeva by Rāmānanda Dvija (Śrī Śrī VamŚigopaladevar carita) are some of the independent biographies of the later saints of the Śaṅkaradeva school which throw some light upon the career and activities of Mādhavadeva.

Govindadāsa's Santa-sampradāya kathā or Etaka Mahantar Carita is a short but reliable account of the Vaisnava movement of Assam. Some information about the spread of the sattra institutions are found here. It gives a running account of the sattras founded by the deputies sent out by Mādhavadeva and Dāmodaradeva. Another attempt of the early history of the evolution of the sattras is the bar-junā or Etaka Mahantar Junā by Vibhunāth. The Prayāna-carita describes the final scenes of the lives of Śaṅkaradeva, Mādhavadeva and four Ātās. Śaṅkara-carita āru sattrar utpat-kathā is a brief account of the lives of Śaṅkaradeva,

20. D.H.A.S., MS No.315
21. D.H.A.S., MS No.343
22. Paper MS mentioned in the SHT, p.28
23. D.U., MS No.224, Kowāmarā sattra coll., 1799 A.D., 32 Agar wood bark folios, 16 cm x 4,75 cm.
Madhavadeva and the spread of the sattras, written in verse in 1799 A.D. Another work in prose Mālā, Bhaktir kathā is a brief account of some conversation of Saṅkaradeva and Madhavadeva about the nature of bhakti and guru. Bhakti-kathā, a work in verse also presents a description of the religious discussions of Saṅkaradeva with Madhavadeva. Both Mālā, Bhaktir kathā and Bhakti-kathā are the attempts at giving the early days of the sattra institutions.

Ādi-carita:

There are some spurious accounts of the Vaisnava movement of Assam and the lives and careers of the saints with wrong and motivated information. Among these works Ādi-carita, a book of doubtful authority, which is ascribed to Madhavadeva, has created much ill-feeling among the Vaisnavas of Assam. This book is also known by the name Bhūvar puthi or Bhūvar-carita. Definitely not written by Madhavadeva, it was supposed to have been written in 1536 Śaka. Sānta-nīrṇava (Caitanya-nīrṇava) is another work of doubtful authority with wrong information about the Vaisnava

24. D.U., MS No.117, Cupaha sattra coll., undated, 42 Agar wood bark folios, 12.75 cm x 4.25 cm.
25. D.U., MS No.6, Cupaha sattra coll., undated, 24 Agar wood bark folios, 17.5 cm x 6.5 cm.
27. Gait, Report etc., p.22
28. Undated Paper MS, K.A.S. Library

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movement of Assam. This Sanskrit work bears a tendency to prove Madhavadeva as a dishonest person and presents some imaginary stories about the saint. This account tries in vain to prove that Assam Vaisnavism is nothing but a branch of the Caitanya movement. Kṛṣṇacārya’s *Santa-carita* and Kaviratna’s *Satsampradāyar katha* are two other books of same spurious nature.

Modern works on Madhavadeva:

A descriptive biography of Śaṅkaradeva and Madhavadeva was written by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. His father Dinanath Bezbaroa made an attempt at composing verse *caritas* on the old model.

Some critical essays were made by Dr Banikanta Kakati on the books and lyrics of Madhavadeva. Kaliram Niedhi attempted scientific discussions on different aspects of Madhavadeva’s art and thought. He made reproduced the text of Madhavadeva’s dramas based on old manuscripts. Dr Maheswar Neog, an authority of Śaṅkaradeva’s art and literature, has offered a number of studies on Madhavadeva.

29. Appended to MS Dēmodara-carita of Nīlakantha in the K.A.S. Library.

30. pub. Laghanurām Chaudhuri, 1837 Śaka (?)
Activities of Śaṅkaradeva:

The biographies of saints give different opinions about the date of Śaṅkaradeva's birth and the duration of his life. Considering all the views of the old and later biographers the modern critics come to the conclusion that Śaṅkaradeva was born in 1449 A.D. at Ālipukhuri Bardowa about 50 Km. north-west of Nowgong, Assam, and lived for 118½ or 119½ years.³¹

Śaṅkaradeva was the only son of Kusumavara Bhuys and Satyasandhā. He lost his mother at a very early age and was brought up by his grandmother, Khersūti. At the age of twelve he was sent to Mahendra Kandali, a pundit, and Śaṅkara's education was started. As a student he proved himself to be a very diligent one. He completed the course of his studies comprising various subjects and proved his inherent power by composing splendid verses even in his school days.³² Moreover, he got acquainted with the art of practising yoga during his early days.

As his father had already passed away, Śaṅkaradeva was asked to assume charge of the Śiromani Bhuyāship of his father. At the age of about 21 Śaṅkaradeva married Suryavati and started a householder's and an administrator's life. He had greater attraction for studies and engaged himself in

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³¹. SHT, p.99
³². KGC, p.45
the studies of different scriptures. Sūryavatī gave birth to a child and within one year or so she died. Śaṅkaradeva felt some sort of detachment from worldly affairs and when his daughter Manu attained the 'marriageable' age of those days, he gave her in marriage to one Hari and set out for his first pilgrimage and visited "all notable places of north and south India connected with the life of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa."

After a long period of about twelve years Śaṅkaradeva returned home. Despite his refusal to enter into the domestic life, Śaṅkaradeva had to oblige the elderly members of his family by marrying Kālindī Devī. Later on three sons, Rāmānanda, Kamalalocana and Haricarana, and a daughter, Rukmini, were born to her. It was after his first pilgrimage that Śaṅkaradeva organised his first dramatic performance Cihna-yātrā, a dramatic representation with paintings. From this period of life Śaṅkaradeva's literary and cultural activities grew in exuberance covering the fields of writings, and of performing of dramas, of composing lyrics, etc. His works were mainly dependent on the Bhāgavata-purāṇa. He evolved the basic tenets of his faith and started the work of proselytization. But the political situation compelled him to leave his native place Bardowā. He moved to the north bank of the Brahmaputra and after moving from place to place

33. KGC, pp. 29-33
34. ibid., p.46; Bardowā-carita, ch.6
stationed at Dhuahāṭa-Belaguri where he met Mādhavadeva in 1522 A.D. This was well within the Ahom state.

At that time a section of priestly brahmans levelled some allegations in the royal court of the Āhōṃ king Suhummuṅ against Śaṅkaradeva. In the meantime Śaṅkaradeva's son-in-law Hari was executed and Mādhavadeva was confined for a period of six months by the king for some flimsy offences against the royal court.35 Being disgusted at such unreasonable behaviour of the Āhōṃ king Śaṅkaradeva decided to leave the Āhōṃ kingdom. He migrated to Koc Behār where King Naranāṛāyaṇa and his younger brother Cilārāy were great patrons of scholarship. For a short while Śaṅkaradeva and his kinsfolk made their camps at different places. At long last he settled at Pāṭbāusi. The work of proselytization received good response at Pāṭbāusi where Bhavāṇanda, later on known as Nārāyaṇadāsa, joined the fraternity. From Pāṭbāusi Śaṅkaradeva went on pilgrimage for the second time.

In Koc Behār also the old priestly class could not tolerate the growing popularity of Śaṅkaradeva's faith and, therefore, they vilely reported to the king, saying that he was practising some heretical faith. The king summoned Śaṅkaradeva to attend the royal court. There the saint had to face a strong debate with the scholars of the opposite group. In this debate Śaṅkaradeva refuted all the allegations.

35. Daityāri, vv. 414-422
and proved them to be completely baseless and false. The king was very much impressed by the saint's scholarship and honoured him.

Śāṅkaradeva spent his last days in a cool and calm mental environment with the encouragement of King Naranārāyana and commander-in-chief Cilārāy. The propagation of the Vaisnava faith was successfully carried on by his skilful associates Mādhavadeva, Nārāyanadāsa and others. He selected Mādhavadeva as his spiritual successor. The spiritual career of Śāṅkaradeva came to an end on the 7th or the 21st Bhādra, 1490 Śaka/September, 1568 A.D.

The neo-Vaiṣṇava movement initiated by Śāṅkaradeva:

Prior to the starting of the Vaiṣṇava movement of Śāṅkaradeva, many a religious cult such as Śaktism, Śaivism, Tantric Buddhism, Tantric Vaiṣṇavism were prevailing in Assam in full swing. Many other religious and semi-religious practices also were in vogue, most of which were of the left-handed order (vāmācāra). Śiva, a popular deity, appeared as Bhairava, and was worshipped with offerings of the blood of goats and tortoises. Offerings of blood was common in the worship of the Mother Goddess. The Kālikā-purāṇa and the

36. Rāmānanda, v. 1570
37. KGG, p. 224
38. Rāmānanda, v. 28
39. JI. 3-5
Yogini-tantra⁴⁰ give a long list of birds and animals which were the objects of sacrifices. Sometimes the Goddess was worshipped with sacrifices of human beings, and often with offerings of blood and flesh from the body of the worshipper himself.⁴¹ The influence of tantricism was so strong that even Viṣṇu was worshipped with fish and meat.⁴² Soon Buddhism that had entered Assam also got mixed up with tantric practices, and, like the tantric Śāktas, it also began to lay stress on the five 'M's (panca-makāra). As a way to realisation of the perfect truth, the Vajrayāṇī Buddhists, like the Śāktas, followed the path of sexual enjoyments. Due to a confused admixture of the Hindu and Buddhist tantric cults, a mysterious atmosphere was created in Kāmarūpa so that it came to be known to the outside world as a land of mysticism and sorcery.⁴³ Worship of countless demi-gods, demi-goddesses and evil spirits was common in the society in addition to so many superstitions prevailing among the people. Practices of brāhmaṇical rites had created a priestly class which enjoyed superiority over the so-called lower classes. Thus society had quite an unhealthy atmosphere.

Śaṅkaradeva was confronted with all these demerits of the religious life of the society of that time. Degeneration

⁴⁰. II.7.156
⁴¹. The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 66
⁴². SHT, p.87
⁴³. ibid., p.91
and disorderliness in the name of religion made him search for the true path. It was after his first pilgrimage that he started his life as a preacher. In the course of his pilgrimage he seems to have stayed for several years at Puri, where he is said to have received his illumination of jñāna-bhakti. He had the opportunity to meet men of different creeds in the holy places like Puri and Varanasi, as a result of which he was able to give fuller shape to his ideas. Later on when he got the Bhāgavata-purāṇa furnished with Śrīdhara-svāmī's commentary and listened to the discourses on it, he was much impressed and was attached to it. He was convinced by its assertions that Kṛṣṇa is the sole worshipful Being and the taking of refuge in Him was the greatest religion of man. He studied more and more, and plunged deeper into the scriptures to prepare himself for the propagation of his faith. He wrote some verses on the divine life and acts of Kṛṣṇa and when he saw people being attracted by it he began to make use of this as well as some other forms of literature as the media of his faith. He started a movement of the religion of love and devotion. Thus in a background of unwholesome and

45. Daityārī, v. 92
46. ibid., v.93
47. ibid., v. 95
48. ibid., v. 96
superstitious traits of various kinds he was successful in bringing some fresh air to blow into the society. People from different classes came and took ordination in the faith that he preached.

Śaṅkaradeva has attached more importance to the path of bhakti (devotion) than to that of jñāna (knowledge) and karma (ritualism), Visnu or Kṛṣṇa being regarded as the sole worshipful one. Of the nine modes of devotion emphasis has been laid on śravaṇa (listening to the singing of the acts and deeds of Visnu-Kṛṣṇa) and kīrtana (chanting of holy names of Visnu). Its main form is dāṣya-bhakti (devotion as of a servant to his master). There were no caste discriminations, and any person of any caste or creed could be initiated into this new creed.

The tenets of the cult are based mainly on the Bhāgavata-purāṇa and the Bhagavadgītā.

As Śaṅkaradeva did not have faith in blood sacrifices and did not permit his followers to worship any god other than Visnu, a section of people with vested interests stood against his movement. Śaṅkaradeva declared that singing songs of Visnu-Kṛṣṇa and taking sole refuge in

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49. Kīrtana, Prahlād-carita, v. 341
50. ibid., v. 38
51. Bhāgavata-purāṇa, 2nd. 53-54
52. KGC, p. 181
Him only would be an effort sufficient to attain final release of the soul. This offered a challenge to the brāhmaṇical priesthood by minimising the importance of their practices. Moreover, a section of the priestly class could not bear that Śaṅkaradeva being a Sudra (non-brāhmaṇ) should render the sacred scripture, Bhāgavata-purāṇa, into the popular language and initiate brāhmaṇ and disciples into the new creed. They, therefore, tried their best to humiliate him by all means and to destroy the neo-Vaisnava movement. The brāhmaṇs proceeded to the court of the Ahom king, Suhummuṅ (1497-1539), with allegations against Śaṅkaradeva of misleading the people. The saint was summoned to a trial, and after a short trial that had taken place he was acquitted. But after sometime the Bāra-bhūyās had to face royal persecution for yet another reason and for fear of further disturbances Śaṅkaradeva changed the centre of his movement to Kāmarūpa, where the ruler now was King Naranārāyaṇa, who was a good scholar. But here also he had to face same type of difficulties. King Naranārāyaṇa received reports about his so called anti-traditional preaching, and allegations against the saint were carried to the royal court by the brāhmaṇs. Śaṅkaradeva had to face a trial in the court of King Naranārāyaṇa at a time when he was at the height of popularity and the number of his followers was rapidly increasing. On the receipt of reports of the anti-traditional

53. Daityāri, vv. 311-312
character of his creeds the king ordered his men to arrest Śaṅkaradeva and declared: "I shall get him cut to pieces, get his flesh thrown to the dogs, get a drum made with his skin and get it beaten even with his bones." But at the very first appearance of Śaṅkaradeva he was very much impressed and he made no hesitation in honouring the saint with valuable presents. Śaṅkaradeva, however, had to produce his arguments in defence of his faith in a disputation with the brāhmaṇ scholars in the open assembly. He proved the allegations to be baseless and was able to establish the propriety of the new faith. The brāhmaṇs could not bring the desired animadversion on Śaṅkaradeva by any means, and the king was firmly convinced about his scholarship and teachings. Thus, after a long and sustained struggle the neo-Vaiṣṇava movement found safety and patronage as well.

Śaṅkaradeva took up the very effective means of literature and fine arts like music, dance and drama for propagating his bhakti cult. With his chief disciple Mādhavadeva he composed a good number of lyrics, dramas and narratives, and rendered into Assamese verse a good many works of Sanskrit as well. In co-operation with some of his other followers namely Ananta Kandali, Keśacarana, Aniruddha and others, he completed the translation of the Bhāgavata-purāṇa into Assamese. Thus he launched a new trend in the

54. Daityāri, vv.754-755 (tr. by M. Neog)
55. ibid., vv. 193-195
56. ibid., vv. 797-810
literature and culture of the country. These were, in a way, by-products of his religious movement. After his death, Madhavadeva took charge as his successor and continued the traditional way of propagation through plays and a new religious literature.

Thus, in order to get a fuller idea about the spread and development of the neo-Vaisnava faith in Assam, one has to go through the eventful life and colourful cultural activities of the dominant figure, Madhavadeva, who became the worthy successor of Sankaradeva after the latter's passing away. It will be seen from the succeeding pages how Madhavadeva had to face rude hostility time and again just like his guru and at long last came out successful. It was not an easy task to fulfil the mission in his life and even in such reverse situations Madhavadeva was able to have triumph ultimately. Furthermore, he succeeded in attaining to a highly elevated position in the fields of the land's religion, literature, music and arts which he maintains even to-day.