

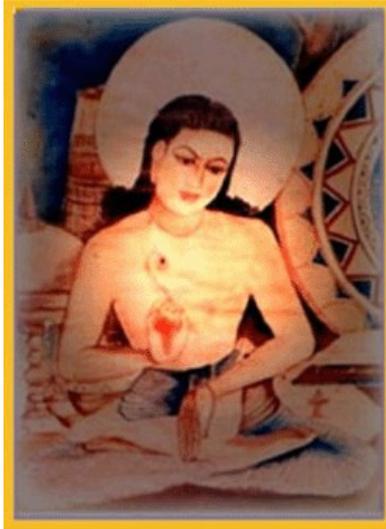


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### Srimanth Shankar Dev



Shankar Dev, who was born in Assam in 1449, was one of the greatest saints of India. But for the "Ekasharana Dharma," the Vaishnava movement initiated by him in Assam, the several tribal communities of that region would never have been drawn into the mainstream of Hindu society. Along with the doctrine of Bhakti, he brought hope to the hearts of the Kacharis, Miris, Garos and Mikirs. In the nam-ghars or houses of worship that he established, all were equal and all had access to God. Today almost every village in Assam has a nam-ghar. Besides being the venue of regular nam-karitan and festivals, the nam-ghar is the centre of all public activities. This has given rise to a type of rural panchayat which has remained a powerful religious and social institution to this day. Srimanta Sankaradeva was born into the Shiromani (chief) Baro-Bhuyans family, near Bordowa in Nagaon in a village called Ali-pukhuri in c1449. The Baro-Bhuyans were independent landlords in Assam, and belonged to the kayastha Hindu caste. His family-members, including parents Kusumvara and Satyasandhya Devi, were saktas. The Saint lost both his father and his mother at a very tender age and was raised by his grandmother Khersuti. He began attending the tol or chatrasaal (school) of the renowned scholar Mahendra Kandali at the age of 12 and soon wrote his first verses:

karatala kamala kamaladala nayana |  
 bhavadava dahana gahana vana sayana ||  
 napara napara para satarata gamaya |  
 sabhaya mabhaya bhaya mamahara satataya ||  
 kharatara varasara hatadasa vadana |  
 khagachara nagadhara fanadhara sayana ||  
 jagadagha mapahara bhavabhaya tarana |  
 parapada layakara kamalaja nayana ||

The complete poem was written before he was taught the vowels except, of course, the first one, and is often cited as an example of the early flowering of his poetic genius. He was physically very able, and according to legend, he could swim across the Brahmaputra while it was in spate. He left the tol in his late teens (c1469) to attend to his responsibilities as the Shiromani Bhuyan. He moved from Alipukhuri to Bordowa, and wrote his first work, Harishchandra upakhyan. Sankardeva produced a dance-drama called Cihna yatra, for which he painted the Sapta vaikuntha (seven heavens), guided the making of musical instruments and played the instruments himself.

At Bordowa, he constructed a dharmagrha or a Hari-grha (house of the Lord) in which he installed an image of Vishnu that was found during the construction of the grha. But it was not meant for worshipping; it was just a "showpiece of art work". In fact, he was absolutely against any kind of worshipping of Idols or Images of gods. He married his first wife Suryavati when he was in his early 20s. His wife died soon after his daughter Manu was born.

#### **Alipukhuri and Bordowa**

It is possible the death of his wife increased his spiritual inclination as his mind began to focus, more than ever before, on the transcendental. When his daughter turned nine, he married her off to Hari, handed over the Shiromaniship to his grand uncles and left for a pilgrimage (c1482). At this point of time, he was 32. The pilgrimage took him to Puri, Mathura, Dwaraka, Vrindavan, Gaya, Rameswaram, Ayodhya, Sitakunda and almost all the other major seats of the Vaishnavite religion in India. At Badrikashrama, he composed his first bargeet-mana meri ram charanahi lagu-in Brajavali. He returned home to Ali-pukhuri after 12 years (his family had moved back from Bordowa in his absence). During his pilgrimage, he witnessed the Bhakti movement that was in full bloom in India at that time.

After his return, he refused to take back the Shiromaniship. On his grandmother's insistence, he married Kalindi at the age of 44. Finally, he moved back to Bordowa and constructed his first naamghar (prayer hall), and began preaching. He wrote Bhakti pradipa and Rukmini harana. Soon after, he received a copy of the Bhagavata Purana from Jagadisa Misra of Tirhut which had in it commentaries from Sridhara Swami of Puri, an Advaita scholar, and began rendering it into Assamese. He also began composing the Kirtana

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ghosha. The 13 years at Ali-pukhuri was the period during which he reflected deeply on Vaishnavism and on the form that would best suit the spiritual and ethical needs of the people.

### **Dhuwahat**

From Ali-pukhuri he moved again to Gajalasuti and then back to Bordowa. In the mean time the Bhuyans were getting weak politically and Bordowa was attacked by the neighboring tribes. Sankaradeva had to move again from place to place. At Gangmau he stayed for five years where his son Ramananda was born. While at Gangmau, the Koch king Viswa Singha attacked the Ahoms. The Bhuyans fought for the Ahoms and the Koch king was defeated. Due to the unsettled situation at Gangmau Sankaradeva next moved to Dhuwahat, present day Majuli, now an island on the Brahmaputra.

At Dhuwahat, he met his spiritual successor Madhavadeva. Madhavadeva, a sakta, got into a religious altercation with his brother-in-law Ramadasa who had recently converted to Vaishnavism. Ramadasa took him to Sankaradeva, who, after a long debate, could finally convince him of the power and the efficacy of Naam Dharma. At Dhuwahat he initiated many others into his religion and continued composing the Kirtana ghosha. He tried to appease the brahmins by gentle persuasion and debate, but they felt threatened by the emergence of a new religion propagated by a non-brahmin. Some brahmins submitted a complaint with the Ahom king Suhungmung, who summoned Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva to court. They gave adequate replies to the royal queries and were let off.

Though the relationship with the Ahom royalty began cordially, it soon deteriorated. Once on the charge of dereliction of duty, Hari, Sankaradeva's son-in-law, and Madhavadeva were arrested and sent to the capital Garhgaon, where Hari was executed. Madhavadeva's life was spared but he was imprisoned for a year. This incident pained Sankaradeva much and he, along with his family and Madhavadeva, journeyed toward the Koch kingdom. At Dhuwahat, he wrote the drama Patniprasada.

### **Patbausi**

At Sunpora he initiated Bhavananda, a rich trader who had extensive business interest in the Garo and Bhutan hills besides Kamarupa. The trader, Narayana Das, settled at Janiya near Barpeta and took to agriculture. A man of the world otherwise, he soon flourished and became a provider to Sankaradeva and his devotees. He came to be known popularly as Thakur Ata.

After a great deal of moving, Sankaradeva settled at Patbausi near Barpeta and constructed a Kirtanghar (house of prayer). Some of the people he initiated here are Chakrapani Dwija and Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya, brahmins; Ketai Khan, a kayastha; Govinda, a Garo; Jayarama, a Bhutia; Murari, a Koch and Chandsai a Muslim. He also befriended Ananta kandali, a profound scholar of Sanskrit, who translated parts of the Bhagavata Purana. Damodardeva, another brahmin, was initiated by Sankaradeva and he later became the founder of the Brahma Sanghati sect of Sankaradeva's religion.

Among his literary works, he completed his rendering of the Bhagavata Purana and wrote other independent works. He continued composing the Kirtana Ghosha, further translated the first book of the Ramayana (uttarakanda) and instructed Madhavadeva to translate the last book (adikanda), portions that were left undone by the 14th century poet Madhav Kandali. He wrote four dramas: Rukmini harana, Parijata harana, Keligopala and kalidamana. Another drama written at Patbausi, kamsa vadha, is lost. At Patbausi, he had lent his bargeets numbering around 240 to Kamala Gayan. But unfortunately, his house was gutted and most of the bargeets were lost. Since that incident Sankaradeva stopped composing bargeets. Of the 240, 34 remain today.

Sankaradeva once again left for a pilgrimage with a large party of 117 disciples that included Madhavadeva, Ramarama, Thakur Ata and others. Madhavadeva, on the request of Sankaradeva's wife Kalindi urged him to return from Puri and not proceed to Vrindavana. He returned to Patbausi within six months.

### **Kochbehar**

On hearing complaints that Sankaradeva was corrupting the minds of the people by spreading a new religion, Naranarayana the Koch king, ordered Sankaradeva's arrest. Sankaradeva managed to go into hiding, but Narayan Das Thakur Ata and Gokulchand were captured. They were taken to Kochbehar and subjected to inhuman torture, but they did not divulge the location where their Guru was staying, and the royals soon gave up. In the meantime Chilarai, the general of the Koch army and brother of Naranarayana, who had been influenced by the religion and had married Kamalapriya, the daughter of Sankaradeva's cousin Ramaraya, arranged for Sankaradeva's audience with Naranarayana.

As he moved up the steps to the throne, Sankardev sang his Sanskrit totaka hymn (composed extempore) to God, and as he sat down, he sang a borgeet, narayana kahe bhakati karu tera. Naranarayana was overwhelmed by the Saint's personality. The king then asked Sankaradeva's opponents to prove their complaint. After Sankaradeva defeated them in the debate, Naranarayana declared him free from all allegations. Sankaradeva began attending Naranarayana's court at the king's request. When he met Naranarayana, he was well over a hundred years old and had just three more years to live. After the debate, Sankaradeva shuttled between Kochbehar and Patbausi. On the request of Nara Narayan and Chilarai he supervised the creations of the 60mx30m woven Vrindavani vastra, that depicted the playful activities of Krishna in Vrindavana. This was presented to the Koch king.

### **End**

He made arrangements with Madhavadeva and Thakur Ata and gave them various instructions at Patbausi and left the place for the last time. He set up his home at Bheladonga in Kochbehar. During his stay at Kochbehar, Naranarayana expressed his wish to be initiated. Sankaradeva was reluctant to convert a king and declined to do so. According to one of the biographers (Ramcharan Thakur), a painful boil-a visha phohara - had appeared in some part of his body and this led to the passing away of the Saint. According to other accounts (Guru Charit Katha et al.), Naranarayan's adamance that he be initiated into the new religion led the saint to surrender his life to the Lord by way of meditative communion. Thus, in 1568, after leading a most eventful life dedicated to enlightening humanity; the Mahapurusha died - within six months of his stay at Bheladonga - at the remarkable age of 120 years.

### **Eka Sarana**

Sankaradeva used the form of Krishna to preach devotion to a single God (eka sarana), who can be worshiped solely by uttering His various names (naam). In contrast to other bhakti forms, eka sarana

follows the dasya attitude (a slave to God). Moreover, unlike the 'Gaudiya Vaishnavism' of Bengal, Radha is not worshiped along with Krishna. In uttering the name of God, Hari, Rama, Narayana and Krishna are most often used.

Sankaradeva himself and the religion in general are particularly antagonistic to saktism which was strongly prevalent in Assam at the time. This probably explains the non-use of Radha as an icon. A non-brahmin, Srimanta Sankaradeva started a system of initiation (saran Iowa) into his religion. He caused a huge Social revolution by fighting against anti-social elements like casteism prevailing at that time. He initiated people of all castes and religions, including Muslims. After initiation, the devotee is expected to adhere to the religious tenets of eka sarana. Failure to adhere to these tenets led to ex-communication in certain cases. Though he himself married twice, had children and led the life of a householder, his disciple Madhavadeva did not. Some of his followers today follow celibate monkhood (kevaliya bhakat) in the Vaishnavite monasteries - the satras.

The people who practice his religion are called variously as Mahapurushia, Sarania or Sankari.

## **Works**

### **Literary**

Sankaradeva produced a large body of work. Though there were others before him who wrote in the language of the common man - Madhav Kandali who translated the Ramayana into Assamese in the 14th century - his was the first ramayana to be written in a modern Indian language. His language is lucid, his verses lilting, and he infused bhakti into everything he wrote. His magnum opus is his Kirtana-ghosha, a work so popular that even today it is found in nearly every household in Assam. It contains narrative verses glorifying Krishna meant for community singing. It is a bhakti kayva par excellence, written in a lively and simple language, it has "stories and songs for amusement [for children], it delights the young with true poetic beauty and elderly people find here religious instruction and wisdom".

For most of his works, he used the Assamese language of the period so the lay person could read and understand them. But for dramatic effect in his songs and dramas he used Brajavali, an artificial mixture of Braj language and Assamese. Other literary works include the rendering of eight books of the Bhagavata Purana including the Adi Dasama (Book X), Harishchandra-upakhyana (his first work), Bhakti-pradip, the Nimi-navasiddha-samvada (conversation between King Nimi and the nine Siddhas), Bhakti-ratnakara (Sanskrit verses, mostly from the Bhagavata, compiled into a book), Anadi-patana (having as its theme the creation of the universe and allied cosmological matters), Gunamala and many plays like Rukmini haran, Patni prasada, Keli gopala, Kurukshetra yatra and Srirama vijaya. There was thus a flowering of great Bhakti literature during his long life of 120 years.

### **Poetic works**

- Kirtana-ghosha
- Harishchandra-upakhyana
- Rukmini-harana
- Ajamilopakhya
- Bali-chalana
- Kurukshetra-yatra
- Gopi-uddhava-samvada
- Amrta-manthana
- Krishna-prayana
- Kamajaya

### **Bhakti Theory**

- Bhakati-pradipa
- Anadi-patana
- Nimi-navasiddha-samvada
- Bhakti Ratnakara (in Sanskrit)
- Gunamala

### **Drama (Ankia Nat)**

- Cihna Yatra (lost)
- Patni-prasada
- Kalia-damana
- Keli-gopala
- Rukmini-harana
- Parijata-harana
- Srirama-vijaya

Sankaradeva was the fountainhead of the Ankiya naat, a form of one-act play. In fact, his Cihna Yatra - staged by him when he was only 19 - is regarded as one of the first open-air theatrical performances in the world. Cihna yatra was probably a dance drama and no text of that show is available today. Innovations like the presence of a Sutradhara (narrator) on the stage, use of masks etc., were used later in the plays of other eminent playwrights. These cultural traditions still form an integral part of the heritage of the Assamese people.

### **Songs**

- Borgeet (composed 240, but only 34 exist now)
- Bhatima
  - Deva bhatima - panegyrics to God
  - Naat bhatima - for use in dramas
  - Raja bhatima - panegyrics to kings (to king Nara Narayan)

The Borgeets (literally: great songs) are devotional songs, set to music and sung in various raga styles. These styles are slightly different from either the Hindustani or the Carnatic styles. The songs themselves are written in the 'Brajavali' language.

*Dance*

**Sattriya dance**, that Sankaradeva first conceived and developed and which was later preserved for centuries by the sattras, is now among the classical dance forms of India.



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