

boarding school. But he found the hard work at studies very irksome and tried to steal a day's holiday by bribing the *pandit* with a little money and a piece of cloth. Kandali, however, reported the whole matter to Sankara's grandmother, who scolded the grandchild very severely indeed. The reprimand had the desired effect, for Sankara spared no pains to pore over ancient folios. He achieved miracles by becoming a scholar in the conventional Sanskrit lore in about six years, by being able to compose a hymn in the tripping *totaka* metr (rhyme without vowel symbol) at the beginning of his student career, and by writing in verse a narrative, *Harischandra-upakhyâna*, when still at school. He paid his *guru* handsomely for the education he got and returned to his family.

Sankara's relatives insisted on his taking up the duties of *Siromani Bhuyan*, whereas he himself preferred a life of scholastic and religious persuasion. Under the kinsfolk's pressure he was forced to marry at the age of twenty-one. He was also installed as *Siromani*. All the same, he did not give up his scholarly habits. About four years after the marriage a daughter was born that was followed soon by the death of Sankara's wife, which made him lose all interest in worldly life. He waited till the sixth or seventh year of his daughter so that she might be married to an able *Kayastha* youth. This done he assigned the over-lordship to two of his uncles and set out on his first pilgrimage at the age of thirty-two years in 1481 AD in the company of seventeen others, including his teacher, Mahendra Kandali, and his lifelong friend and associate, Ramarama Vipra. He visited Puri, Gaya, Prayaga, Vrindavana, Mathura, Kurukshetra and other holy places. It is not certain whether he traveled in Southern India as some later biographers

would like us to believe. It was at Badarikashrama that he made one of his earliest lyrics (*bargita*) beginning

*Rest my mind, rest on the feet of Rama, Seest thou not the great and approaching ?*

*My mind, every moment life is shortening, just heed, any moment it might fleet off.*

It is clear that a sense of transitoriness of life and the world had seized the mind of this young man very strongly. Although he remained away from home for twelve years, it is probable that he spent a considerable part of this long time in Puri. Born a *Sakta*, he seems to have a revelation there and to have come to the firm faith that devotion to one god, Lord Krishna or *Jagannatha*, alone could lead men to Supreme Bliss. He had no spiritual preceptor and *Jagannatha* is considered to have taken place in his life.

When Sankara returned home in 1493 AD his mind was charged with the warmth of a new faith of Love, *bhakti dharma*. He saw how the holy places like Puri and Varanasi were echoing with a new type of songs. Fain would he now devote all his energies to the propagation of his *dharma*. His kinshfolk took note of this and pressed on him to marry again and resumed the duties of *Bar-Bhuyan* or *Siromani Bhuyan*. He yielded on the first point and married Kalindi, but, declining to be an administrator again. Had a temple built for him so that he could sit with other people to discuss matters spiritual and hold prayers. A Tirhut Brahmin, Jagadisa Misra, brought him from Puri the full text of the *Bhagavata-Purana*, furnished with Sridhara Swami's *Bhavartha-dipika* commentary. He went deep into this *bhakti* text as interpreted by one of its best commentators,

and seriously started on the programme of proselytizing and building a literature in the Assamese language to incorporate the soul of *bhakti*. Thus he composed some sections of his most popular work. '*Kirtana-ghosha*' narrating tales from the *Bhagavata-purana* and other holy texts. In these he propounded the doctrines of his *ekasarana nâma dharma*, enjoining unswerving devotion to one god, Vishnu-Krishna and, prayers as the sole *sâdhana* of that devotion.

It is about this time that Sankaradeva is believed to have organized a dramatic performance, *Chihna-yâtrâ*, depicting Vishnu in his celestial abode in a series of seven scenes painted as background on paper. For this he had to make very elaborate preparations by having *mridangas* and other instruments made for him and rehearsing the actors and musicians. He himself played the role of Narayana at one stage and charmed the theatre-goers with marvelous dances. A great number of people were attracted to him, and he now became a preacher, receiving his teacher, Mahendra Kandali, and his class-mate and family priest Ramarama Vipra, among the first neophytes.

The Bhuyan's territories bordered on the lands held by the Tibeto-Burman tribe, Kacharis, who started creating troubles for these chiefs leading to skirmishes between the two groups. Sankaradeva, who wanted a quiet life for his spiritual activities, migrated with all the Bhuyans to the northern bank of the Brahmaputra and settled finally at a place, Gangamau, near modern Biswanathghat. But the Cochins under the leadership of Visvasimha were establishing a Kingdom with Coch-Bihar as its centre, and the Bhuyans in Kamarupa were already feeling the impact of Visvasimha's expansionism. Seeing this, Sankaradeva and his company of Bhuyans moved once again

to the east and, entering the Ahom Kingdom made their abode in the River Island of Majuli at a place called *Dhuwâhât* or Beloguri. *Dhuwâhât* has its derivative from the word '*Bhuyâhât*', which was a commercial centre or *hât* populated by Bhuyâns. It was here, on one hand, that Sankaradeva, acquired the companionship of a brilliant Kayastha youth, Madhavadeva, later to be his closest disciple and finest apostle, after a very keen debate, for the latter was till then a staunch Sâkta, believing that the primordial power of the world in the form of a goddess has to be propitiated with many animal sacrifices and, on the other hand, he had a stiff confrontation with the *tântrics* and scholars belonging to various shades of Indian thought. Some of his protagonists of heterodox faiths abused the ears of the Ahom monarch of the land with foul reports about his missionary activities. The Saint was summoned to the capital for a trial, but had an honourable acquittal when facts about his faith and philosophy were made known to the King. Nothing daunted, the adversaries tried another trick and raised fears of subversion in the King's mind. The Bhuyans of Dhuwahat were called to an elephant-catching *kheddâ* operation but, not being used to it, let the elephants escape through the areas of their vigilance. The King ordered arrest of the principal Bhuyans. Sankaradeva somehow escaped, but his son-in-law Hari together with Madhavadeva were taken in chains to the capital, Gargaon. The son-in-law was put to the executioner's sword and Madhavadeva, apparently saintly, was detained there for six months. This greatly embittered the Saint's feelings, who on Madhava's return decided to go to the Coch Kingdom, because the new King, Naranarayana, and his brother and commander-in-chief of the army, Chilaraya, were known to have a love of learning and piety.