

Naranarayana and Chilaraya led an inroad into the Ahom Kingdom in 1546 AD and advanced as far as Narayanpur at a small distance from Dhuwahat. Sankaradeva and others took advantage of this and with the help of some Vhuyans (Bhuyans) already in the Coch camp sailed down the Brahmaputra in a number of boats. They entered Kâmarupa and after staying in several places settled at Barpeta. His life in the Coch State was of comparative quiet. But even here the old priesthood offered hostility to his creed and tried to win over the King against his church. On the other hand, he acquired a great number of disciples here, and it was to his advantage that Chilaraya married the daughter of his cousin, Ramaraya. Some good people like Narayana Thakura, and others joined the order of Sankaradeva.

About 1550 AD Sankaradeva took 120 disciples and set out on a second pilgrimage to Puri, coming back home after some six months. An old man now, he devoted his time to holding congregations, receiving neophytes and writing books. Among the new converts the notable were Ananta Kandali, a Brahmin scholar and poet, the chief of Heremda, and a Muslim, Chandcai. The activities of the *Vaishnava* fraternity increased to such a degree as to cause disquiet in the old priestly circles, which started a campaign of vilification in the capital and elsewhere. Naranarayana was much infuriated to hear exaggerated and distorted reports about the Saint's doings, and sent some sentries to bring down the social rebel in chains. The saint could not be apprehended. Two of his followers, Narayana Thakura and Gokulachanda, were dragged from Barpeta to Coch Behar and put to the severest forms of torture in an attempt to extort news about the Master. The two Vaishnavas refused to divulge

anything and were, therefore, sold to some Bhutanese traders, who, however, were impressed by their devoutness and released them. The two sentries who carried Narayana and Gokulchanda back to the capital became ready converts to the new faith.

The King sent his men a second time to bind down Sankaradeva. Chilaraya, however, sensed his brother's fury and sent his own men to take his uncle-in-law safe to his own quarters. When Naranarayana pressed on Chilaraya to hand over the religious rebel to him, the latter obtained the assurance from the King that no injury would be done to the person of the Saint before the trial was over. Sankaradeva accordingly presented himself at the Coch royal court. His genial personality, his poetical and philosophical disposition coming out in the measure of a few Sanskrit and Assamese verses of his own composition, which he recited with his deep and mellifluous voice, and in the form of the discourse that immediately followed, made a very deep impression on the King, who had his early education in Varanasi. Day in and day out, there was a series of religious disputation with the Brahmin scholars of the land who for the most held *tântric* views, and each day brought signal triumph for the Vaishnava saint. The result was that Naranarayana became a friend to the Saint and remained so till the last and that Sankaradeva had often to shuttle between his temple (*Sattra*) at Patbausi (Barpeta) and Coch Behar. He often stayed with Chilaraya, who built him a temple at Bhela in the capital itself, and inspired him to have a forty-yard-long piece of cloth woven to depict Krishna's life in Vrindavana in colours and to write a drama, *Rama-Vijaya*, and produced it with his (Chilaraya's) actors (*nartakas*). This piece of writing is dated 1490 *saka* (1568 AD).

Within a few months of its production the Master passed away on the 7th or 21st Bhadra of the same *Saka* year and was given a state funeral on the banks of the small River, *Torocho*.

Sankaradeva was primarily a religious leader and reformer. He found Assam disunited through many creeds and forms. There was no peace in the land as it was divided politically. He himself belonged to the ruling Bhuyan Community, which held various principalities spotting the plains from the northeastern corner of the modern Coch Behar. The different tribes held their own in different places, particularly in the hills and in the backwoods. Of the different religions prevalent in the land, Saktism was the strongest and it got mixed up with debased forms of Buddhist *tântricism* to create a turbid atmosphere. The *Kâlikâ Purâna*, a 'left-hand' text, ordained *pancamakara*, the *Sabarotsava* reeking of frank sensuality, a great variety of blood sacrifices, virgin worship, and other peculiar forms. Some of these extreme rituals were carried on fearlessly in the main centers of *Saktism* like Nilachala (Kâmâkshyâ temple) and Sadiya (Tamresvari temple). The sacrifice of animals in their hundreds was revolting to Sankaradeva and some of his followers, and they declared themselves strongly against it. In order to get rid of other unhappy associations of *tantricism*, they described the worship of *Sakti*, *Siva* and other deities whatsoever. In the words of Dr. S.K. Chatterji (1970), "Sankaradeva was successful in applying the salve of religion to a people distracted in mind and body and brought to them spiritual peace and contentment and helped them on their way to having a better organized life". Fortunately for the people the Ahom power, established in the eastern region early in the 13th Century, expanded westward, and the 16th Century saw the rise and expansion of the Coch

power further west so that the small principalities of Bhuyans and others were subjugated, thus leading to a balance of power between the Ahoms and Coches so that a new Assamese culture, as was evolved by Sankaradeva, could emerge as a cementing principle over Northeastern India with its predominantly Mongoloid population.

The particular form of *Vaishnavism* evolved by Sankaradeva is known as *ekasarana namadharma* (religion of prayers with the ultimate refuge in one God). It enjoined the worship of one God, that is, Vishnu in his many incarnations, chiefly as Krishna and Rama, and interdicted its votaries from the worship of any other deity, because as the *Bhâgavata-purâna* urges, it is enough to water the roots of a tree by which the branches and foliage get their sap or give food to the *pranas* by which limbs get their nourishment. Or, as the *Bhâgavadgîtâ* demands, one should take sole refuge in the Bhâgavat, the Powerful Lord, who saves one from the faults of omission of all other duties, *bhakti* included in its fold eight different forms of *kirtana* (recital of praises to the Lord), *sravana* (listening to the praise of the Lord), *archana* or *puja* (worship to an idol with flowers and other offerings), and so on. But Sankaradeva declared *kirtana* and *sravana* to be the main forms out of these eight, and that is why his religion is called *sravana-kirtana-dharma* or *nâma-dharma*. Then again, it is popularly known as *Mahâpurushiyâ dharma*, because its worship is of the *mahâpurusha* (*parama-purusha* or *purushottama*), the Supreme person, who lords over Primal *Prakriti* and *Purusha*, the procreators of the world of being. The holy services in the temples (known as *Sattra*) are known as *Hariprasanga* or *Nâma-prasanga* and these are mostly congregational prayer in songs, recitations,

expositions of *Sâstras* and, sometimes dramatic pieces. These could be attended by all men (not women though) irrespective of caste distinctions and could be conducted by persons not ranked according to caste. The religious preceptor could also be of a lower social order than the disciple. Thus a sort of social equality was achieved even though the caste order was not done away with.

Sankaradeva and his chief apostle Madhavadeva composed a large literature, which provides the canonical basis as well as materials for the daily and seasonal temple services. There are songs like *ghosâ* (containing a couplet) *bargita* (a type of song tuned to different melody-modes at par Indian classical *râgas*), *bhatimâ* (eulogistic song), and *kirtana-ghoshâ* (sometimes forming part of a long narrative). In some of Sankaradeva's books like *Harichandra-upakhyana*, *Amrita-manthana* and *Balichalana*, stories from the *Bhagavata-purâna* and Vaishnavite tales from other *Purânas* are retold in simple verses. Sometimes again, the Saint follows the original *Bhâgavata* in making a sequence of verses, which may not conform to the set standard of a *khandâ-kâvya* or narrative. In *Bhakti-pradipa* and *Niminava-siddha-samvada*, he expounds the principles of *bhakti*. His Sanskrit treatise, *Bhaktiratnakara*, on the same themes covers a large field and draws from various *Purânas*, works like *Bhâgavadgitâ* and authors like Sankara the Advaitin, Krishna Misra Yati and Silhana Misra. He has six dramas that include *Rukmini-harana*, *Parijata-harana* and others, the tradition of the production of which still continues in some *Sattras* in its glory. These dramas contain in them a number of well-made Sanskrit verses and a number of songs (*ankiya gita*