



सत्यमेव जयते

SPEECH

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SANKARDEVA IN THE KOCH KINGDOM

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One of the greatest Saints of Medieval India, Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568 A.D.) has left his mark in the history of mankind, as one of the most versatile legendary personalities of all times. He played the role of a Saviour of humanity, more particularly, in the eastern parts of Bharat Varsha-the vast North Eastern Region, known as Asama-Kamrupa-Kamata of the 15th and the 16th centuries, which comprised Gaur-desa (undivided Bengal and parts of Bihar) and almost, the entire North East. He was a versatile genius – a yoga expert, an ace swimmer, a bull fighter and sportsman, a culinary expert, a master weaver cum designer, propounder of Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma or Neo-Vaisnavism, spiritual guru, social reformer, an emancipator of the women, an artist, a litterateur, a celebrated scholar, a linguist with sound knowledge and understanding of Assamese, Sanskrit, Prakrit, Brajavali, Maitheli etc. He was also an administrator, an outstanding educationist, a musical maestro, a master craftsman, an actor, a playwright, a lyricist who composed many Borgits (Noble Psalms), a votary of secularism, an advocate of casteless, egalitarian society and a great unifier of people of diverse races, tribes and religions. All these virtues and qualities combined in the personality of one person; and his epoch-making contribution to the society, make Sankardeva outlive both time and space, even 447 years of his passing away in 1568 A.D.

Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the celebrated Oriental scholar, paid reverential homage to Sankardeva in the following way:

“The greatest name in early Assamese literature is that of Sankardeva, and he has left his stamp on Assamese literature and culture, on Assamese religion and way of life. He was a poet and saint, religious leader and social reformer all in one, and his influence on Assamese life and literature is comparable to that of Tulsidasa for the people of the upper Gangetic valley..... The Eka-Sarana Dharma of Sankardeva deserved to be better known in other parts of India, but each area developed its own form of a common Pan-Indian Vaishnava religion of faith in a loving God, and this, coupled with Assam’s isolation probably prevented wider spread of the Eka-Sarana faith in lands outside Assam..... He gave to Assam a new discipline of faith in a single divinity, and helped Assam to break away with a past with its complicated esoteric doctrines and unmeaning practices and gave to the people something simple and straightforward, divested of all questionable associations or implications. He was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing in a purer spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest India has produced, and he deserved to be mentioned with Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Basavappa, Ramananda, Kabir, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak and Tulsidasa. He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of Medieval India as a whole shone upon the life of Assam.”

“Sri Sankara-deva of Assam, who lived in the 15th – 16th centuries, is one of the greatest saints and sages of our country who spent his life in bringing before his people the ideals of a good life conceived on the background of a faith in one single Deity. He was emphatically for the abandon in faith of the human being, to the grace and mercy and love of God. Sankara-deva found his people in Assam disunited through various religious ideals and also through political turmoil, and he 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 organised life. Sankara-deva certainly belongs to the first rank of the saints and sages of mediaeval India.....Sankara-deva is specially

connected with Assam, but he belongs to the whole of India, and he has also a universal quality, as a man of faith and religion, of learning and organization. The *Eka-Saraniya Dharma* or the religion of seeking refuge in one God, with all its philosophy and doctrines as well as its ritual and its cult is something which is unique for Assam, and yet it has its pan-Indian quality and character." [Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Maheswar Neog, Extracts from Comments by Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, 1965.]

Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati pays his homage to Sankardeva thus-

"Sankardeva has given Assam a new life, letters and a state. Rulers have come and gone and their kingdoms perished in the dust, but Sankara's state endures and broad in the hearts of men his power survives." [Sankardeva Studies In Culture, Edited by Bhoba Prasad Chaliha, Page 15, Edition 1998, Article-" A New Life, Letters and A State", by Bani Kanta Kakati.].

Sankardeva was born in the province of Assam, at a time, when the people were following different religious faiths like extreme form of *Saktism*, *Saivism*, a debased form of *Buddhism* and many animistic faiths, as also demeaning practices and *Tantric* rituals, inclusive of human sacrifices at many temples. The entire province was partitioned between the *Koch* and the *Ahoms*, who ruled over the western and the eastern territories respectively. There were also numerous Mahameddan raids from Bengal. The forces of Aryan civilization seem to have been spent up in this region: there arose the religion of bloody sacrifice, from which even human beings were not spared. It is said that there was a class of persons, called the *Bhogis*, who were voluntary victims. The moral forces of society were fully exhausted when Sankardeva commenced his mission. It was an up hill task for him to stand against such an order of things especially when the priestly classes, whose professional interest would be at stake, rose against him in concerted activities. Moreover, they could engage the King's sympathy on their side. But the *Kayastha* youth (Sankara), with the serene equanimity of a philosopher, the boldness of a martyr and the farsightedness of a prophet, stood up alone unaided, every moment subjected to persecution, to remedy those social evils, which in the name of religion, were demoralising the people. [Sankardeva by Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati, PP 203-04, BaniKanta Kakati-The Man And His Works, Publication Board, Assam, Edited-Tabu Taid and Ranjit Dev Goswami, 1987.]

Son of Siromani Kusumbar Bhuyan, the then Governor of the principality of 'Bara-Bhuyan', present Central Assam, comprising Marigaon and Nagaon districts, and born to Satyasandhya Devi, the daughter of a powerful Bhuyan landlord, Sankardeva had the least inclination for the power and pelf of the mundance world. Having lost his mother in early childhood, and father also after a few years of his birth, Sankardeva known as 'Sankar' as a young boy, was brought up by his grandmother, Khersuti. Fond of fun and frolicking, the young Sankar had a late start of his education, after he was sent to the 'tol' (school) of Mahendra Kandali, where he was admitted at the age of twelve years, at the insistence of his loving but farsighted grandmother. He completed his education and the study of the scriptures, showing promise of a great future, just in seven years' time, to the fullest satisfaction of his teacher. Because of his high erudition and many godly qualities, the teacher added the epithet 'deva' (god) after his name 'Sankar'; thence he came to be called as Sankardeva by every one. He was then about 19 years old. During his stay at the boarding school of Mahendra Kandali, he developed great interest in the episodes of young *Krisna*, as described in the *Bhagavata-purana* and the philosophy of life, death, existence, action, incarnation and so forth, as spoken by *Krisna* in the *Gita*. For sometime, he took charge of the 'Bhuyan principality' as Governor, against his will, due to the insistence of his paternal grand parents. He was married to

Satyabati, at the age of about 22 years, again due to the insistence of his family elders, though he had the least inclination to lead a married life. Having lost his wife after about three years, soon after the birth of a daughter, Sankardeva left Alipukhuri (Bardowa), the place of his birth, accompanied by seventeen 'bhaktas' for an All India Tour, popularly known as his first pilgrimage. He travelled different holy places, over a 12 year-long period, inclusive of Mathura, Brindavan, Prayag, Kasi or Benaras, Ayuddhya, Badarikasram, Dwarka, Jagannath Puri etc. On his return to his ancestral village, Sankardeva now fully devoted his time to *Krisna-bhakti* or Eka-Sarana Nama-Dharma' (monotheism, with Krisna as his sole deity). He now set up a Namghar (Prayer-hall) at Bardowa, where he spent his days in devotion to *Hari* (another name of *Krisna*), giving initiation to hundreds of devotees to his faith, besides writing his works, the first such composition being the *Hariscandra Upakkhyan* – a poetry in Sanskrit. Then he took to vernacular writings, in Assamese for the benefit of the not so literate common man. A major part of his monumental work – *Kirtana-ghosa* was written here. Cihna-yatra, depicting the seven 'Vaikunthas' was written in 1468 A.D., and Sankardeva staged it through paintings, music and illumination to the delight of thousands of spectators, Sankardeva playing the role of 'sutradhara' or linkman (between the actors and the audience). This work makes Sankardeva a 'modern day' pioneer playwright of the world, which in fact preceded Shakespeare by more than a century. This fact is rarely known to most people in India, not to mention the outside world. This also is a pointer to the neglect, that the Mahapurush has been given, so far, may be due to general lack of interest in the culture, history and spiritualism of this interior part of India, or lack of sheer knowledge of history. [PP I-II, Introduction, Sankardeva: His Life, Preachings & Practices, Jyoti Prasad Rajkhowa].

Sankardeva propounded '*dasya-bhakti*' or total surrender to *Krisna* or *Hari* or *Rama*, out of the nine forms of '*bhakti*' or devotion to God, accepted by the Vaisnavite religion. He introduced his 'faith', in order to make the core of the Bhagavata and the Gita easily accessible to the illiterate and down trodden masses, as also the various ethnic tribes, who were then practicing different religious rituals, and to relieve the common man from the ritualistic excesses of priestly classes, and 'Bamacari or Brajayana' form of Buddhism. Sankardeva was totally against the cruel animal sacrifices, the exploitation of the women and girls in the name of religion, and the abominable human sacrifice, that was also practised at some temples of the '*Devi*' known by many names. Sankardeva's religion is simple, inexpensive, painless, without mind –boggling prescriptions of the Brahmanical religion with worshipping of many gods and goddesses and can be followed by any person, at any time of the day and night, even at work place, by simply practicing any of the three ways- '*sravana*' or hearing, '*kirtana*' or singing the glories of God and '*smarana*' or remembering the name '*Hari*' or '*Krisna*' or '*Rama*' or by any other name. His religion also includes four things or '*chari-bastu*' – '*Guru, Deva, Bhakat* or '*Bhakta and Nama*'. His '*Krisna-bhakti*' is total, unattached devotion, surrendering oneself to the service of *Hari*, as a servant does to the master. The slogan of his religion is, '*ek deo, ek seo, ek bine nahi keo*', that is – 'there is only one God, only there is one Service, and there is no other God but one. [PP II-III, Introduction, *Ibid*].

While propagating 'Eka Sarana Nama Dharma', Sankardeva and his followers incurred the ire of the priestly classes, who became afraid of losing their professional earnings. This led to a number of conspiracies against him, by the lodging of false complaints to the Ahom Kings during his stay in Asama or Saumara, and the Koch King Naranarayana, with his capital at Koch Behar, where Sankardeva shifted his place of 'campaign headquarters', towards the last twenty twenty two (three?) years of his life. But, through his extraordinary personality, virtuous character, erudition and unparalleled debating skills, together with thorough knowledge of the '*sastras*' or scriptures, he could overcome all opposition. Within a short period of his initial

campaigning, thousands of people from all walks of life, both members of ethnic tribes and others, including the socially 'inferior' sections of the Society joined his fold. This could happen without much effort, due to the principle of equality, that he preached and practiced, by making his religion accessible to all, without any caste distinctions. Although on the social front, the prevailing caste distinctions could not be disturbed, on the spiritual front, Sankardeva treated every one on the same footing, as the 'dasa' or slave (servant) of Krishna or Hari. Many members of the so called lower castes, tribes, scheduled castes and Muslims included, were elevated by Sankardeva to the status of Atai and Deuri- quite high up in the religious order. [PP III-IV, Introduction, Ibid].

In order to educate the people in the core of his religion, and to attract the masses to his fold, Sankardeva introduced certain major innovations, which were his own. These are the '*Nama-ghar*' or community prayer hall, several musical instruments, the Anka or One Act Play, the Bar-git or the 'Noble Psalm', the Bhaona or the Staging of his plays, 'bhaoria' or the actors, different masks (mukha) for different characters of the 'ankas', costumes of gods, kings, demons, warriors, jesters; 'alankar' or imitation ornaments of different kinds etc. He introduced different colour, using all indigenous raw material, i.e. hengul, haital, kajal, bali-chanda or silver dust etc. for the make-up of the players. A character Sutradhara or link man was introduced in the Ankas to explain the various events and to serve as a link between the Play and the audience, which is quite unique by itself. The Sutradhara- dance form is now recognised by the Government of India, as a major Classical Dance form of India. The '*Naam ghar*' is a community prayer hall, where apart from daily '*Nama-kirtana*', religious discourses, social, cultural, economic and educational problems of the village community are also discussed and resolved. Presently, there are above 100,000 such Nam-ghar, scattered around entire Assam, and also some neighbouring regions, which are all constructed by the village or local community. In addition to the '*Nama-ghar*', each Vaisnavite follower has a family prayer chamber at his or her house, known as the Gosain-ghar or the house of God, where daily prayers are offered by the members of the family. [P IV, Introduction, *ibid*].

Another unique gift of Sankardeva is the '*Sattra*' institution, which he started at Bardowa, by establishing, what he called a Than (*monastery*). Presently Assam has more than 800 such *Sattras*, spread all over the State., which still continue to serve as religious, cultural and educational centres, though initially, those were started mainly for Sankardeva's religious propaganda. All these '*Sattras*' are private institutions built up by the people, with their own toil, moil and money, who also used to choose the *Sattradhikar* or Spiritual Head, though there are many *Sattras*, whose Heads are appointed on hereditary basis.

In order to promote his religion as a religion of the masses, Sankardeva produced a huge quantity of vernacular literature in Assamese, Prakrit and Brajavali, and translated many Sanskrit scriptures into Assamese for the benefit of the common man. This made his religion extremely popular, and the common man could obtain direct access to God (Hari or Krishna or Govinda, Gopala, Rama, Jadupati, Jadurai, and many more names by which He is known), as against the Brahmanical Hindu religion, which made access to God possible only through the middlemen the priests. A large number of talented disciples and followers of the Saint, the more distinguished amongst them being, Madhabdeva, Damodardeva, Ananta Kandali, Ram Saraswati, Purushuttam Bidyabagish, Vaikunthanath Bhattadeva and others replicated his efforts, by producing a vast treasury of '*Bhagavata*' literature, both in poetry and prose, besides in dialogue form. A number of his scholar disciples also composed valuable works, based on the episodes of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two great Indian Epics. The penultimate work of Sankardeva was the '*Ram Vijay Nat*', which he composed at the request of the Koch

Generalissimo Chilarai, and also staged it at his request. For writing these works, Sanchi-pat or leaves from the bark of 'Sanchi' plant were generally used; Tula-pat or paper made of cotton was also in use during Sankardeva's times. Numerous literary creations were made in all the branches of Literature- prose, poetry, plays, songs, hymns, stories, biographies, grammar and so forth, by Sankardeva and his illustrious disciples. [P V, Introduction, *ibid*].

For this reason, Sankardeva's times are regarded as the 'Golden Age' of Assamese Literature, also popularly called 'Sankari Renaissance', in the same light the 'European Renaissance', is described in history. But then, the History books, outside Assam, do not state anything about this epoch-making 'Renaissance', may be due to the geographical seclusion of this part of India, from the main land, or due to general neglect and apathy of the Indian and International scholars and historians, who concentrated their attention to the Indian mainland upto Bengal only. This unpardonable neglect has been repeated, exactly in the same manner, in the case of the Brahmaputra Valley Civilization, which finds no mention in History books. On the other hand, long chapters are devoted by most historians, to the Indus Valley and Gangetic Valley Civilization. [P V, Introduction, *ibid*].

The richest tributes that have been paid to Sankardeva came from his closest disciple and also a literary wizard, Madhavdeva, who expressed those in a verse.

Srimanta Sankara Hari Bhakatara.
Jana Jena Kalpataru
Tahanta binai Nai nai nai
Amar parama Guru II

The English transcript stands as - "Srimanta Sankara is, as it were, the tree that fulfils all kinds of desire (kalpa-taru) of the devotees of Hari. Verily, verily do I say I have no other great guru than Sri Sankardeva". [*Sankardeva Studies In Culture, Dr. Bani Kanta Kakati, Ibid, P-45, Article –Sankardeva and the Vaishnava Renaissance in Assam, Dr. Maheswar Neog.*]

Sahityarathi Laxminath Bezbarua pays his homage to Sankardeva in the following manner (English transcript). ['Wanted a Guru. An educated disciple here.' So I advertised throughout the world. Lo! Sankardeva, the Guru of the world, has been here even in my own house. Blind as I had been, I recognised him not.] [*Jagat-Guru Sankardeva, Dimbreswar Neog, IInd Edition, 1998, Published by Srimanta Sankardeva Sangha, Nagaon, Assam, Page before Contents*].

The 'Eka Sarana Naam-Dharma' or the *Bhakti* movement of Sankardeva, which extended open invitation to the people of different ethnic origins, castes, creeds or religious groups without any social discrimination and footing of equality, received tremendous response everywhere. His declaration that the simple singing of the tales of *Visnu-Krisna* and the taking of refuge in him, would be sufficient for the attainment of final beatitude encouraged numerous people to join his faith. Sankara's teachings, the growing popularity of his faith, and his personal popularity, caused so much concern amongst the priestly class that they demonstrated open hostility by abusing and molesting his followers. The priesthood practiced *Tantricism* and supported the various rituals and sacrifices, including human sacrifices, as done at Tamreswari, apart from animistic faiths and worshipping of trees, stones and other inanimate objects etc. The priests approached the ruling Ahom King, Suhungmung or Dihingia Raja, who was following their old faith, with the allegation that Sankara had tampered with their traditional religious practices. Sankara was immediately summoned to a trial, which, however was a summary. The King was not convinced about the guilt of Sankardeva and so he was

honourably acquitted; but the hostility of the priests continued with unabated fury. [P-108, Sankardeva.....*ibid*].

The priestly class felt very insecure and afraid, for the reason that their profession as priest in the Vedic rites and ceremonies, would be adversely affected by the simple 'Naam Prasana' introduced by Sankardeva. They also disliked Sankardeva's translating the Sanskrit Scriptures into the vernacular, thereby making those easily comprehensible to the common men, which privilege much hitherto being the monopoly of the Brahmins. In their complaint to the Ahom King Suhungmung, they alleged that Sankardeva, who was a Sudra or non-Brahmin was bringing disaster to the country by prohibiting solemnization of the ceremonial Vedic rites. The King summoned Sankardeva to his Court and arranged a debate between him and the Brahmin priests, in which Sankardeva defeated the priests and was duly awarded by the King. Meanwhile, the new *Naam Dharma* of Sankardeva got to its fold numerous followers. Besides, its democratic outlook and the emphasis on community feeling and brotherhood soon appeared to be a threat to the Ahom monarchy, whose principles of governance were based on despotism and negation of individual liberty of the subject population.

Sankara and his closest disciple Madhabdeba envisioned to carry on their mission of propagating the neo-Vaishnavism together with literary, social, cultural and other welfare oriented activities, by staying in the Ahom kingdom only. They had no intention to move towards the west of Kamarupa. But, they were totally shaken and mortified, due to the inhuman treatment meted out to their disciples by the Ahom king, Suklengmung (*Gargaiyan Raja*), the successor of Suhungmung or Dehingia Raja. During the period Madhabdeba, with his associate 'bhaktas' were visiting Upper Assam for propagating Vaishnavism, the Ahom king, under the influence of some crooked followers of Saktism, ordered their arrest. Accordingly, they were arrested and imprisoned, and on release they were assigned the difficult task of guarding royal elephants, during a kheda operation (elephant-catching operation, conducted by driving out the elephants from their natural habitat). Unfortunately, one elephant managed to flee. Having come to know about this, the king ordered the execution of Hari Bhuyan, son-in-law of Sankardeva, by severing his head with a sword after finding out that he was a family man. On being informed that Madhaba was a confirmed bachelor, and hence there won't be anyone to mourn his death, he was let off. Later, as Sankardeva came to know about the tragic happenings, he was shocked and grief-stricken by this ruthless and inhuman act of the Ahom king and decided to leave Dhuahat or Dhuyahati, rather move away from Asama, ruled by the ruthless Ahoms. [P-108, Sankardeva*ibid*].

The two incidents, namely the beheading of son-in-law, Hari and the continued hostility of the priestly class embittered and hurt his feelings and Sankardeva decided to leave Dhuwahat or Dhuyahati near Majuli, then in the Ahom kingdom. They heard of the Koch King Nara Narayana of Western Kamrupa, not only as a virtuous monarch, but also as a poet and scholar. Incidentally, this was the period, when Nara Narayana-Chilarai invaded Eastern Assam (Ahom kingdom) in 1546 A.D. [P-111, Sankardeva*ibid*].

By the down current of the Brahmaputra, Sankardeva passed by Khagarikata (Nagaon), Kaliabar, Siddhari, Bardowa, Darrang, Kuarbhag, Barbhag, Kheh (1), and then to Kapala, by the old course of the Brahmaputra, where Sankardeva stayed for six months. It is here that Madhabdeba's mother died. Then they left the place, again by the old course of the Brahmaputra, and passed by Sundari. The saying goes that Narakasur, famous king of Pragjyotishpura, collected two beautiful women from this place, though not a single woman of the like, could be had from five to ten villages, in the neighbourhood. So the place came to be

known as Sundari. Then they came to Ciralimukh or Bausi, where Madhavdeva stayed for sometime now. Others went by the same old course of the river, came to Sarpateswargram and through Gayajan came to Barpeta. Here they found a very big tree called Cunpora, and Sankardeva with his followers anchored their boats, under the tree. They found this place comfortable and stayed here for sometime. Sankardeva thereafter came to reside at different places in Barpeta. For three months, he stayed at Ganakkuchi and then left it to Madhaba and he himself came Kumarkuchi. It is here, that his daughter Vishnupriya died. Sankardeva then settled at Patbausi or Bausi with all his followers. At all the places Sankardeva visited, he had his prayer-houses constructed, where regular religious councils and discussions were held. [P-112, *Sankardeva ibid*].

During the relevant time, the entire region called Kamrupa, from the west of the Kalang was under the sway of the Koch king. It was in 1546 A.D., when Sankardeva was 97 years old, that he entered the Koch kingdom, though according to some in 1543 A.D. and at Bausi (Barpeta) he set up a Sattrā, erected a Namaghar and resumed propagation of his faith. Here Harideva, Damodardeva and many Brahmin pundits joined Sankardeva as disciples. Among the other important disciples who were initiated at Barpeta, were Sriram, Paramananda, Baloram the junior, Madhaba the junior, Gopal, Mukunda, Jatiram and Gokulchand. No less interesting is the initiation, of the king of Herhambapur, which was performed through Madhabdeva.

The most important event, that took place at Patbausi, is Sankardeva's meeting with Damodardeva, another pillar of Assam Vaisnavism.

Dimbeswar Neog gives the following narration from '*Guru-Carit*' about Sankara's meeting with Damodar, and the latter taking initiation from him.

Damodar, an honest person, was son of Dayal and he earned his livelihood through agriculture. He used to go to the fields every day, carrying a stick in his hand, a shovel on his shoulder, the rag in his loins. Due to his poverty, he could not buy a pair of bullocks, so he used the shovel (*kodal*) for tilling the soil. His cultivation yielded him crops for six months only; for the remaining six months of the year, he used to serve at other persons' house, and with such difficulties he used to sustain himself. One day, finding Damodar passing that way, Sankardeva called him. The Brahmin turned up, and stood nervously, before Sankara, saluting him, with folded hands. Sankara then asked him to tell about himself. Damodar said that, he used to live from hand to mouth, by working at other people's house, and that he was just out for his work. Sankara then advised him to take bath and come to his place, for serving that day. After sometime, the Brahmin returned to Sankara and stood saluting before him. Sankardeva welcomed him heartily, removed his anxiety and said.

'Hear the glories of Krisna here with the other devotees, and this is the service I want to have from you.' Damodar was thus used to a new life. Meanwhile his wife died, and on the occasion of her funeral ceremony, he got some money and things to pay homage to Sankardeva. Sankara looked at him and said:

'I have no need of this. Do take it back home. I tell you truly, do marry again; I will help you'. Damodar then said with folded hands:

'I have no mind to re-marry. What better gain can I have than singing the glories of God, in the company of your disciples? Have mercy on me, Bap (father), let all my former generations be delivered of sins.' So saying he prostrated at his feet. [P-152, *New Light On, History of Asomiya Literature*].

In the Koch Kingdom also, Sankardeva had to face the challenge of the priestly class, but he ultimately vanquished them in open debates, in the court of Moharaj Naranarayana. Highly impressed by Sankardeva's depth of knowledge, pristine look and his saintly character, Naranarayana established him by appointing as the Gomasta or Administrator of Barpeta region. The king also donated him lands to establish a Sattrā, at Bheladanga, later came to be known as Madhupur or Bhela- Madhupur, at Koch Behar, near his capital. Besides, Naranarayana issued a Declaration permitting the free propagation of his faith and teachings amongst his subject population. *The ground situation preceding the above benevolence of Naranarayana is narrated hereunder.*

During his stay at Patbausi or Bausi, many Brahmin scholars came there to have debates with the Saint, but all of them faced defeats, became speechless before him, and left the place. They were determined to take revenge on Sankardeva and accordingly, hatched a conspiracy and started malicious rumour against the Saint. They also submitted a long list of fabricated complaints against Sankardeva before the Koch King Naranarayana. (It is said that the Brahmin pundits went to the Koch capital at Kochbehar, where on arrival, they threw an image of Goddess Kali into a beel (natural water body). [*Koch Beharer Itihash, Khan Choudhury Amanatulla, Ahmed, Ibid, P 63.* After sometime, as the soil got separated from the image, the pundits took out the bamboo and thatched frame of the image from the water. Then producing the same before Naranarayana, they complained against Sankardeva stating that he had committed unethical and objectionable acts, and that if he was allowed to stay in the kingdom, he would bring doom to the kingdom. Amanatulla states that the Brahmins took out a damaged idol of the Goddess 'Kali', that was immersed in the river (Torosa?) earlier, produced it before the King and lodged complaint against Sankardeva, for breaking the image of the goddess.

The pundits further complained that Sankara was not honouring the dictates of the Vedas, Gita and other scriptures, and that he was also, not even tolerant of the fragrance of the holy *tulsi* (Rosary). They further complained that Sankara had prohibited the observance of *yagnya*, and *shraddha* ceremony in honour of the deceased parents, and he was also propagating a new religion called *Ek-sarania* (monotheism) and that as a result, the King's subjects were abandoning the traditional holy practices. They urged upon the king for immediate punitive action against Sankara. As Naranarayana had already heard about Sankardeva, as a scholarly and holy person, he initially hesitated to initiate any action against Sankardeva. But due to continued insistence of the Brahmin pundits who went on filing allegation against Sankara and urged the King for action, ultimately, the King became infuriated and ordered *Garamali* (a Royal Officer) to arrest Sankara and produce before him, without any loss of time. Naranarayana also made an outburst, in the open court, saying that, with skin of Sankara, he would get *damama* (musical drum) stiched, and his flesh, he would give to the hungry dogs.

Hearing about the King's ire and the cruel orders, Sukladvaj (popularly known as Chilarai) became extremely sad and worried, thought for some moments, and mentally decided his course of action. It may be mentioned that Sukladvaj married the cousin of Sankardeva, Kamalapriya or Bhubaneswari (daughter of Ram Rai), from whom he had learnt a lot about the great qualities and virtues of Sankardeva and respected him much, although he was yet to meet the Saint. Chilarai dispatched eight of his own *doots* (soldiers) by boat, with an expert boatman *Tekai Majhi*, as the head, gave clear direction to them that Sankardeva would have to be escorted and produced before him absolutely safe and sound. Chilarai also declared an award of one hundred rupees to them, should they be able to rescue Sankardeva, safe and

sound; otherwise they would be meted with the severest penalty. Chilarai also ordered the boatmen to row non-stop, day and night, in order to reach Sankardeva well before the king's soldiers could reach him. Tekai Majhi and his boatmen, rowed up stream day and night and reached Pat Bausi in two day's time. They reverentially approached Sankardeva, informed him about the orders of Prince Sukladvaj and the Saint having consented to accompany them, they put him together with four of his disciples onto their boat, and rescued him from the king's soldiers, who by then reached Sankardeva's place. On his arrival at Koch Behar, Chilarai received Sankardeva with high reverence and also arranged his accommodation, at the garden palace (*Phul Bari*), with utmost secrecy. The king's soldiers having failed to arrest Sankara at Patbausi, arrested two of his disciples, namely, Narayan Thakur and Gokul Chand. They were tortured a lot to extract information about Sankara and failing in that, produced them before the King. Naranarayana also could not extract any information from them about their master, and out of disgust, he ordered Hari *Garmali* to sell them to the *Bhotas (Bhutias)*. The Bhotas marched them towards Bhutan's hills, but during the march, the Bhotas observed them chanting the name '*Hari*' all the time. All on a sudden, the Bhotas faced total darkness before them, could not see anything ahead, they became almost blind. Thinking them as miracle men, the Bhotas returned to Koch Behar with them and sold them back to Garmali. After hearing the details about Narayan Thakur and Gokul Chand, the King set them at liberty. [*Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Neog, Ibid. Page156.*]

Gradually, the king came to know from Garamali how Sukladvaj managed to wrest Sankara from the 'rajdoots' and had kept him hidden at his own place. One day, in open court Naranarayana mentioned about this, also stated what he heard about the great scholarly and spiritual qualities of Sankardeva, and expressed his keen desire to meet him. He then asked a guard to inform his brother-king Sukladvaj, about his wish to see Sankara and that Sankara be sent to him, with the message that, no harm would be done to Sankara. Chilarai totally disbelieved this assurance, because of the previous outburst of the king, against Sankara, He sent back the guard with a message to the king that, the latter should send one of his closest persons to him, and only after taking him into his custody, Sankara would be sent to meet the king. It was also conveyed to the king that should any harm be done to Sankara, the king's man would be beheaded. Naranarayana accepted the proposal of his brother, sent one of his closest men to him, whereupon Chilarai sent Sankara to the royal court, with proper escort.

Sankara's arrival being announced, the king ordered the doorman to bring him into the court. As Sankardeva approached the royal throne and stopped, the king watched him with utmost wonder and reverence, became totally mesmerized by his serene and elegant personality, and he asked Sankara to climb up the steps to the throne and be near him. Sankara started climbing the nine-storied platform (*sopan*), chanting a *totay* (hymn) to the glory of '*Hari*', which he composed and sang extempore, consisting of nine stanzas-

*Madhu danava darana deva baram
Barobarija lochano chakradharam
Dharanidhara dharana dhyeyaparam
Paramatha vidya subhanasa karam/*

[I offer my salutation to the Destroyer of the demon, Madhu, the god who is worshipped by all gods, who has big lotus like eyes, the holder of the Chakra (Disc), the holder of the Govardhana, the greatest of all the gods and goddesses, the Destroyer of the evils that confront the wise and the righteous"]

Karacurnita chedipa bhuribhagam

Bhagabhusana korchita padayugam //
Yuganayaka nagara besa rucim /
Rucirang supidhana sarira sucim //

["The one who with his physical powers destroyed Sisupal, the king of Chedi, the most resourceful one, having enormous greatness, whose jewel like feet are even worshipped by Brahma, the One who is the leader (the top actor) of all the ages, Who is popular with all the young ladies, whose dress is exceptionally attractive, who wears beautiful yellow clothes, whose body is the purest of the pure that baggars description"]

Sucicamara vayu nisebyatanum
Tanumadhyagadeha subesahanum/
Hanumanta harica sahayaratam
'Rataranga parayana satrunatam//

["The One whose body is cooled by the air from the fan made of the pure *camar*, the *kati* or middle portion of whose body is (*sukhma*) slim, the hanu (cheek-bone) portion is fantastically beautiful, whose assistant is Kapiraj Hanmuman, who is even worshipsed by Devaraj Indra, who has the *gandharvas* and *apsaras* as his servants".]

Nata bartula sthula sudirgha bhujam
Bhujagadhipatalpa sayana majam /
Aja Ramara bigraha viswagurum
Gurugodhana kamada kalpatarum //

["The One who has long and broad shoulders, takes his repose on the bed of Ananta Nag, who is birthless, whose body is deathless-always alive, who is the Guru of the Universe, who gives to the Gopas whatever good and great they desire, who fulfils the wishes of the 'bhaktas' just like the 'kalpataru'"]

Taruni-manamohana sarvasubham
Subhamangala dayaka nilanibham /
Ibhakumbhaja muktika malyabaham
Bahalora samistaj sarva saham //

["The One who steals the mind and heart of the young Gopis, who is the embodiment of all the goodness, does good to one and all, who shines like the 'indranilmani' (blue sapphire), who wears the 'gajakumghajat' pearl necklace, whose heart is always broad, who is worshipped by all, who is the bearer of the burden of the universe]

Sahajaiyati padmada lakhyacidam
Cidananda vinodana-vedavidam/
Vidusanmanamandup aksajugalam ?
Gola-hubhita kaushthabha bhimabalm

["Who has wide, innocent (*sahaj*) eyes like the lotus bud (*dalabat*), who is philosophical (*chit swarup*), who is the storehouse of knowledge, ever joyous, who pleases one and all, who is the master of the Vedas (*vedabat*), who is like the temple of the mind of the wise, who is 'kambu kantha', whose neck is decorated by jewel 'kausthabh', who is devastatingly powerful"]

Balabhadra sahodara satyabapum
Bapunirdita vishwasu rariripum /
Ripu yuthapa yuthapa darpaharam

Haramauli nighrista padabja param/

["The One who is the younger brother of Balabhadra, whose body is always pure (nitya niranjan), who exists all over the Universe as the Supreme Being (Brahma), who is the dread (ripu) of the 'Asuras' – the enemy of the gods, who smashes the pride of the originator of all the 'ripus', whose unique feet are cleaned (gharsit) by the head of the deer ('harar sirar dwara')"]

*Paraloka sahaya sahasramukham
Mukharali kula kulakula malya sukham
Manaso parimeya sahasra phalam //*

["The One who is the Saviour of all future births (paralok), who has thousand faces (sahasra mukh), whose garland attracts all the ever busy bees (jar malya sukhat patubhramagan akulit)), who is the symbol of pristine beauty and expert in giving emancipation (mukti), who is the consort of Lakshmi, who is the giver of thousand fruits or virtues to the mind".]

*Phalato'smi natao'smi natosmi harim
Hari bairi hutasana bhogyaharim /
Harkinkara Sankara isa pade
Pada micchati gayati camrata de //*

["The One who is the enemy of Aghasura, who swallows the forest fire, - to such a virtuous saint (mahapurusa), this servant of Hari prays by singing and speaking about all His great virtues, and offers himself to his service, by prostrating at his feet, again and again.]

Sankardeva next composed and chanted another hymn (*bhatima*) in praise of Naranarayana, e.g.

*Jai Jai Malla Nripati Rasa-van /
Jakeri guna-gana nahike saman /
Nijkul kumud prakasaka indu /
Gahina gambhira dhir pekhite sindhu //*

[Glory glory, let there be, to the powerful and humourous King, who has no parallel in matter of virtues and fame! A lotus in his own dynasty, he radiates the brightness of the sun. He is as dignified, majestic and steady to look at, just like the sea.]

*Sabha ek patra apon maharaj /
Devaka madhye jaice suraraja //
Apona bhujabale dandiya rajkul /
Pawata sakalahi kaj /
Jai jai iswara pada prasadata /
Malladeva karo raja //*

[In the royal court, the great King shines like god indra, who shines amongst all other gods. He had established his position amongst the royal dynasties, by virtue of his own physical might, and the services of all the people are at his feet.]

*Nataka Bhatika paschim desaka
Jata jata pandita awya /
Ghotak kambal bahut rajata /
Aponahi man puri pawya //*

[The king presents horses, blankets, silver and other gifts to the scholars like Natak, Bhatak and others coming from the western country, to their heart's content.]

*Astrat sastrat sashtrat pargata
Bipakhyak apad jan //
Deva brahmanaka pitrik arccane
Jakeri nahi saman //*

[The great King is adept in weaponry, an expert in the scriptures, his enemies consider him with great awe. He offers high reverence to God, the Brahmans and the elderly persons, and has no equal anywhere.]

*Apon nripabar dharma Yudhisthira
Bicarata apon sujan//
Kavya kavitta sasadhara pandita
Dhanurdhara Arjuna saman //*

[Our great King is as religious as Yudhisthira, in delivering justice also, he is very wise. His poetical genius is comparable to that of the moon, and in scholarly qualities, he is like the great archer Arjuna.]

*Mane Duryudhan apon punyajana
Dane Karna saman //
Malla yudhata apon dristit
Tuha vine nahi an //*

[In showing respect to the holy persons, he is like Durudhana, in charity he is like Karna, and in wrestling according to me, there is no match for him.]

*Apon gun jase vyapiya dharani
Nripat madhyata pekhi /
Neel utpal rekhiye sarir
Mrnal sadrisa bhuja dekhi*

[Your virtuous fame has spread far and wide all over the world; your handsome physique, bearing the enchanting eyes like the blue lotus, and the shoulders like the stem of the lotus, shine amongst all the monarchs.]

*Bahu bakyasthal kati madhye dekhiye
Kamini hoye bari laj/
Jaice raj hanshi gamani /
Gahin gambhir maharaj //*

[O' great King! Even the most enchanting woman feel shy of her beauty, when she watches your broad shoulders, the chest, the slim waistline, the swan like walk, and your calm and majestic gait.]

*Kahalu tayuguna hamu sisumati
Marasa sakalo moha dosaha /
Kahaiya Sankara najano sabhasada /
Patra madhye E katha pucaha //*

[Sangatattwa-Darsan or Vishnav Darsan, Bhuvan Bhuyan, Ibid, P280-81, Bhubah Bhuyan, 1st Edition]

[Have I extolled about your virtues, guided by my child like mind; so I beg to be pardoned for any wrongs I may have said. O' Courtiers! You may now ask me, in this very Court, what guilt have I committed.]

Naranarayana was impressed by Sankara, so much so, that he spontaneously extended a highly reverential welcome to him, ordered a proper seat to be provided near him and requested Sankara to explain the meaning and implications of the hymns sung by him. At this, Sankara suggested that, the pundits present in the court, should explain first. The king waited a while, noticed that they were not opening out and simply keeping silent; so he asked Sankara to explain. Sankara then gave four different interpretations, which the king was satisfied with. Next the king informed Sankara about the allegations against him and wanted his explanation, which the latter did in such a superb manner that the accusing pundits had no answers to make. Thus the battle of wits with the pundits ended with victory for Sankara. [*Bar Carit, Dinanath Bezbarua, Ibid, P 130.*]

Relevant experts in Assamese are reproduced below:

*Ehi dui bhatimaka gai gurujan /
Karila Rajaka asirwada anukhyan //
Parama pandita Raja suni moha bhaila /
Ar artha kara buli bacana karila //*

[After singing these two 'bhatima', the preceptor said his blessings to the King profusely. The king himself a great scholar was immensely charmed, and asked Sankardeva to explain the meanings of the 'bhatima'.]

*Kambal diyuk sikhrey buli adesila /
Sabhasad lokar save ananda milila //
Punah punah Raja boloya sikhra kari an /
Dutey bicaranta kambalaka ghane ghan //
Brahman savar pichey kambalak dhari /
Paramananda bani suniya Brahmane /
Hata Hati kambalaka niya tatwakhyan //*

[The King then directed that a blanket be immediately be brought for Sankara to sit; he repeated his orders that, it should brought then and there. The 'doot' hurried to search for one. Behind the Brahmins, Paramananda Atai was holding a blanket and a *dhari* (mat) in his hands and was in a shivering state. Hearing the majestic voice of the King, the Brahmins brought a blanket in great haste.]

*Pache Garmali gote paria dilanta /
Rajar adeseey Guru Basilanta //
Pache Guru bulilanta ati samadare /
Bhatimaro arthaka kaho dwijabare //
Brahman sakalo anye anye bhaticil /
Rajai bolonta arthak napaila //*

*Bhal bhal torawava prathame hatila /
Awaey artha kara buli Sankara kaila //*

[Then *Garmali* (a petty official) spread the blanket on the floor, and as desired by the King, Sankara occupied the seat. Thereafter, Sankara suggested with all humility, that the Brahmans should first interpret the '*bhatimas*'. The Brahmans thought of different interpretations, so they kept quiet, and observing their silence, the King commented, "well, well! You have already faced your first defeat." He then asked Sankara to give his interpretation.]

*Pache Gurujane artha cari cari prakare /
Bhatimara artha karila nirantare //*

[The Guru (Sankara) explained the meaning of the two *bhatimas*, giving four different types of interpretations to each.]

Narayarayana then asked Sankara to give his replies to the allegations levelled against him by the Brahmin pundits, though he knew very well, that the pundits complained about Sankara out of jealousy.

The King then said—"Sankara! Listen to what I say. The Brahmans have complained that, you do not acknowledge the '*tulasi*' nor do you acknowledge the '*Gita*'; the worshipping of gods and offerings to fire (hom) you have forbidden.

"It is also complained that, you have been damaging the idols of gods and goddesses. Let me know, if it is true or not." To this Sankara replied with folded hands, "without *tulasi*, Hari (god) will not accept any worship. Kindly look at me, my head wears a chain of *tulasi*. All works will go in vain, if *tulasi* is not used. My religion is monotheism, which is based on the core of the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata Sastra*.

Sankara further said, 'O' Venerable One! I have incorporated in my Faith, the nine forms of devotion (*bhakti*) drawn from the *Bhagavata*, and given expression to the same in our religion. The worshipping a deity (*puja*) is also one of these, but, without the worship of Visnu, worshipping of all other deities is useless for humans.

I have selected the core from the *Satvat*, *Sanghita*, *Pancharatra*, *Namatantra*, and all other *Vedas* and *Vedanta*. How am I charged for spreading irreligion or faithlessness, the Brahmans should now explain that.

The King applauded Sankara for his clarifications, thanked him repeatedly, and asked the scholars to come next day early in the morning, in order to rebut Sankara's reasonings. Then he asked Sankara also, to arrive by the same time, and adjourned the Court for the day thereafter. Sankara then made his departure for his home with a delightful heart; as Chilarai to know from Sankara about the day's events, he was too pleased to hear about the same. His wife, Bhubaneswari took blessings from Sankara, by touching his feet, and then made all arrangement for his dinner.

The next day, Sankardeva had his bath early in the morning and got dressed up for visiting the royal court, *Sukladvaj* sent Sankardeva with a number of his close associates and under proper escort. Five Brahmin pundits also came to Sankardeva and assured him not to worry. Thus Sankardeva reached the royal court '*chandana chaurak*'; the king on noticing the Saint, asked him to be seated. Sankardeva too and his previous seat, and the Brahmans also

took their respective seats. The king then asked the Brahmans to tell about the wrongs done by Sankara. The Brahmans informed the king that Sankara had damaged an idol of goddess Kali, and thereby proved himself as an unjust person. Then they produced before the king one such damaged idol.

*Sankara bolanta ara Patbausi sthane /
Sastrarare artha napai lajja paiya mane //
Puja avasane murti jalata pelai /
Sehi murti sohongak aniya acay //*

*Prabrity nrbity sastra jateka acaya /
Vedat kahice taka manda nobalaya //
Kintu nrbitaro pantha devata savaka /
Nakaribe ninda nakaribe bandanaka //
Kebale Krishnara arcca bhakati kariba /
Krishnar prasade lok sansar tariba //*

*Gita Bhagavata sastre aka kahi ache /
Sudhibaka chaon ami savba Brahmanaka //
Dwija bandhu bole kak ak kahiyuka /
Brahmane bolonta bidhabara putra hai /
Sijanake dwijbandhu buliya kahay //*

*Sankara bolonta Maharaja kena katha /
Pandit bolay najanaya sastrajatha //
Kanya bikri kare nija karmako nachare /
Sijanaka dwija bandhu bulia kahay //*

*Nara nakha kesa danta suci ki asuci /
Brahmana sakale aka kahiyu alaci //
Dwijane bole situ sakale acuci /
Sankare bolonta sehi samastevo suci //*

Sankara said, “the Brahmans may explain if the nails, hair, teeth of humans are pure or impure.” The Brahmans retorted, “all are impure”.
Sankara said, “all these are pure”.

*Bhal bhal kaila buli dwije ujarila /
Hasia Sankardeva kahibaka laila //
Bharatat a janmalabh karma patra hai /
Krisnara bhakati patra manusya nischay //*

As the Brahmans commented sarcastically, ‘well, well!’, Sankardeva simply smiled and started explaining. First he paid homage to *Bharatavarsa*, saying that, only as a result of good deeds, men earn their birth in *Bharatavarsa*, and that becomes possible only through devotion to Krishna.

*Byaghradir nakhsab suddha kari ati /
Subarna khacita kari galat pindhanti //
Hastidante nirmita Iswarara singhasan /
Cowari pahur kes chamar nirman //*

*Maharaja gan aar devatar gaowe /
Sehikeseey binchibar diwanta swabhawe //
Eteketey prakritatha najani Brahman /
Acusi kahaay Raja vidyaman //*

Sankara said, “after purifying the nails of tigers and others of their kind, and setting those in gold, the kings and the gods wear them on their neck. Similarly, the *singhasan* or seat of God, is made of elephant tusk, and the hair of the female (kowari) deer are used to make fans, which are blown to provide cool air to the kings and gods.” Then, Sankara commented, “without knowing the inner meaning of ‘pure’ and ‘impure’, the Brahmans dare call such things as impure, in the very presence of the king.”

*Ehimate ano nana badi dwijgan /
Badkari jinibak napari takhan //
Sakal Brahmane lajja paila bhaiankar /
Bolonta awar sastra acaya bistar //*

In this manner, having failed to defeat Sankara in the debates, the Brahman scholars felt awefully ashamed, they next proposed to have debates on the *Sastras*.

*Des desantatar pandit aniyuk /
Tebese Sankardeva bhanga labhibeka //
Suniya Nripati Kasi Prayagate hante /
Nimantrane asila pandit aparjyante //*

They advised the king to invite scholars from both within and outside his country, who Sankara should have debate with. The king extended an open invitation accordingly, and a large number of scholars arrived at his capital, from Kasi, Prayag and other places.

*Dhawaja bana tuliya pandit gana asey /
Dekhiya Nripati rahibak diloa basey //
Asangkhye pandit aila tarkat nipun /
Candan corat basibara dila sthan //*

The scholars came there carrying flags and banners; the king having observed their arrival, arranged proper accommodation for their stay. For the purpose of the debates, the king provided them seats in his ‘*candan churak*’ (royal Court made of sandal timber).

*Bolanta Nripati jata pandit pradhan /
Sankar sahite bad kariyu ekhan //
Bipragane nana tarka kutarka aniya /
Sankarak jino buli manat bhabiya //*

The king then directed the assembled principal scholars to start their debates with Sankara, without loss of time. In order to defeat Sankara, the scholars brought up many issues with all sorts of arguments, including vile ones.]

*Tarka Vedantara katha ani ani kaila /
Sankare bibidh arthe sakalo khandila //*

They quoted extensively from the Tarka-sastra, Vedanta etc., but Sankara met their queries with his replies, giving different interpretations, and totally destroyed their arguments.

*Hulasthul kari bipragane dei uki /
Raja prabodh paiya thakanta nicuki //
Ananta Kandali Sarbbabhowm adi kari /
Rajar pandit gane kahanta sadari //
Suna Maharaj tumi parama pandita /
Sankarar mat awe najai khandita //*

The Brahmans then created a noisy scene, and started whistling in desperation; the king tried to console them and asked them to maintain calm. Then Ananta Kandali, Sarbbabhoum and other scholars of the royal Court, appreciated Sankara, supported his line of arguments, and addressing the king as a venerable scholar himself, asserted that Sankara's views were just not destructible.

Thus, the pundits having failed to score a victory over Sankardeva lost all their initiatives and became totally depressed. The King declared that, he knew it for certain that Sankara would win the debate, still he would like to know if there was any other point for debate. At that very moment of time, the gardeners came and deposited a number of bags full of black pepper. The king then distributed the black pepper amongst all the Brahmans and other courtiers, the moment they got it they started chewing the same. On seeing that only Sankara was not eating those, the Brahmans immediately brought it to the notice of the king. The gift given by the king they had eaten instantly, on the other hand Sankara had not eaten any of those and thereby he had violated the royal mandate. Then Sankara said-

*“Badati Sankara Maharja suniyuka /
Ehi jalukar katha acaiya jatek //
Jaluk pakile loke pariya anaiy /
Charut sijaiya chotalat meli thay //
Adhasuddha bhailey pawdiya larai diey //
Jarukiya ani sari tuliya capaye //
Sikarane itu drabya sanskar nakari /
Iswaraka arpana karibo kena kari //*

Maharaj! Kindly listen to the story of black pepper-the process of making the black pepper. When the black peppers ripen, farmers harvest those by picking from the mother plants. Then those are boiled in saucepan or cauldron; when those get half boiled, those are taken out and spread over the ground of the courtyard, for sun drying. While doing that, those are moved by the feet from time to time so that, the drying takes place all around the seeds. In the process, black pepper seeds get scattered around on the courtyard, which the farmers sweep together using broom-sticks, and then those are brought together to one spot and collected for use. Because of this process, the black peppers, unless those are properly cleaned or purified, how those can be offered to God?

*Arpana nakari jito drabyaka bhunijaya /
Bistha mutra bhunjibara pataka labhaya //
Huiba nuhike puciyuka bipragane /*

*Suniya pucila biprasabaka tekhane //
Kandali pravrity bipre savinay kari /
Kahilanta Sankara katha satya kari //
Desantarar bipragane maha lajjo paila /
Uttar nidiya adho ukha haiya raila //*

[Sankara further said, “those who eat anything, without first offering it to God, commit sins, as a consequence of which they are destined to eat night soil, urine etc. Maharaj! Kindly ask the Brahmans, if such sins would be committed or not. The king did that instantly. *Kandali* and other scholarly Brahmans told the king, with all humility that, what Sankara said was true. At this, the Brahman from foreign lands, lowered their heads in failing to give any reply.]

*Henamate dine dine Sankara sange /
Badak karante guru jine maharange //*
[Bar Carit, Dinanath Bezbarua, *Ibid*, PP131-132.]

[In this manner, for days together, the debates with Sankara continued, and on each occasion, the ‘Guru’ won to his utmost joy.]

On another day, a huge quantity of deer meat was brought to the King, which, he got distributed to everyone in the royal court and others around it. Sankara was also given one portion, after which the King dismissed the court for the day and bade goodbye to all, asking them to come the next day. Hearing the king’s direction, the Brahmans left the Court immediately, and the next day, after eating the deer meat, they arrived at the court at the earliest. But Sankardeva was a little late; the Brahmans immediately took note of his absence. They said to the King- “Maharaj, kindly see how proud is Sankara; he even dares to defy your orders”. Just then, as Sankara arrived, the King asked him about the reason of his delay. Sankara then replied thus-

*Sankara badati Maharaja suniyuka /
Kali diyechila pasu bhunjibaka mok //
Bhunji sabadhane karibat bela bhail /
Dwijebole ami sabe kiba nubhunjila //
Sankare suniya pace kahila Rajaka /
Mukha suddhi jal caru diuyu asambaka //
Dasaney kharika laiya sabe nukha dhoka /
Keman achar ekhyane dekhiyoka //*

[Sankara said, ‘O’ great King! Please listen to what I have to say. Yesterday, your Highness had given us the meat to eat, which I ate with great care, and that is why am I late in arriving here.” The Brahmans argued that, they also enjoyed the meat, but they arrived at the Court well in time. Hearing this, Sankara requested the King to arrange some ‘charia’ (a vessel) and pure water for the purpose of mouth-washing. Let everyone wash his mouth with the clean water, using tooth picks and spill the water into his ‘charia’, and only then, it will be known how clean these persons are.]

*Suni Raja jal caru kharika dilanta /
Ahankar kari sabe mukhak dhuilanta //
Sankareo dhuala kamandalu jal ani /*

Parama nirmal jal dekhila pramani //

[Hearing Sankara's request, the King arranged for supply of water, charia and tooth picks; all Brahmans washed their mouth with great pride, and then poured the water in the *charias*. Sankara also brought water in a *kamandalu* (a jar), washed his mouth in the charia given to him and the water that remained in the charia, looked transparently clean.]

*Sakal dwijar pani tukiya carur /
Dekhe thopa thope mangsa parila bistar //
Dekhi Naranarayane maha kroddha kari /
Brahman ganaka bulilante anacari*

[As the water from the *charias* used by the Brahmans was gradually poured out, it was seen that remains at the bottom of each charia, were pieces of eaten meat. Naranarayana became terribly angry to see this scene and in great rage he called all of them unclean.]

*Sankara mat suddha michai nindil /
Mora age kono katha jinite napail //
Ehimate tini masa jata bade kare /
Tanna tanna kari taka Sankare sanghare //*

[The King also chastised the Brahmans for unnecessarily criticising the true views of Sankardeva, and also said that, they failed to score victory over any of his arguments, made in his presence. In this manner, three months passed, and Sankara destroyed each of the arguments of the Brahman scholars, by giving his explanations in the minutest of details.]

*Pace ath guti slok Raja kari dila /
Brahmane lahara kono artha nubujila //
Sankare kariya cari prakara byakhyan /
Rajaka likhiya dila dekhiya Rajan //*

[Later, the King constructed eight number of *slokas* (verse in Sanskrit), whose meanings the Brahmans failed to give; Sankara, on the other hand, wrote four types of interpretation of each *sloka* and gave these over to the King.]

*Dhanya dhanya Sankara pandita agragani /
Jahara bhakata dui srestha rupe gani //
Prabhavaate tasambaka bhoteu ninila /
Sankaraka smari dukhe paritran paila //*

[The King then declared Sankardeva as the greatest among the scholars, thanked him repeatedly and said that, considering his two 'bhaktas' as great persons (godmen), even the *Bhotas* did not take them along; and they could save themselves of their woes, by remembering Sankardeva.]

*Ehibuli subarna bakhare biracita /
Cola eka puraskar tekhane dilanta //
Sunaha deva Sri Sankara ehito dagala /
Aponara yogya aka pindhibeka bhala //
Sankare bolanta mai ar yogya noho /*

Tathapai Rajara punya karya kariboho //

[Speaking in this manner, the King presented an ornamented shirt, studded with gold and gems to Sankardeva. Addressing Sankardeva as the most Venerable One, the King said that, he had presented this shirt to him, who he found worthy for it, and that he would be pleased if Sankara would wear it. Sankara humbly submitted that, he was unworthy of this, still he would accept it and use it for the welfare of the King.]

At the commencement of dusk, the King adjourned the Court for the day; Sankara also set out for his place of residence. On the way, as he was walking over the bridge to cross the river (*Torosa*), many other people were also walking over it. As the bridge suddenly collapsed, Sankara saw that many people fell into the river and were almost drowned. While one person chanted '*Ram naam*'. Then Sankara and all others chanted "*Ram naam*". The people blamed the king for not maintaining the bridge properly, and made him responsible for the loss of a valuable life. In order to free the king from the sin, arising out of the casualty, Sankardeva presented the golden shirt given to him by the King to the person, who chanted '*Ram naam*', as token of atonement for the death of his kin.

The following morning, after completing his usual daily chores and prayer, Sankara left for the royal court. At the court, Sankara took his usual seat. After sometime the Brahmans started their debate with Sankara. Sankara met all their arguments by quoting from the *Sastras*. Then he started asking questions to them, which they could not reply to the satisfaction of the king. At this Naranarayana got extremely enraged and said to the Brahmans thus-

*Suna suna dwijana kene kaila garba /
Sankaraka napariya kiya bhaila kharba //
Purba hante jano Sri Sankara bigyabar /
Michat gochar dila tomra barbar //*

[Listen, listen all the Brahmans, you explain why you had shown your ego, have you failed to defeat Sankara, where your ego has gone now! I have been aware since past, that Sankara is a highly knowledgeable person; you, nasty fellows have lodged a false complaint against him.]

*Brahman nabhail dandarese yogya howa /
Ekhyane sabhara uthiya save jowa //
Suna patra kutarka sastraka karhi an /
Khanda khanda kari kati nadita pradan //
[Bar Carit, Dinanath Bezbarua, Ibid, P133].*

[But for the fact that you are Brahmans, you deserve to be punished; right now all of you leave my court and get out. Listen guards (*patra*), go and snatch away all the evil scriptures from them, tear those into pieces and throw those into the river.]

Accordingly, all the '*ku sastras*' (evil scriptures) of the Brahman pundits were snatched away by the royal officials, cut those into pieces and then thrown into the *Torosa*. The place where this royal order was executed has since been known as '*Kakatkuta*'. Since then the river also changed its course, and took a new course. At *Kakatkuta* the river is known as '*mari suti*' (dead course). On the other hand, Ananta Kandali and other Brahman pundits who supported Sankardeva in the debates, quoting extensively from the *Sastras* were suitably rewarded by Naranarayana with lavish gifts of money and clothes.

While in the Koch kingdom, for propagating Ek-saran Naam Dharma or Neo-Vaishnavism, Sankardeva and his close associates produced a large number of valuable literature. Sankardeva formed the centre as well as ideal of all the literary activities of the age so that, the period is best described as the Age of Sankardeva. Around the personality of this poet-reformer centred other literary figures of the time- Madhabdeva, the most brilliant among them; Ram Swaraswati, the most voluminous; Ananta Kandali, the story teller; Vaikunthanath Bhattacharya or Bhattadeva and Gopalacarana, the two prose-writers, and a host of other minor satellites. [*Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Neog, Ibid. Page155.*]

Dr. Maheswar Neog states about the literary genius of Sankardeva in the following manner.

All religious movements are generally accompanied with, and assisted by, the efflorescence of a new literature, quickening with the very soul of the movement. There was a *Vaisnava* literature in Assam, which upheld and beautified the cult of *bhakti*; and its sweetness and attraction compelled people to the side of Sankara, who also had the largest share in this literary movement. He formed the centre as well as the ideal of all the literary activities of the age, so much that, the period is best described as the Age of Sankardeva. Around the personality of this poet-reformer centred other literary figures of the time- Madhabdeva, the most brilliant among them; Ram Saraswati, the most voluminous; Ananta Kandali, a pleasant story-teller in verse; Vaikunthanath Bhattacharya or Bhattadeva and Gopalacarana, the two prose-writers, and a host of other minor satellites. [*Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Maheswar Neog, Ibid. Page156.*]

Sankara received a literary form of language with poise and beauty and a few verse-forms as a legacy from his predecessors. He enlarged the scope of this literary language, coined the novel idiom of Brajabuli for his dramas and certain types of his songs, and added variety and richness to the verse-forms. The immediately preceding period in literature exhibited a remarkable zeal for story telling; and the two Indian Epics and some of the *puranas* were rendered into Assamese verse, at least in parts. But the new literature of the Vaisnava movement now placed the greatest value on the *Bhagavata-purana* and the activities of *Krisna*, particularly in his childhood. The *Ramayana* was read, translated and dramatized during this period; and a poet like Ram Saraswati specialized in the *Mahabharata* lore. But the greatest poetry of the period had the child *Krisna*, as the main source of inspiration; and the *Bhagavata-purana* in general was the most widely discussed single work. The orthodox view of those times considered a non-Brahmin's handling and, at that, translating this *purana* into the local language as an act of sacrilege. Sankara continued his work in spite of this opposition, and met the protest with citation of the *purana's* own authority. [*Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Neog, Ibid, PP 156-7.*]

Sankara was more a religious ideologist and preacher than a litterateur as such. Sermonizing more than literary excellence was the basis of his creations. But then, there is some literary excellence in Sankara's works. His knowledge of humanity, and poetic genius inspired him to pieces of genuine characterization; to create living men and women, who love and quarrel, brag and fight, and think and work like living beings. These qualities also prompted him to create quick dramatic situations; to give the results of his own observations in similes, metaphors, or otherwise; and to re-create the poetry of the original texts in unimpaired beauty. The greatness of his poetry is judged from the facts that, it has provided the leaven to a rich folk-culture, pervading the Assamese people as a whole, and that, in spite of the neglect of the educated modern, it has always appealed to the common man, who still finds in it the solace and enjoyment of life. It enriches and enlivens his existence with a store of worldly

wisdom, of divine revelations, and a ready word for every thought or situation. Such is the influence of Sankardeva on the people that, we often find the unlettered explaining *vedantic* views (without, sometimes, knowing that he is doing so) and a man mounting the scaffold with composure and reciting from the *Kirtana-ghosa*. In the majority of his writings, the philosophy is generally kept in the background, so that the common man might consider them as his property. Simplicity is one of the pleasant qualities of his verse; other marked thoughts are *Vaisnava* humility, self-reproach, world-weariness, self-abnegation and dedication to the love and service of God, and yearning for divine grace and divine wisdom. [*Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Neog, Ibid, Page 157*].

Dr. Barman endorsing the views of Dr. Neog states that, the *Bhakti* Movement, like the 'Reformation in Europe', gave a strong impetus to the people to develop their own local languages and literatures. Since long before the *Bhakti* age, the popularity of Sanskrit as a spoken language, had been crushed under the juggernaut wheels of grammatical complexities and masses lost interest in it. True, the tradition of writing in Sanskrit continued, but these were for scholars only; the masses understood little of what was written in them. The *Bhakti* leaders, therefore, in order to popularize their movement, favoured local languages in place of Sanskrit. [*An Unsung Colossus, Sivanath Barman, PP 114, Para-1.*].

"Sanskrit is water in a well whereas language is running water".- Kabir once remarked. "If Sanskrit is created by God, do you think that Prakrita languages (vernacular languages derived from Sanskrit) are created by thieves and thugs?" – Eknath asked and answered, "Leave aside such vanity. The stories of God are always sacred and hence revered. God is not partisan to any particular language; Sanskrit and Prakrita, both are equal in His eyes." [*An Unsung Colossus, Sivanath Barman, Ibid, PP 114, Para-2.*].

Like their counterparts in other states, Sankardeva and other Assamese *neo-Vaisnavites* also emphasized the development of their own language, in spite of the fact that, most of them had well founded scholarship in Sanskrit; some of them even wrote books in that language. Sankardeva himself wrote an excellent Sanskrit hymn in praise of *Vishnu-Krisna* in addition to as many as 179 verses (in eight different metres) for their use in his dramas. He also compiled an anthology of Sanskrit verses glorifying *Bhakti* under the title of *Bhaktiratnakara*. The Sanskrit hymn, Sankardeva composed in *totaka* metre, is so outstanding in its poise and lyrical beauty, that it is difficult to resist the temptation of quoting at least its first verse which runs thus:

*Madhuvanavadaranadevavaram /
Varavarijalocanacakradharam //
Dharanidharadharanadhyeyaparam /
Paramartha vidyasubhanasakaram //*

[(I salute *Hari*) who is the supreme deity responsible for the annihilation of the demon Madhu, whose eyes are like the best lotuses, who (as *Visnu*) holds the wheel, who (as *Krisna* in Gokula) held up the Govardhana) mountain, who is the supreme element deserving to be meditated on and who destroys the evils of the knowers of the essentials of the supreme truth.]

Mention may be made in this context of Ananta Kandali. He too was a profound scholar in Sanskrit and wrote two books– *Nitiratna* and *Kalpadruma* in that language. But in his Assamese rendering of the tenth Book of the *Bhagavata purana* he wrote,

I know well how to write verse in Sanskrit. Still I have composed (these) verses in Assamese (in the hope that) women, *Sudras* and others will learn the absolute theory (of

Bhakti) and gain pleasure by listening (to matter concerning *Bhakti*). [*An Unsung Colossus, Sivanath Barman, Ibid, PP 114, Para-5.*]

This ardent desire of the neo-Vaisnavites to reach the populace through their own vernacular, had a great impact on Assamese literature. It enlarged the scope of Assamese literature and elevated it to a dizzy height with fine embellishments of beauty, balance and grandeur. Needless to say, all these qualities found fullest expression in the writings of Sankardeva.

Assamese literature, however, did not burst into flowering all of a sudden. It had a long history and heritage particularly, in the field of *Vaisnavite* literary works. As back as 14th century Madhava Kandali (whom Sankardeva called his unerring predecessor in poetry) wrote an Assamese version of the *Ramayana*. Harivara Vipra, on the basis of the *Mahabharata*, wrote as many as three books- *Lava Kusar Yuddha*, *Vavruvahanar Yuddha* and *Tamradhvajar Yuddha*; basing himself upon the *Vamana-purana*. Hema Saraswati composed *Prahlada Caritra*. But these were small streams flowing within the confines of their own embankments. Sankardeva, in the words of his apostle Madhavadeva, "came and removed the embankments; and lo, now it flows tumultuous throughout the world". (Namaghosa v.372). [*An Unsung Colossus, Sivanath Barman, Ibid, PP 115.*]

Sankardeva's literary output is considerable, and consists of quite a wide variety: compositions in Assamese, Assamese-Brajabuli and Sanskrit: prose, verse and poetical prose; translations or adaptations, compilations from different texts, and lyrical effusion; songs and lyrics, longer narratives and a doctrinal treatise. Several typical forms could also be marked out among Sankardeva's literary works in Assamese: lyrics (e.g., *Bargita* and *Bhatima*); choral songs (*Kirtana-ghosa*), which are objective in purpose; longer narratives or 'episodes' (*Upakhyana*) (e.g., *Hariscandra-Upakhyana*, *Rukmini-harana-kavya*); and Dramas (*Anka* or *Nata*). [*Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Neog, Ibid, Page 159*].

Dr. Neog divides Sankardeva's literary career into three periods, corresponding to his stay in the Bara-Bhuyan, Ahom and Koch territories respectively, which are stated below.

A. Early period: in the Bara-Bhuyan territories-

This period is characterized by a youthful gaiety and exuberance, and extends upto the year 1516.

(i) Non-Bhagavata group -

1. *Hariscandra –upkhyana (Markendaya-purana)*
2. *Bhakti-pradipa (Garuda-purana)*
3. *Kirtana-ghosa: 'Uresa-varnana' section (Brahma-purana)*

(ii) Non-Bhagavata material mixed with Bhagavata elements not influenced by Sridhara Swami–

4. *Rukmini- harana-kavya (Harivamsa nad Bhagavata–purana)*

(iii) Lyrics-

5. Bar- gitas

(iv) First group of Bhagavata tales, taken from outside Book X-

6. *Ajamila – upakhyana (Book VI)*
7. *Amrita - manthan (Book VIII)*
8. *Kirtana–ghosa: 'Ajamila –upakhyana' (Book VI), 'Prahlada-caritra' (Book III, VII), 'Haramohana', 'Bali-chalana', 'Gagendra-upakhyana' (Book VIII), and 'Dhyana-varnana' sections.*

(v) 9. **Gunamala, ii-vi**

B. Middle period: in the Ahom Kingdom (1516 to 1543 A.D.)

This was a period of great unrest and obstruction, self –criticism, and then advance

(i) Presentation of arguments to meet the opponents of the '*Bhakti-cult*'-

1. *Kirtana-ghosa: Prasanda-mardana*' and 'Namaparadha' sections (*Bhagavata–purana, Padma-purana, and Brahma-Naradiya-purana, Visnu-dharmottara and Suta-samhita*).

2. (*Vipra-*) patni-prasada–nata (*Bhagavata-purana,X*)-

3. *Kirtana-ghosa: 'Sisu-lila', 'Rasa –krida', 'Kamsavadha '*,

'Gopi-Uddhava-sambada', 'Kujir-bancha-purana' and 'Akrurar bancha-purana' sections.

It is believed that during this period, the composition of Bargitas continued.

C. Final period: in the Koch Kingdom (1543-1568 A.D.)

This period is marked by a comparative quiet in the life of Sankardeva and the career of his order, by the fullest development of Sankardeva's mind and art, and by the fulfilment of the mission of his life.

(i) The second group of *Bhagavata* tales, taken from outside Book-X

1. *Bali-chalana* (Book VIII)

2. *Anadi-patana* (Book III, Vamana-purana)

(ii) *Bhagavata* tales from Books X (Uttarardha), XI, XII-

1. *Kirtana-ghosa: 'Jarasandha-yudha', 'Kalayavana vadha', 'Mucukunda-stuti', 'Syamantaharana,'Naradar Krishna-darsana,' 'Vipra –puttra-anayana', 'Daivakir–puttra-anayana', 'Veda-stuti', Lilamala', 'Rukminir-prema-kalaha', 'Bhrigu-pariksa', ;Sri Krisnar vaikuntha prayana', 'Catur-vimsati-avatara varnana', and 'Tatparya; sections'.*

Dr. Neog further holds the view that, the sections 'Rukminir –prema-kalaha' and ' Bhrigu-pariksa' are not generally included in manuscript copies and printed editions of the '*Kirtan-ghosa*'. The '*Sri Krisnar vaikuntha-prayana*' embodies three sub-sections and includes matters from Books I and III besides Book XI of the *Bhagavata*. This group of compositions (particularly in the '*Veda –stuti', 'Caturvimsati-avatara-varnana', 'Sri Krisnar vaikuntha-prayana'*) etc. is characterized by occasional philosophical passages and may, therefore, be called the philosophy group'.

(iii) Renderings of the *Bhagavata–purana*, taken *skandha* by *skandha* or in the form of independent anecdotes-

1. *Bhagavata , X, Adi*

2. *Bhagavata, XI (with materials from Books I and III)*

3. *Bhagavata, XII*

4. *Bhagavata, I*

5. *Bhagavata, II*

6. *Bhagavata, IX(not available)*

7. *Kuruksetra (Book X, Uttarardha)*

8. *Nimi-nava-siddha-sambada*

9. *Gunamala*

(iv) The Tale of Rama-

1. *Ramayana, Uttara-kanda*

(v) Lyrics-

1. *Bar-gita*
2. *Totaya*
3. *Bhatima*
- (vi) Doctrinal treatise –
 1. *Bhakti-ratnakara*
- (vii) Dramas-
 1. *Kali-damana*
 2. *Keli-gopala*
 3. *Rukmini-harana*
 4. *Parijata- harana*
 - 5.
 6. *Ram-Vijaya (written in 1490 Saka, 1568 A.D.)*

The songs and dramas must have been distributed all over the period [*Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Neog, Ibid, PP 159-62.*]

From the above narration on Sanardeva's compositions, it would be pretty clear that his major contributions to literature were made during his stay in the Koch kingdom (22 to 25 years) over a life span of 119 years & 11 months.

Maharaj Naranarayana once asked some court poets to give him a gist of the Twelve Cantos of the *Bhagavata-purana*, in Assamese verse to be completed in a day, so briefly, that a person should be able to finish reciting it, while cooking his food. All of them expressed their inability to compose the same, stating that it was an impossible task. To quote the details in Assamese text. [*Bar Carit, Dinanath Bezbarua, P 133-34.*]

*“Pandit ganaka prati Rajaye kahila /
Bhagavata kathasaar kariya uddhara /
Krisna guna yasa saba kariya bistar //
Taka eka dine moka sravana karaite /
Paribaka napariba pandit samaste //
Pandit sakale bola kino acharita
Eke dine 'Bhagavata ke pare sunaita //*

[Addressing the scholars, the King said that, he would like the core matters of the *Bhagavata*, containing details about the virtues of *Krisna* and his fame, prepared and then recited the same to him, in one single day. He enquired of them, if that could be done or not. The scholars replied- “What an amazing task! Who could recite the *Bhagavata* in one day?”]

*Kono jane bole nava konojane dasa /
Satdin bole keho astam diwasa //
Siman dinate bahu prayasa karile /
Sunaibe paribo Bhagavata abikale
Ekdine kadacito naparibo ami /
Sunia kahila pace Sri Sankara Swami //
Badati Sankara Malla Mahi pati /
Raj agnya palibaka lagaya samprati //
Sadhyamate bicaria karyaka sadhibo /
Bidai diyoka ami grihaka calibo //
Hena suni Raja moha sambhram karia /*

Thakibar thaika lagi bidayaka dila //

[Some one said, it can be done in nine days, some one else said 'ten', one said 'seven', another said 'eight', and that too would be possible, with lot of efforts. In a single day, we shall never be able to do the task. Sankardeva then said- 'O' great and powerful King! I shall be proceeding right now for compliance of your order. I shall try, with the best of my ability, to complete the assigned task. With your permission, shall I now leave for home. Hearing this, the King with high reverence, bade 'good by' to Sankardeva, for making his home ward move.]

*Gunamala sastraka karibaka arambhiya /
dui hate pat dike dui hatey likhe //
Sab sabi likhi janta khyaniko napekhyeya /
Sesa ratri bhaila Guna Mala sanga bhaila //
Sambaran kari pace sayana karila //
Prabhatate uthi kriya kalapa acari /
Bhojan karia Guru chalila sattari //
Ati sikhre asi Maharaja Mallarai /
Carata basia raila sabhaka jatai //
Sankaro prabes bhaila Raja sadarila /
Guna Mala sastra khani Rajaka sampila //*

[On arriving home, Sankardeva got on to the task of writing the '*Gunamala*'; two hands he used to scan the pages of the *Bhagavata*, the other two hands he used for writing his work. [Sankardeva was believed to be an incarnation of Visnu/ Krisna.] He kept on writing non-stop, and towards the end of midnight, '*Gunamala*' was completed. Sankara then changed his dress and went to sleep. Early next morning, he woke up, completed the daily chores, finished his meal and then set out for the royal Court. As Sankara entered the Court, the King extended a hearty welcome to him; Sankara then presented him the copy of the *Gunamala*.]

Naranarayana requested Sankardeva to recite the *Sastra* and for that purpose a '*thagi*' (*guru-asana*) made of gold was brought. The king listened to the grand recital with all the courtiers, appreciated Sankara for his superb composition. The king knew it for certain that, this person (Sankardeva) was a '*Maha-purusa*', he also enjoyed the recital so much so, he felt as if he had witnessed a play (*anka*). [*Bar Carit, Dinanath Bezbarua, Ibid, P134, stanza 1832*].

Then the king with a generous heart presented gifts of money and clothes to Sankardeva and bade him good bye. Sankardeva immediately proceeded to his camp house, at Raja Chilarai's palace, where on meeting Chilarai, saluted him. Chilarai received the *Guru* with great delight. He arranged a huge boat with eighteen oars, for taking Sankardeva on his return journey to *Patbausi*, upstream the Brahmaputra. Chilarai's wife Bhubaneswari prostrated before the *Guru*, with many presents. Thereafter Sankardeva set out for the river *ghat*, the great king Sukladvaj (Chilarai) showed exemplary honour to Sankardeva, by escorting him for a certain distance. Sankardeva then started his journey upstream the river and arrived at Patbausi, after three days.

The original Assamese text from the '*Bar Carit*' is quoted below.

*Katodur mane Sukladvaja nripabare /
Sankara devaka agbarhaila sadare //
Anukrame Gurudeva Ujane asila /*

Tinidine asi Patbausi prabesila //
[Bar Carit, Dinanath Bezbarua, Ibid, P134.]

Another version states that, when Sankardeva heard of the king's wishes, he completed the work 'Gunamala' containing 376 verses in all, and presented a copy of it to Naranarayana, who was much pleased with it. The composition of this marvellous work is also described as an episode called '*bhurukat hati bhoroa*'- the impossible task of putting an elephant into an earthen jar.

While at Koch Behar, every morning, Chilarai used to have the virtuous company of Sankardeva, and every evening Naranarayana had serious discourses with him on spiritual matters and the *Sastras*. Sankardeva praised Chilarai as '*parama rasiko guru Raja Sukladvaja*' (King Sukladvaj, the real preceptor of the rasas). Overwhelmed by the Bhakti philosophy, Chilarai with his wives accepted initiation (*Saran*) from the Saint, who was initially hesitant to initiate Chilarai, because of the high Office held by him. Naranarayana too was insistent on being initiated by Sankardeva; how the latter avoided that, even at the sacrifice of his life, is another story. [*Generilissimo Chilarai And His Times, J.P. Rajkhowa, Ibid, Ch-IX.*]

Sankardeva made all his major poetical and dramatic works at Patbausi in the Koch kingdom, where he stayed for eighteen & a half years. His last work, Rama-vijay nata was written during his stay in Koch Behar and then staged in 1568 at the request of Yuvaraj Sukladvaj. It is again, at the request of Sukladvaj and his brother, maharaja Naranarayan that, Sankardeva made an extraordinary creation, weaving his scriptural knowledge and dream, imagination and wisdom, on silk, which came to be famous as the '*Vrindabani-Bastra*', depicting the '*Lila*' of child *Krisna*. His expertise as a painter, designer and weaver of this unique fabric of coloured silk, covering all the episodes of child *Krisna*, at *Vrindaban*, established him as an artist '*non pareil*' of all times. This great piece of work is also illustrative of Sankardeva's role, as a keen promoter of cottage industry, with unique attention to handloom weaving and designing. This fact is magnificently illustrated by his personal designing and on the job supervision' of the weaving work of the *Vrindavani Bastra*.

The historical description of the events leading to the making of the '*Bastra*' goes like this. One day during the period of his stay at Patbausi (Barpeta), in the Koch Kingdom, when he visited Koch Behar, Maharaj Naranarayana and Yuvraj Sukladdvaj or Chilarai paid rich tributes to Sankardeva, as a great scholar. Then they requested him again with great humility, if he could describe to them, the complete details of *Vrindavan*, where Lord *Krisna*, in His human form, passed his childhood in fun and frolic in the company of cowherds (*gopa-balakas*), the cows, buffalo, their calves and so forth. On hearing this, Sankardeva immediately started narrating to them, the various episodes of *Krisna*, all related to *Vrindavan*. Afterwards, the royal brothers, again addressing Sankardeva with high reverence and humility, enquired of him, if he could present it to them in graphics. Kindly listen Sankara, you are a great scholar, do narrate to us about the place where Lord *Krisna*, in His human form, had fun and frolic in the company of the bullocks, cows and their calves.

On listening to their request, Sankardeva immediately responded in a positive note, and described to them the events relating *Vrindavan*. Both the Kings then asked Sankardeva, with high reverence, if he could show to them how the Vrindavan looked like.

Sankara said that, if they really wanted to see the holy place, they would have to arrange silk yarns of different colour, which would be required for weaving the designs, and it would take about four months' time to complete the fabric in the desired form.

The King was highly delighted to hear Sankara's consent; he immediately passed on his orders to supply the yarns that Sankara had asked for, without any loss of time.

Sankardeva was also appointed as the Governor of the territories under the principality of Kamrupa, including Tantikuchi. Sankardeva was later sworn in as the '*Bar-Bhuyan*' (Chief Administrator or Governor) of Patbausi. The King also ordered that, Sankardeva would administer law and justice to the people of the province of Kamrupa.] [*Bar Carit, Dinanath Bezbarua, Ibid, P 99.*]

On his return from Kamatapur, (Koch Behar) Sankardeva convened a meeting with the weavers, informed them about the king's wishes, engaged them straightway in the process of all the preparatory works, and also demonstrated to them, how the various scenes were to be prepared and portrayed with yarns. A large number of weavers were engaged, in weaving the massive cloth, in the '*karsana-ghar*' (weaving shed or workshop) at Tanti kuchi. They depicted the various scenes of *Krisna-Lila*, in different colour, as taught to them by the Saint and the Master Weaver. Everyday Sankara visited *Tantikuchi* with his disciples and could get about one '*begat*' (about six inches) of cloth completed.

One day Sankara being unwell, Madhabdeva, was sent to the '*karsana-ghar*' at Tantikuchi to supervise the work. On that day, the design of *Brahma Maha- Lila* was being woven. Under Madhaba's supervision, about four inches of extra cloth could be made that day. Learning about this extra progress, Sankardeva was highly satisfied, admired Madhaba profusely and named him as '*Borhar Po*'. When the '*Vrindavani Bastra*' was ready in all respects, Sankardeva brought it to his house at *Patbausi Sattr*, where the people became dumb struck with wonder at the sight of the fabric and got totally spellbound to witness the spectacular '*Krisna-Lila*', depicted on the unique piece of cloth. The '*Bastra*' was so long, broad and heavy, that it took sixty persons to spread, roll back, tie and lift it. Amanatulla states that, the '*Vrindavani Bastra*' was 120 haat (180 feet) in length and 60 haat (90 feet) [two measures of haat is equivalent to one yard] in breadth.

Sankardeva then carried the *Bastra* to Koch Behar, where he presented it before Naaranarayana and Chilarai. Both the royal brothers were overwhelmed with extraordinary delight, at the magnificent sight of the '*Bastra*'; Sankardeva then explained to them each of the scenes depicted on it, to their fullest satisfaction.

The King was so much pleased with Sankardeva that, he had endowed to him the charge of the principality of Barpeta (*Barpeta mahal*) as a reward; but Sankardeva declined the offer. Later on, Sankardeva's brother, Ram Rai took charge of the abandoned Principality and governed it. [*Koch Beharer Itihash, Amanatulla, Ibid, P 62.*]

Chilarai's wife, Bhubaneswari (*Kamalpriya*) prayed to the *Mahapurusa* that a *Sastra* be composed for her, giving the details about the creation of the Creator (*Ishwar*), His activities (*Lila*) and His destructive powers (*Pralay*). On return to Patbausi, Sankardeva entrusted Madhabdeva with this task of writing the *sastra-Janma Rahasya* (The Mystery of Birth), which Madhaba did to the high appreciation of Sankardeva. The Saint then called his cousin brother, Ram Rai who is also the father of Bhubaneswari, handed over the book to him, with the advice to present it to her at Koch Behar. Bhubaneswari was exceedingly pleased to receive it. [*Generilissimo Chilarai And His Times, Ch-X, J.P. Rajkhowa, Ibid.*].

Presently, portions of the *Bastra* are found preserved in British Museum & Albert Museum (London), Musee Guimet, Paris and Virginia Museum of fine Arts in Richmond (USA),

Philadelphia Museum of Arts (USA), unfortunately though, not a single piece is found in any museum of India. [For more details PP 148-154, Sankardeva: His Life, ibid J. P. Rajkhowa].

Following Sankardeva such *Vastras*, smaller in size, were manufacture in lower Assam. They were typical of the exceptional “quality of Assamese silk, the stylisation of the drawing, and the blocks of curious angular in woven scripts” which were not to be found anywhere except Assam. They were also known as *gokhain kapor* or priest’s clothes (God’s wrap-around!) as they were used as an altar cover for use in the worship of Vishnu in Assamese monasteries. Today, VVs are sought after antique silk scrolls for textile art lovers of the world and museums for its design, colour and beauty. Only a few pieces of the so called VVs are known to be preserved around the world.

The original VV, after presentation to Chilarai was housed at Madhupur *Satra*, Cooch Behar, in present day West Bengal, but it disappeared at some unknown time. Ms. Rosemary Crill believes that the original VV most certainly had made its way to Tibet, and was made into pieces to suit the needs of the customers and these and others only recently joined the stream of the rare textiles coming out of the Tibetan monasteries. She opines that there is no way the original VV could be identified irrefutably with only a few pieces that are known to be existing in different parts of the world today. However, she believes that if there is any piece that survived, the one in Musee Guimet, Paris is the most likely piece that could be from the original VV. The reason is that this piece alone stands apart from the others that still exist in various parts of the world from the point of view of iconography that are drawn with greater imagination and finesse and the feeling of an original design work, having vitality and humour than in any other pieces. This is so from the point of view of the style of the drawing of the figures which can be compared with the style of the paintings (*Chitra Bhagavata*) of the Assamese Satriya or monastic school that flourished in Assam from the 16th century onwards. About the size: while expert agree about the length, they feel that from the practical point of view, it could not be any more than a loom width which this piece confirms. On the other hand, several loom width as the piece in British Museum no.5 in the list below, could have been sewn together to make the stated width incorporating the original design by Sankardeva.

[Shri Gagan Hazarika, Researcher, London, Letter RE: Vrindavani Vasna, The Sentinal, Guwahati]

From Patbausi Sankara set out for his second pilgrimage (*Bharat Darsan*), accompanied by one hundred and twenty *bhaktas*, including Madhabdeva, Ramarama, Ramarai, Srirama Ata, Narayan Thakur and others, about 1550 A.D. He was then one hundred and one years old. But Narayan Thakur had to return after a day’s journey, as he had to take back his old and decrepit uncle, Caitanya. This time Sankara could extend his visits only up to Puri via Gaya. Sankara and his followers did not visit *Vrindavana*, as Madhaba did not agree to accompany them there. It is said that, Madhaba did this, because of a secret injunction from Sankara’s wife, that her husband should not be allowed to see *Vrindavana*, lest he should forget his home altogether. The pilgrims stayed at Puri only for a few months, when Sankara had the opportunity of meeting holy men from different parts of India. They had to return before the rains set in. After travels, covering six months, they reached back home in the month of *Vaisakha (Bohag)*. [Srimanta Sankardevar Bargit, Tafajjul Ali, Srimanta Sankaradev: Samaj Aru Sanskriti (Assamese), PP 102-07, Edited–Pradip Jyoti Mahanta, 1st Publication, December 2000, Puberun Prakash, Guwahati-1.]

On returning to Patbausi, Sankara resumed his customary work of holding congregations, receiving neophytes, and writing books. The king of Hedamba, possibly the Chief of the principality of Heremda in south Kamrup, and the Muslim tailor, Candsai were among the converts. Among others who joined the *Vaisnava* camp were Budha-dalai of the *Daivajnya* caste and his brother, who was an officer of the Koch king. The Brahman scholar, Ananta Kandali also joined Sankara as his disciple. As stated earlier, the Mahapurusa composed all his major works at Patbausi. After the happy conciliation between Sankara and Naranarayana, they became friends and continued to be so till the last. With both the King's and the *Generalissimo's* patronage and support at his back, Sankara and his followers felt completely secure in their movements, and the *Vaisnava Order* thrived vigorously. The end of Sankara's life was now drawing near. Of his three sons, the second, Kamalalocana, had already died, and the eldest, Ramananda, was still in the employ of Chilarai. But he looked forward to Madhaba as his proper spiritual successor. He stayed for one night with Madhaba at Ganakkuci, and had the last intimate talk with him, in the course of which he assigned to this chief disciple all the work he had been doing. [*Sankardeva And His times, Dr Neog, Ibid, Ch.IV, PP115-17.*]

Madhabdeva composed the '*Nam-ghosa*' at the desire of his mentor, who composed the first two stanzas and left the rest to Madhaba. These two stanzas are-

*"Muktita nispriha jito sehi bhakataka namo
Rasamaii magoho bhakati /
Samasta mastakamani nij bhakatara baisya
Bhajo hena deva Jadupati //*

[I salute the '*bhakta*' who is disinterested in salvation; do I beg for the path full of '*bhakti-rasa*'. I worship only the God-*Krisna* or *Jadupati*, who wear the crown adorned with all the gems and jewels, and who remains subservient to his own '*bhaktas*'.]

*Jar Ram-Krisna nam nawey bhabasindhu tari
Pawey paraspada papi jata /
Sadananda sanatana henaya Krsinaka sada
Upasa karoho hridayata //"*

[Everyday, I worship with all my heart, the God, who bears the name *Rama-Krisna*, and by chanting whose name, even the sinners can cross the turbulent ocean of life, without any fear. I worship that virtuous *Krisna*, who is always full of joy and who is the only Supreme Being of the Universe.]

Madhabdeva, in this monumental work, offers his salutations time and again to the Supreme God- *Krisna*, who is also known as *Hari-Narayan-Vishnu-Ram* and many more names. Madhaba offers himself at the services of *Krisna*, just like a *dasa* (servant), eulogises the virtues of the Lord, elaborates the greatness of '*Naam-kirtan*'- that is, by chanting or singing about the goodness of *Krisna-Hari-Ram*, how one could get oneself, rescued even from sins. Some Stanzas from the *Namghosa* that would throw some light on the greatness and simplicity of '*Eka-Saran Naam-Dharma*' are reproduced below:

*"Krisnara namaka sada kirtan karaiya jito
Mane driha kariya a nischaay /
Niskam hok ba jadi sakam hoaiy taka
Kadacito Kali nabadhaiy //*

(Stanza-20)

[Whosoever chants the name 'Krisna' and sings his glories every day, with a single-minded devotion, whether this is done without a purpose or with a purpose, that person shall not, take it for sure, be a victim of 'Kali'.]

*Ram Krisna Hari Ram /
Sarba dharma anupam //
Sakal nigame twatta sara /
Jata pare dharma nahi ara //*

[The *Naam-Dharma*, with the chanting of 'Ram, Krisna, Hari, Ram' is the most superior to all other religions. It contains the core values of all the great scriptures, and there is no other religion better than this.]

*Hena nam nusumari kamana bharasa kari /
Raiya aca bhaba taribar //*

[Why are you wasting your time by indulging in desires and temptations, in stead of remembering and chanting the glories of such 'Naam' (Ram, Hari, Krisna, Ram) (Stanza-23)]

*Hari-naam Kirtanat /
Nahi Kal desa patra /
Niyam sanjam eko bidhi //
Harita saran laiya /
Kewal Harire nam /
Kirtan karante hoiye siddhi //
(Stanza-28)*

[There are no rules nor any restraints, in 'Naam-Dharma' for surrendering oneself to the service of Hari; simply by chanting the name 'Hari' and singing His glories, one can get all the needs satisfied, without any asking.]

Madhabdeva gives full credit to his Guru, Sankardeva for propounding the Faith-

*"Sankarese suddhamat Iswar bhaktir twatta
Pracarila sastrasar jani /
Tahanka najani murhe jibikara arthe phure
Apnar mahatta bakhani //
(Stanza-53)*

[It is Sankardeva who has spread the right mode of devotion to the god, by collecting the core nectar of the scriptures. Not knowing him, the fools go on beating their own drums and that too only for earning their livelihood.]

*Sankare sangsaij chedi sastrar twattaka bhedi
Pracarila Krishnara bhakati /
Tanka eri ki karane anaka boloiya guru
Kino lok maha murhamati //
(Stanza-54)*

[Sankardeva has spread the message for worshipping of Krisna through his 'bhakti' movement, by penetrating deeply into the core of the scriptures and thereby removing all kinds of doubts. Why then call others as 'guru' neglecting him-aren't such persons really foolish minded?]

*Samaste tirhat snan karileka sarva yagnyay
Dikkhita bhaileka situjan /
Samaste danar phal si si jane paile ati
Jito kare Harir kirtan //
(Stanza-85)*

[One can get the fruits of all those acts, like taking holy bath at all the pilgrimages, making all the sacrifices or offerings, and making of all the charities, simply by chanting the glories of *Hari*]

*Madhabe bolonta mok Krisna Krisna Krisna buli
Sadai sumare jito jane /
Jala hante jena padma narakara para tangka
Apuni uddharu narakara para tangka
Apuni uddharu rangamane //*

[God (*Madhaba*) himself says-those who remember my name every day, calling *Krisna*, *Krisna*, *Krisna*, I merrily redeem them from even hell, just in the same way one would pick out the lotus from the water.]

*Jadyapi durjan kali Harir bhakati pantha
Karileka birala pracar /
Ekanta sarane jito sraban-kirtan kare
ocare napawe kali tara //
(Stanza-87)*

As long as even the wicked one spreads the message of '*Hari-bhakti*', and with total surrender engages him in listening or chanting the glories of *Hari*, the Satan (*Kali*) cannot reach them.]

At the insistence of Naranarayana, Sankardeva had to leave *Patbausi*, handing over its charge to the care of Madhabdeva and settled at Koch Behar, where he stayed for two and a half years till his death. Chilarai built him a *Sattra* near the capital, which became later known as *Bhela* or *Bheladanga-sattra*. One day Naranarayana called Sankardeva to him and speaking in words soft and sweet requested Sankara to initiate him to *Krishna*. The latter wanted to evade it saying that a King could not be initiated to *Krishna*, since he was compelled to worship gods and goddesses. Sankara urged upon the King to abandon the idea, and rule his subjects confining himself to politics. The King, however, was insistent with his request.

Dr. Neog narrates the talk between them as below.

Snakardeva- 'So, O king, do abandon this idea. You are yourself a scholar, and endowed with infinite virtue. You should not risk hell. Do take my advice, and rule your subject confining yourself to politics.'

Naranarayana- 'The day I have said I could be initiated to *Krisna*, I have left all hope in gods and goddesses, will never be addicted to any rituals, and will be devoted to *Krisna* alone, sing his glory and regard you as my preceptor.'

Sankardeva now clearly saw that it was not possible to evade like this. He took leave of the king presently and said that the king might be initiated later on. Naranarayana took it for a yielding and compliance, and was glad; but Sankardeva was still on the look out for a means to avoid, and was at unrest. He at last decided thus-

“Nara-nat eribaka mane kailo sar:
Bolo teve eraiboho hatara ihar.”

[*Sankardeva And His Times, Dr. Neog, Ibid, Ch.IV, PP 117-120.*]

[I have decided to bring the drama of human life to an end. This is how I can avoid initiating the king.]

What Sankardeva suffered from, no one truly knew. It is said that he suffered from a boil in an inconvenient part of the body, Anyway he had been lying on bed for four days. Then Sankardeva asked his son Ramananda to make a seat for him under the holy *Aswaththa* tree; and when this was done, he went and lay there, said his prayers and breathed his last.

On hearing the news, Naranarayan came on foot, and was full of repentance. He humbly prostrated before Sankardeva’s dead body saying- ‘O God, what have I done? Sinful as I am, why was I not initiated (earlier)?’ So saying the king much expressed his grief and even in the dead body of Sankara he took initiation. This reminds one of Ramanuja taking initiation in the holy grave of Sathakopa.

Naranarayana went to his palace, ordered all arrangements to be made for burning the dead body. Ramrai made the carrier and the four great *bhaktas* Ramrai, Harirai, Ram and Harijai carried the body and put it on the funeral pyre on the bank of the *Torosa* in Koch Behar. Thus all other necessary works of the burning were completed presently. The eventful career of the Mahapurusa came to an end on Thursday, the 7th or the 21st *Bhadra* or *Bhada* (September), the 2nd day of the bright half of the lunar month, 1490 *Saka* / 1568 A.D.

[*New Light On The History Of Assamese Literature, Dimbeswar Neog, Ibid, P 155, 1st published 1962.*]

The years of Sankardeva’s life as calculated by Ramcaran, the most exhaustive and the earliest and contemporaneous biographer of Sankardeva, are one hundred and twenty years deficient by one. Daitari Thakur has given the date as *Saka 1490 Saka* (1568 A.D.).

[*New Light, Dimbeswar Neog, Ibid, P 154-5/Generalissimo, Ch.IX.*]

Amanatulla states thus about the cremation of Sankardeva.

Sankardeva’s last rites were observed, at ‘*Kagaj Kata Ghat*’, on the bank of the *Torosa*, where heavenly flowers (*puspa*) were showered on his dead body. Because of this, the river came to be known as ‘*Puspa-kanti*’. That spot of the river has presently turned into either a dead stream or a *beel*. *Kagajkuta* is now lying as an unknown place in the Koch Behar region.

[*New Light On The History Of Assamese Literature, Dimbeswar Neog, Ibid, P 138.*]

[Comment: The river is presently also known as *Torosa*. When this author visited *Madhupur Sattra* and the neighbouring *Torosa* on 19.01.2003, he enquired of the *Sattra* residents, as also some some leading citizens of Koch Behar, about the ‘*Puspakanti*’ river, they expressed ignorance about it. The living name is *Torosa* only, which the author visited, and was totally overwhelmed with joy to see her bluish waters and the serene beauty. This author simply wondered and attempted to imagine how the river must have looked like 435 years ago, in 1568 A.D., when Sankardeva had lived by it and breathed his last there, with the fantastic sylvan environment, and all other bounties of Nature.]

The place, where Sankardeva breathed his last is presently known as *Madhupur*, near Koch Behar City, in North Bengal, which was also named by the Mahapurusa. The story goes like this. At the age of one hundred (was it one hundred and one?) years, Sankardeva,

accompanied by one hundred and twenty disciples, set out from his seat at Patbausi, for the second '*Bharat-Darsan Tour*'. About 1550 A.D., as he was returning home from Jagannath-Puri, he along with the disciples, took rest at a place about seven miles (11.20 km) west of Koch Behar town, under a '*Parali*' tree. There Sankardeva was telling the '*bhakats*' (*bhaktas*) about the various events of *Krisna-Lila* at *Vrindavan*, when he noticed that, drops of honey were falling on the ground from a honey-hive, on the tree. Then, as per his desire the honey was collected from the hive, and the Saint together with the devotees heartily enjoyed the honey. The ebullient Madhabdeva, himself relished the honey, and in his poetic voice thus commented.

"What a 'honey honey' (*madhumai*) ambience! What a holy place it is! The Guru chanting the glories of *Hari (Krisna)* and also relishing the honey at the same time, with the '*bhakats*'!"

At this, Sankardeva said,

"Madhaba, you know it for certain, a monastery (*than*), to be called *Madhupur* (city of honey), would come up here in the future."

According to some biographers, Sankardeva rested under the '*Parali*' tree and took honey with his disciples, while narrating to them the '*Krisna-lila*', during his onward journey for the second '*Bharat-Darsan*'

After returning to Koch Behar, Sankardeva defeated the Brahmin *pundits*, who thronged at the Court of Naranarayana, coming from different part of the sub-continent, in a number of religious debates. Naranarayana was greatly pleased with him, and requested his daily presence at the royal Court. Sankardeva, who had his seat, at the *Phulbari* palace of Chilarai, informed Kamalpriya and Chilarai about his success in the debates; their joy knew no bounds as they learnt about his grand victory. After this event, Sankardeva had his seat shifted to the place, where he found the honey (*madhu*) and enjoyed it with his devotees. He named the place as '*Madhupur*', where Chilarai got a *Sattra* established by constructing the temple and the houses. Then onward, from this *Sattra* only, the Saint used to attend the Court of Naranarayana. The Mahapurusa also made his '*Maha-prayan*' from Madhupur only, when he was faced with the biggest predicament- the desire of the King to initiate him to the faith, which Sankardeva simply wanted to avoid. Sankardeva had his '*iccha-mrityu*' or self-willed death, which made it possible to avoid initiating the King.

*"Madhupure Sattra pati
Tathate thakila /
Vaikuntha gaila nara-dehaka erila //*

[*Mahapurush Sankardevar Chamu Paricai aru Vaikunthaprayanar Sthan Sri Sri Madhupur (Dham) Sattar Itibritta, (A), Pirambar Rai Bhakat, Ibit, Page 15.*]

At the '*Kagaj kuta ghat*' of the *Torosa*, the disciples of the Saint completed his last rites by cremating the body. As there were heavenly showers of flowers, when the cremation of the Saint was going on, the ghat came to be known as '*Puspakanti*'. With the passage of time, the '*ghat*' became extinct due to erosion or flood or both. Later, recognising the Saint as God-incarnate, Maharaj Naranarayana made a gift of two hundred bighas of land in the memory of Sankardeva as '*Brahmottar*' or '*Devottar*', with *Mowamari* on the west, *Manasai* on the south, the *Torosa* in the north and *Bheladanga* on the east as its boundaries. Sankardeva had stayed at *Kakat-kuta* and Madhupur, whereas, Madhabdeva has his residence at *Bhela*. After the

'*maha-prayan*' of the Saint, Madhabdeva took up the responsibility as his spiritual successor in 1568 A.D., and started propagating the religion, from Patbausi, Ganak-kuchi, Barpeta and Sundari-dia. Subsequently, at the request of king Lakshminarayan, he shifted his place of residence to *Bhela Sattr*a in Koch Behar. The king also became a disciple of Madhabdeva.

During the reign of king Birnarayan, Lakshminarayan's son, the *Bhela Sattr*a faced heavy erosion by the *Torosa*. In remembrance of the attachment of his late father to this *Sattr*a, the king got the plinth-soil of the *Kirtan-ghar* and the *guru-ghar* or *gurugriha* dug up, and transported some quantity by boat to Madhupur, where the *Sattr*a was re-established, by setting up *guru-griha*, *hati-bati*, *kirtan-ghar* etc. The *Sattr*a then came to be called *Sri Sri Bhela-Madhupur*, and Govinda Atai became the first *Sattradhikar*; he started the devotional activities with '*Nam-kirtan*' together with 120 *bhakats*, by lighting the perennial lamp (*akkhyai-banti*).

The loss of the Great Master was simply irreparable to the disciples and the followers, closest of them being Madhabdeva, himself an illustrious poet, an ardent devotee of *Krisna*, and a life-long amirer of Sankardeva.

Madhabdeva laments the passing away of Sankardeva, acknowledges his magnificent contribution to *Vaisnavism*, and declares him as the *supreme Guru*, through the following verses of '*Nam-ghosa*'.

*Hari nam rasey Vaikuntha prakase
Prem amritara nadi /
Srimanta Sankare paar bhangji dila
Bahey Brahmandaka bhedi // (stanza-371)*

[Through the juice of '*Harinam*' the door to '*Vaikuntha*' gets open to one and all; Srimanta Sankara broke all the embankments, as a result of which, the river of love-nectar flows uninterrupted to the entire Universe.]

*Govindara prem amritar nadi
Bahe Vaikunthar para /
Cari purusartha tahara nijhara
Hariname mul dhara // [stanza-372]*

[The river of love nectar of Govinda (*Krisna*) flows down from the '*Vaikuntha*', moving in four streams, of which, the main stream is the '*Hari-nam*'.] Here the four streams connote the '*Chari-bastu*' or the four things, namely *Nam*, *Dev*, *Guru* and *Bhakat* or *Bhakta*.

*Haribhakti daan diya jagataka
Tarila sansara Sindhu/
Henaiya kripalu Sankara binain
Nahi nahi aan bandhu // [stanza-373]*

[By presenting the gift of '*Hari-bhakti*' ('*Eka-saran-nam-dharma*'), you have rescued the world, from the tumultuous ocean of life. Without such a generous Sankara, there is no other (repeated twice) better friend for us.]

Madhabdeva pays his homage to the Guru in the following hymn (*bhatima*):

*Jai guru Sankara Sarva Gunakara
Jakeri Nahike Upama /
Tohari caran renu satakuti
Bareka karo ho pranama/*

[Glory to my preceptor Sankara, the repository of all the virtues, who has no equal anywhere! Prostrating at your feet with hundreds of crores of fragrant dust, I salute thee again and again.]

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