

VERSIONS OF THE LIFE: SRIMANTA SANKARDEVA

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Abstract

The Paper analyzes how the biographical works on Srimanta Sankardeva presented him in different lights keeping in mind his enormous contribution towards the different aspects of Assamese society. The select biographers under examination looks at Sankardeva from different angles and illuminates his varied and multitalented personality. His contribution to the Assamese society, culture and religion are examined in various ways. Sankardeva's life was variously configured by these biographers and as a result his multidimensional personality is stressed by them. Facts are so configured that Sankardeva emerges out as a saint, religious reformer, a humanist, a cultural icon, a dramatist, a poet and other roles emerges out. Each of these biographers have worked on the past biographies of the saint and have thrown fresh lights on the facts which were partly or fully ignored by their predecessors. Their fresh evaluations of the saint gave an entire new picture of his life. Now the different biographies of Sankardeva have a different story to narrate.

Key Words: Version, Biographical literature, Configuration, Humanism

Writing on the versions of a life, noted life writing critic Ira Bruce Nadel describes in detail how a biographer has a different story to tell even if the same life is written again and again. He writes:

Versions of life exist not because that the facts may differ but because of differing conceptions of what form of story-telling, narrative, is best suited to the facts. The configurations of life, not the fact, alter. Shifting Ideological, psychological, or aesthetic imperatives prefigure the form of plotting to be followed, which changes with each reading of the life by a biographer. Through alternate plots, each biography of the same person demonstrates the multiple meanings and interpretations possible which the form (biography) does not limit. Versions of a life actually record the discovery of how various plot structures can be applied to provide sets of events with different meanings but with no loss of factual value. Through literary tropes, the constituted life transfers the symbolic significance of a comprehensible plot structures to the events. Each biography of the same individual has a different story to tell not because the facts differ but because the plot structures available to, and employed by, the biographer differ.

(Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form)

Nadel describes that a life evolves in the way a biographer tries to present it by configuring the life in various ways. Facts remains the same but the interpretation of those facts makes the difference. These new data or new theories bring about fresh evaluations. Coupled with the impulse to correct, there emerges in biography the desire to revise. As more facts and details become known, a new, corrected record must be applied. Further he remarks:

The failure of earlier biographies to provide a complete picture of their subjects because of the suppression, distortion, or ignorance of detail clearly necessitates new lives.

(Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form,104)

Biographical literature on Shankardeva is literally abundant and different writers have their own story to tell about the 'Mahapurusha'. In this paper it will be a humble attempt to briefly discuss

the biographies of Sankardeva written by the eminent writers of Assamese language and analyze the different facets of the great saint of Assam as presented by them. Each of the biographers has tried to see and review the personality in their own way. The biographies under scan are Lakshminath Bezbaruah's biographical works "Sankardeva" (1912) and "Sri Sri Sankardeva And Sri Sri Madhavdeva" (1914), Dimbeswar Neog's "Juganayak Sankardeva" (1963), Dr. Maheshwar Neog's "Sri Sri Sankardeva" (1949), Shivanath Barman's "Srimanta Sankardeva: Kriti Aru Krittiva" (1983), and Bapchandra Mahanta's "Aetihashik Patabhumit Mahapurusha Sankardeva" (1987)

Srimanta Shankardeva (1449–1568) saint-scholar, playwright, socio-religious reformer, is a colossal figure in the cultural and religious history of [Assam](#). His literary activities provided the base for an emerging Assamese culture and gave a living tradition to the Assamese people. It is difficult to imagine how deep and widespread was the influence of Sankardeva on the cultural renaissance that spread during the Medieval Assam. Sankardeva's life was an inspirational in developing the literature, religion and arts of Assam. As a religious reformer, Sankardeva's greatest achievement was his success in reforming the religious set up in Assam. He inspired the people to shift their religious belief from Sakta *tantricism* to the pure monotheism of Vaisnava faith.

Highlighting on the biographical literature on Sankardeva, Dr. Maheshwar Neog remarks:

The Neo-Vaisnava movement ushered in the saint created an unprecedented zeal for the culture of religious literature; and in the wake of the movement came to be born a rich biographical literature centering on the career and personality of Sankardeva. Within a few decades of his death, his lives and the lives of his followers came to be written in verse. These early examples were emulated by the later writers, and biographical works in verse and in prose multiplied with the advance of time.

(Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement
in Assam: Sankardeva and His Times.,01)

Biographical literature on Sankardeva begins with the 'Guru Charitas'. The Charitas were the

tales in verse composed by the followers of Sankardeva. It informs us how the narration of the story of the Master came to be cultivated in Vaisnava circles. These brought a living tradition and it has brought down to us the minutest details of the lives of Sankardeva. The Charitas not only informs us about the lives of the saints but also provide us information regarding the political, economic structure of the country and the background of the Sankardeva movement. They are only the source of the political history of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The old biographical literature (Guru -Charitas) centering round Sankardeva and his cult can be classified as follows:

- A. Caritas of Sankardeva, Madhavdeva and their immediate followers.
- B. Independent biographical works on the apostles of Sankardeva, and other religious leaders.
- C. Attempts at histories of the Vaisnava institutions.
- D. Spurious works of dubious authorship and with a Caitanyaite bias.

(Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam: Sankardeva and His Times, 03-04)

These life writings written during the medieval era represents Sankardeva from a feudalistic view point and tries to establish him as a Saint as well as spiritualist. The early biographical works consider Sankardeva and Madhavdeva as incarnation of Vishnu, although they never lose sight of the man in both. It was in fact, an essential part of their creed to consider the religious preceptor as none other than God.

It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that the life of this great saint was seen from logical and modernistic point of view. Critical investigations, albeit of a pioneering type, were now carried into the fields of Vaisnava faith and literature, and much useful material began to emerge.

Modern life writing on Sankardeva began with Lakshminath Bezbaruah's biographical works

“Sankardeva”(1912) and “Sri Sri Sankardeva And Sri Sri Madhavdeva” (1914). He was responsible for the revival of interest in the Vaisnava movement. It was Bezbarua’s pioneering work which attracted the attention of the common people towards Sankardeva. Bezbarua’s account of Sankardeva was based on the limited resources made available to him. Although the account was limited it had its desired results. He interpreted the life of Sankardeva from a modernist point of view. In the history of Assamese society Bezbarua is the esteemed exponent and expositor of the Vaisnava faith and philosophy of Sankardeva.

Dimbeswar Neog’s “Juganayak Sankardeva” (1977) expounds and analyses the life of Sankardeva in a more scientific manner. He looks at his personality through the lens of a humanist. According to him Sankardeva was an apostle of humanism and he devoted his life in the upliftment of the society from the debased social norms surrounded by superstitious beliefs. He tries to establish his character more as human being than as a man of superhuman quality. In his book he tries to establish the fact that Sankardeva was born to serve the suffering humanity and he has showed the way how a man can attain sainthood by serving the humanity. The great truth that saints are also man has been rightly emulated by the ‘Mahapurusha’. He also discusses several literary works written during the period.

Dr. Maheshwar Neog’s “Sri Sri Sankardeva” (1961) discusses the life of Sankardeva and his religion in a more threadbare, research oriented and objective manner. In this book he broadly discusses the socio-economic condition of the medieval Assam and how Sankardeva preached his religion in this historical time. He also discusses the nature of his religious philosophy. This book also introduces the followers of Sankardeva and the religious institutions and Satras set up by him. The writer has tried to give logical and factual interpretations of the different controversial incidents in the life of the saint. In doing so the writer has taken the help of old scripts, history and easily available documents and has tried to evaluate the authenticity of those materials.

Modern attempts have been made to envisage Sankardeva on the national stage. In this respect Shivanath Barman seems to lead the front. In his biographical book, “Srimanta Sankardeva: Kriti Aru Krititva” (1983), he makes effort to launch Sankardeva in the line of nationalist figure. In

the introduction of the book, he states that the life and personality of Sankardeva is the storehouse of unending debate and discussions. His life is like a kaleidoscope. From whatever direction you view it, you will be able to see the various angles of his personality and works. He tried to appraise Sankardeva from a sociological point of view rather than emotional and religious view points. In order to understand Sankardeva, one has to take into account various factors .He was not a spiritualist away from humanity, not a person uninfluenced by the socio-economic factors, but a man of flesh and blood. Barman tries to bring out the “Indian Sankardeva “from the “Assamese Sankardeva .The Bhakti movement which swept all over India in 14th century was spearheaded in Assam . The Bhakti cult preached the sermon of brotherhood and love. Sankardeva’s able leadership and insight gave a tremendous momentum to the movement in this part of India. It was through his enduring works and multilayered personality that Assam was able to breath a new life into its religious life. Sibanath Barman remarks: He was not a person who -

...led a purely intellectual life, equanimity of his mind being scarcely disturbed by bereavements and other worldly woes.”

(Srimanta Sankardeva: Kriti Aru Krittiva).

Another distinguished biographer of Sankardeva is Bapchandra Mahanta. His path breaking work is “Aetihashik Patabhumit Mahapurusha Sankardeva” (1989). His first book on Sankardeva was “Mahapurusha Sankardeva” But he felt that it ought to be revised as the parameters of evaluation and the assessment of the subject matter changes with the change of time. So instead of writing a second edition of the book, he planned to pen down another book with different point of view. In the preface of the book “Aetihashik Patabhumit Mahapurusha Sankardeva” (1987) he writes,

The book is not intended for those who are after the religious philosophy of Sankardeva. Religion and culture are above superstition and communalism. Unless religion is grounded in philosophy and scientific base, it loses the capacity of adaptability in the society. In such a situation religion does harm to the society. In the same way culture

also depends on both economic and artistic escalation. Sankardeva should have been viewed not only as prophet but also as the leader of cultural renaissance which thereafter enriched the Assamese culture years back. But we failed to cultivate such habits as we are accustomed to the traditional outlook. In this book my endeavor to observe Sankardeva from humanitarian perspective.

His evaluation of Sankardeva from a realistic and humanist view point is stressed in the book. He feels that Sankardeva should be assessed as a cultural hero whose contribution needs to be studied.

He further relates how the socio-cultural situation at the time would have favored his ascension as a ruler. His devotion to the social upliftment is emphasized upon. He quotes:

Sankardeva could have become the ruler of the Bhuyan's as he was conferred the title of "Shirumoni" and was bestowed with mental strength, good health, as well as administrative legacy. Above all the social and political situation was congenial for his ambition. But he gave himself to the concern of permanent peace and paid more interest to the augmentation of cultural and social organizations rather than on prosperity. His economic negligence paid him negative results. As an outcome his upcoming generation had to face acute financial crisis. Then his pupils and followers supported economically and morally his great grandsons. Society deems to support and patronize such the social worker. This was in fact the duty of the followers to support the Guru and his family in whatever way they can. Later this attitude of responsibility began to continue as "Guru Kar" which could be compared to the royal levy system. This type of levy was not meant for the personal opulence of the Guru. It was meant for sustaining the particular life style of the guru as well as management of the Satras."

Sankardeva was not only a prophet but also a cultural advocate who strived to give a definite shape to the Assamese culture. So, he is also known as Cultural leader. Sankardeva's life has

been variously represented and interpreted by the scholars and writers in various manners. But the truth remains that Sankardeva's contribution to the Assamese society is immense and unforgettable.

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