

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **Sankardeva as a Religious Reformer and a Playwright with Special Reference to his *nat Rukmini Haran***

**Tejoswita Saikia**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, DKD College, Dergaon, Assam, India

### **Abstract:**

*Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva was the reformer saint of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam under whose aegis the diverse population of the land was united under a socio-cultural phenomenon that gave a new direction to life in Assam. A forerunner of the Bhakti Movement of India and its pioneer in the North East, Sankardeva rescued the Assamese people from the clutches of a decadent belief system that thrived on the exploitation of the ignorant masses. In spite of life-threatening encounters with the rulers and the guileful schemes of the Brahminical priests, Sankardeva preached a way of life that propounded full faith in the devotion of the One God, Vishnu/Krishna as the route to salvation for all. The neo-Vaishnavism promulgated by Sri Sankardeva was egalitarian, democratic and free of whimsical and irrational religious practices that left the society divided and impoverished. Its ideal of bhakti assured every individual an equal opportunity to be closer to God with just a sense of true love for the One.*

*Preaching such a religion could not be possible without touching the hearts of all the people irrespective of their gender or caste. And the heart could only be reached through means that were comprehensible to the common people. So, Sankardeva took recourse to different forms of art and literature to influence the people and ignite in their souls the love of the one God. In this paper, I have attempted to study Sankardeva's nat Rukmini Haran as an example of his literary and religious work.*

### **1. Objective of the Paper**

To study the *nat Rukmini Haran* as an example of Sankardeva's literary prowess while also emphasizing on the central theme of the neo-Vaishnavite movement – the *bhakti* towards Lord Vishnu/Krishna as the means for ultimate salvation for all and sundry.

### **2. Scope of Study**

I have undertaken the study of the play *Rukmini Haran* as composed by Sri Sankardeva to analyze his literary genius in trying to preach *bhakti* to the common folk.

### **3. Content Analysis**

A day in September of the year 1449 marked a new dawn for the people now collectively known as the Assamese. After much appeasing of the Lord Sankara a boy was born to Kusumvara Bhuya and his wife Satyasandhya and hence the baby was named Sankara. Sankara's ancestors had migrated to Assam around 1350 and were conferred upon the title of 'Bhuya', loosely meaning zamindar, by the Kamata King Durlabhanarayana. Kusumvara Bhuya, Sankara's father was a scholar of great repute but it was his son who would become the beacon of light for generations of the 'Assamese' people uniting them under a new socio-religious culture that would continue to define their identity for centuries to come. The wave of reformation that Sankara brought into the socio-cultural life of the people of Assam had earned him the apt title of 'Mahapurush' from whence he came to be known as Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva.

The literary genius in Sri Sankardeva was evident from a very young age as he had composed a lyric in praise of Lord Vishnu using only the consonant sounds and the vowel 'a' with the limited education he had attained so far from his Brahman guru Mahendra Kandali. The Brahman caste of the guru is being emphasized here for a very significant purpose. It was time of the dominance of Brahminical and Sakta religious culture pan-India. These religious beliefs, although not inherently evil in themselves, had been manipulated by their practitioners, those belonging to the 'higher castes' into decadent systems of exploitation and ill-pursuits. Marginalized sections like the 'lower castes' and the women, especially, were subjected to unjust oppression and abuse; and boundaries of humanity had been transgressed through practices like human-sacrifice while animal-sacrifice was daily ritual. Under such circumstances, when Sankardeva began preaching about neo-Vaishnavism, such was his soulful call to the people that even the Brahman guru debunked the ill-practices of his caste and became a follower of his former disciple. With advancement in his education and his in-depth study of the Hindu religious texts like the Puranas, he began trans-creating scenes and stories from these texts into different literary forms like *kavya*, *aakhyaan* etc. In these early works Sankardeva did experiment with his creativity and in fact exhibited immense artistic dexterity. Meanwhile, his continuous correspondence with the religious texts was driving him towards a

path of piety and devotion though he did juggle with the role of a Bhuya too, for some time. Personal tragedies, it must be mentioned, were catalysts in inducing religious inclinations in Sankardeva. After the death of his first wife in, Sankardeva undertook his first pilgrimage in 1481 across holy places in India during which he came in contact with the Bhakti Movement that was gaining momentum throughout India. The propagators of Bhakti preached devotion towards Vishnu and hence the movement came to be referred to as Vaishnavism. Vaishnav religious reformers believed and sermonized the people about the One Lord, Vishnu, and devotion to whom was the only way to salvation. This devotion or *bhakti* was bereft of irrational rituals and extravaganzas.

In between the mid 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Srimanta Sanakardeva took up the arduous task of religious reform in Assam. In a period of divided kingdoms, Assam was under the sway of the Brahminical religious system that bred numerous social evils. As Pan-India, in Assam too, a decadent caste-ridden society had made worship of God in the Hindu religion a privilege of the 'higher caste' men. It must be highlighted that women, even of the 'higher cast' were subjected to various forms of exploitations and whimsical restrictions that marginalized them even in a matter as personal as religious practice. During his pilgrimages he came closer to the ideals of worship that revolved around Lord Krishna and his avatar, Lord Ram. This was the time of the Bhakti Movement and various religious reformers, discontented by the divisive and exploitative society emerging out of the Brahminical and Sakta religious practices sought a religious and social reformation that would give a fresh lease of life to the decaying society. Sankardeva became influenced by this idea of *bhakti* and picked up practices that would help propagate this belief further, throughout his travels. Amongst the three ways of worship – *jnana*, *karma* and *bhakti*, Sankardeva, like the other reformers of the Bhakti Movement chose *bhakti* or true devotion towards the One God, Lord Vishnu as the only way to attain salvation. It was now to be propagated amongst the ignorant common folk of his native land. With advancing age and growing religious understanding and fervor, the literary works of Sankardeva became media for popularizing his religious beliefs amongst the common people and uplifting them from the darkness of religious ignorance and exploitation. Illiteracy and ignorance had rendered the common folk vulnerable to the manipulations of a class of wily priests. God and worship were expensive and taxing affair with little hope of deliverance. Under such circumstances Sankardeva had to design ways to educate the common people in a religious system that instilled in them faith and devotion for God rather than fear and apprehension while also empowering them to defend their religious beliefs against attacks of the ill-minded priests. Sankardeva was a shrewd scholar as well as an earnest religious reformer. He had understood that the common folk who were not literate in the Vedic language of Sanskrit could not cause their own religious emancipation because of this lack. He, as such, designed ingenious ways to attract and initiate the people into the new system of religious belief. Throughout his pilgrimages he realized the importance of regional and folk art and culture in proliferating religious beliefs. Keeping this in view, Sankardeva formulated some novel and artistic ways that would catch and hold the attention of the public while also strongly instilling in them religious beliefs that would result in their own alleviation. *Bargeet* (a kind of lyric), *xatriya nitya* (a dance form), *ankiya nat* and *bhaona* (kinds of drama) are all examples of this intermixing of religious teaching and artistic sources of entertainment. What must be strongly kept in mind is that these artistic creations were primarily created for propagation of a particular religious message because of which their creator was often indifferent to their artistic worth. In this regard, Sankardeva's *nats* can be compared to the 'mystery' and 'miracle' plays of Medieval England where these plays fulfilled the same religious purpose. Sankardeva's *nats*, it needs be mentioned here, have an artistic flavor to them that has resulted in them becoming an integral part of Assamese literature and culture also giving it a novel direction.

Initiating the spiritual and cultural wave of neo-Vaishnavism Sankardeva devised ways to organize the Assamese people into a socio-cultural community by establishing socio-religious institutions like the *xatras* (kind of monastries) and *namghars* (prayer halls) where all the people irrespective of caste and gender could come and offer their devotion to the Lord by singing odes in the form of *bargeet* (also known as 'noble song') and participating in *nam-prasanga* through recitations of verses from the *kirtan* and *Gunamala*. The *kirtan* and *Gunamala* are different concise trans-creations of the Hindu religious text, the *Bhagavata Purana* in the verse form especially in idiomatic Assamese with interpolations from other Hindu religious works where the Supreme Personality of Godhead, Krishna's innumerable divine qualities are enumerated. In composing the religious literary works, Sankardeva, who is well versed in the Sanskrit language too, uses Assamese as medium to facilitate easy understanding by the common people unfamiliar with the scholarly Vedic language. The concise nature of the *Gunamala* and the *Kirtan* wherein significant events from the *Bhagavata Purana* are discussed in verses of a few lines convey Sankardeva's dependence on the popular oral culture through which the stories of the high religious texts had flowed through generations enabling the people associate the story related to a given verse. Thus, it is pertinent to mention here that the thread of a particular kind of religious culture had been continuing in Assam for quite some time but Sanakardeva's arrival gave the flow a new direction. The prefix '*neo-*' is added to the Vaishnavism propagated by Sankardeva because unlike the older form of Vaishnavism, Sankardeva did not preach an anti-Sakta or anti-Brahminical attitude even though he did criticize some of their ill practices like animal and human sacrifice or the proliferation of casteism. Sankardeva's neo-Vaishnavism paid due respect to the beliefs of other religious systems while supporting the idea of true devotion as the only way to reach God. The acceptance of this multiplicity by Sankardeva is another instance of his astute understanding of the people. He could comprehend that influencing the maximum number of people would not be possible if he blatantly disregarded the beliefs that had been instilled into them from generations. That would only beget him ire of the people rather than their faith.

Just as the Mahapurush's religious system embraced a diverse systems of beliefs, so did his literary works manifest a brilliant amalgamation of literary conventions across time and cultures. The borrowing and re-molding of different literary traditions by Sankardeva to create works of art that disseminated and popularized his religious beliefs by entertaining the audience/reader is most wonderfully represented in the dramas or *nats* that he had produced. In this regard, Sankardeva had put his art to the most apt use – to instruct while also giving pleasure. It is almost uncanny how Sankardeva's use of literary art proved the universality of Sir Philip Sidney's grounds for defence of poetry. Reverting back to his assimilation of diverse literary trends and forms with an unique resultant

product it is found that Sankardeva refused to be bound by conventions and experimented with forms and techniques to arrive at pieces of art that suited his religious project. His *nats*, especially, represent a mélange of ancient Sanskrit dramatic form skillfully knitted with *natya* (a complex amalgamation of dance and acting) that drew inspiration from dance forms like Kathakali that he had seen during his pilgrimage. The *ankiya nat* that included the *bhaona* (a kind of dance drama depicting mythological episodes) is one of the most popular art forms created by the guru attracting and involving people belonging to an entire cross-section of the Assamese society.

Sankardeva started the theatrical form with *chinha jatra* wherein the seven different scenes of *Baikuntha*, Lord Vishnu's abode were presented with much creativity and fanfare. From here on, he moved onto to create a genius amalgamation of dance, song and acting which was termed as *nat*. The importance of *nat* lies in its bringing together of ancient folk practices of *ojha-pali*, *gayan-bayan* and the art of pan-Hindu Sanskrit dramas into one melting pot. As has been mentioned, Sankardeva refused to be restricted by the formerly practiced forms of these arts and invented his own unique form of drama to deliver religious messages to his people. *Rukmini Haran* is a classic example of one such *nat* that tries to arouse devotion towards Krishna in the audience by dramatically emphasizing on the beauty and qualities of the lord. *Rukmini Haran* was first written as a *kavya* or epic poetry but later he created the *nat* out of it by making relevant changes and highlighted the points of religious importance maintaining a sense of indifference towards the artistic attributes. The sources of *Rukmini Haran* mainly are *Khilbhag Harivansh Puran* and *Bhagavad Puran*. However, Sankardeva makes significant diversions from the source texts to rationalize the action of the play as well as enhance the religious overtones in it. The play begins with elaborate descriptions of the mystical powers of Lord Krishna and the ethereal beauty of Rukmini. The main motive behind this beginning that is missing in the source texts is to invoke in the audience a sense of awe and surrender towards the lord, Himself. Krishna is attributed with deep humanely feelings of love and longing for his beloved Rukmini in the play, unlike in the source texts, to enamor the audience drawing them into the emotive fold of the play completely. Scenes have been so modified so as to entertain the audience through presentation of deep emotions as well as comic scenes like the fainting of the Brahman Vednidhi while onboard with Krishna on his *rath*. It is important to mention here that many characters including that of Vednidhi have been created and added to the play by Sankardeva to heighten the dramatic effects to make the play more entertaining as well as make rational connections between the scenes which were not necessary in the source texts. Sankardeva, the reformer, exploited the freedom available to Sankardeva, the playwright to alter high religious texts for the higher purpose of instilling in the common folk faith and devotion towards Vishnu. He, in a way, risked charges of blasphemy, given the vindictive and inimical attitude of most of the Brahman priests towards him, yet braved these dangers for the betterment and emancipation of his people.

The language used in these *nats* was Brajabali Assamese, which is a mixture of the north-Indian language of Braj and Assamese. Use of Sanskrit was avoided by Sankardeva because it could not be understood by the common people who were the target audience. Yet, Sanskrit slokas were sung by the Sutradhar to amplify the dramatic as well as religious effect making the audience aware of the high and noble subject being dealt with. Brajabali too was used for a similar purpose as it reflected the nobility of the characters of the play. On the other hand, the dominance of the Assamese language assured the audience of a familiarity that brought them closer to the subject of the play. Sankardeva, though mostly indifferent to artistic quality of the play in comparison to its religious importance has displayed immense creative dexterity in this play to make it appealing to the audience. Here, mention may also be made to his delineation of the character of Rukmi and his tragic defeat in the hands of Krishna. After his defeat in the hands of Krishna, Rukmi's life was forgiven by Krishna on the pleading by Rukmini but Rukmi had to suffer a more humiliating consequence as Krishna shaved the head of Rukmi branding him with even more shameful sign of defeat. In the *nat* Sankardeva intensifies the tragic effect by making Krishna blacken the face of Rukmi. This addition by Sankardeva lends a very significant dramatic effect that not only highlights the strength of Krishna but also makes Rukmi look almost like a Shakespearean tragic hero. The sense of awe that fills the audience proves Sankardeva's creative prowess. Here, the playwright works, apparently, against the Aristotelian view of catharsis for he depicts such a frightful scene to awaken the audience to the power of the Lord. However, the benevolence of Krishna is highlighted quite starkly as he forgives the life of the one who had dared to fight against him.

The harbinger of Assamese religious and cultural Renaissance, Sankardeva's continued reverential status is also an effect of his pro-feminist belief and actions. Sankardeva's reformist zeal was not limited to improving the lot of men only. His religious belief was unbiased and egalitarian, encompassing women within its fold too. It is noteworthy that his grand-daughter-in-law, Kanaklata re-established the *xatra* near Bardowa taking forward the legacy of the great saint. This is an instance of a woman taking lead in propagating the religious beliefs of Sankardeva. Sankardeva's support for the emancipation and empowerment of the women folk also finds reflection in the play *Rukmini Haran*. In the *nat*, Rukmini is shown to be a woman who has made a choice for herself and fights for it. Her friends who also act as her spies, Lilavati and Madanmanjari are characters created by Sankardeva who enable Rukmini to get information regarding her betrothal to Sishupala and also lend her the agency to call on Krishna to elope with him with the help of the Brahman Vednidhi. At a juncture when even her father, Bhishmaka had to bow down in front of the wishes of Rukmi, who himself feared the King Jarasandha, Rukmini took into her own hands to fight for her love and marry the one she chose. Rukmini, unlike a servile woman spoke out against her brother strongly resisting his imposition of arbitrary authority on her. Moreover, her pleading mercy for the same brother who had put her through so much suffering also emphasizes her magnanimous character, something that makes her the most suitable companion for the ever benevolent lord. Finally, Rukmini's ability to marry the One Lord, in whom everything merges, in whom everyone seeks salvation reverberates with her strength of mind and soul having made the Lord Himself fall in love with her through her devotion.

Sankardeva, in this play shows his modern and democratic outlook as a religious reformer along with exemplifying his artistic ingenuity which was to give a new direction to the literature and art of Assamese culture. Dramatic art in Assamese culture turned a

new leaf with Sankardeva's *ankiya nats*. The sagacity of Sankardeva as a religious reformer is illuminated by his ingenuity as a playwright and a literary artist as he managed to truly unite a diverse population under the faith of neo-Vaishnavism.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

*Rukmini Haran* is one of Sankardeva's finest *nats* that show his reformist zeal, modern outlook and creative genius. As a reformer his intentions to popularize his religious beliefs and glorification of Lord Vishnu/Krishna find amplified expression in this play. It also embraces the marginalized sections of society – women and the 'lower-castes' instilling in the people the idea that devotion to God is a way of worship open to all and is the only way to salvation. In addition to this, his founding of the innovative art of *ankiya nat* redirected the literature and culture of Assam towards greater heights of creativity hitherto unseen.

#### 5. References

- i. Ankamala: Old Assamese dramatic writings by Sankardeva, Madhavdeva, Gopala Ata, Sri Ramadeva Ata, Ramacandra Ata and Laksmideva Ata. Ed. Dr. Kesavananda Dev Goswami, Guwahati: Banalata, 2014 (fourth edition)
- ii. Daloi, Dr. H.N Sarma, Sankardeva Sahitya-Pratibha (Vol-I), Nalbari: Padma Priya Library, 2014 (fifth edition)
- iii. Neog, Dr. Maheswar. Sri Sankardeva, a treatise on Sankardeva: His life and works, Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, 2006
- iv. Phukan, Bimal. Srimanta Sankardeva: Vaishnava Saint of Assam, Guwahati: Kaziranga Books, 2010