

The *Caritaputhis* and the *Mahapurusiya Dharma* in Assam

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ABSTRACT

The *caritaputhis* or hagiographic literature associated with the *Mahapurusiya Dharma* or the Neo-Vaisnavite movement in Assam are important literary sources that belong to the medieval period of this region. These texts were written to commemorate and remember the lives and activities of the important saints associated with this movement. These texts were, however, composed in a period posterior to the actual lives and times of the saints. Also, in a manner similar to most hagiographic literature, these texts contained many imaginary and fanciful details regarding the lives of the saints. Owing to the said nature of these texts, historians are sometimes skeptical of their credibility in providing an authentic view of the past. However, in the recent decades significant developments have been made in the field of the study of hagiographies in general. Hagiographic texts are now seen as providing a window towards understanding the underlying structures of consciousness of a society. Similarly, the *caritaputhis* of Assam can also prove to be important sources for understanding the socio-cultural, economic and political background of Assam during the medieval times. A critical analytical approach towards these texts can provide us with invaluable insights into the prevailing atmosphere of the times in general and the *Mahapurusiya Dharma* in particular.

Key Words : *Caritaputhis*, *Mahapurusiya Dharma*, Assam, Bhakti, Neo-Vaisnavism, Hagiographies, Society, Culture

INTRODUCTION

The *Mahapurusiya Dharma* of Srimanta Sankaradeva came to dominate the religio-cultural terrain of Assam during the 16th and the 17th centuries. This movement can be broadly called a way of life that touched every aspect of how people thought, behaved and participated in a particular historical context. Its emergence had deep roots within the existing socio-economic and religious context of medieval Assam. The period of its emergence and growth, *i.e.* the 15th and the 16th centuries is also the period when similar socio-religious reform movements, which have been clubbed under the uniform term Bhakti Movement, were in full swing in the rest of the Indian subcontinent.

Among the numerous contributions it had made towards the cultural fabric of Assam one of the most important is the flowering of Assamese literature. The Vaisnavite texts constituted of the works of Sankaradeva

and Madhavadeva and the vast corpus of hagiographic literature called *caritaputhis*. It is the latter that I undertake to discuss in this paper.

The paper has been divided into four sections: in the first section I attempt to give a general introduction to the *caritaputhis* and as such this section is mostly descriptive in nature; in the second the methodology of dealing with these texts has been described; the third section gives an account of the socio-economic and political background of the texts; and the fourth section attempts an enquiry into the functions of these texts and their significance for the spread of *bhakti*.

The *Carita Puthis*:

The *caritaputhis* or the hagiographic literature of Assam embodies the lives and activities of different leaders of the Vaisnavite movement in Assam.¹ They belong to the vast corpus of vernacular Vaisnava literature

which sprang up during this period and were aimed at spreading the message of *bhakti* among the people.² They are found in prose as well as verse. The authorship of some of them is anonymous. Although written by different writers in different spaces they bear significant similarities in form and content. These texts constitute important sources for studying not only the growth and development of the Vaisnavite movement of Sankaradeva but also provide us with valuable information about the socio-economic, cultural and political atmosphere of medieval Assam.

The *caritaputhis* came to be composed in the post-Sankarite period, *i.e.*, during the 17th and the 18th centuries. Scholars on Assam Vaisnavism mainly categorize these texts into two groups: the early group of *caritas* and the later group of *caritas*. The first set belongs to the early 17th century and the later group belongs to the late 17th century and the 18th century. Apart from the chronological factors there are also other perceivable differences between the two sets of texts. The later day texts are more elaborate both in detail and fantasy. Maheshwar Neog organizes the known *caritaputhis* according to their nature and chronology³:

A. *Caritas* of Sankara, Madhava and their immediate followers:

1. Early group comprising of the writings of Daityari Thakur, Bhusana Dvija, Ramananda Dvija, and Vaikuntha Dvija;
2. Later group comprising *Guru-Varnana* by Aniruddha Dasa; the anonymous prose *caritas-Katha-guru-carita* or *Guru Carita Katha*, the second *Katha-guru-carita* and the *Bardowa-carita*; *Sankaradeva-carita* in synopsis found in Barpeta; the verse biography ascribed to Ramcarana Thakur; *Saru-svarga-khanda* and *Bar-svarga-khanda* ascribed to *Sarvabhauma*

B. Independent biographical works on the apostles of Sankaradeva and other religious leaders:

1. The *caritas* of Damodaradeva by Ramaraya and Nilakantha Dasa;
2. The *caritas* of Harideva by Dhanesvara Dvija, Vanesvara Dvija and Divakara Dvija;
3. The *caritas* of Gopaladeva of Bhavanipur by Ramananda Dvija;
4. The *caritas* of Purusottama Thakura and Caturbhuj Thakura by Vidyananda Ojha; and the later portion of Vaikuntha Dvija's *Santamala*;
5. The *carita* of Vamsi-gopaladeva by Ramananda

Dvija

6. The *caritas* of other saints- Vanamalideva, Yadumanideva, Sriramadeva, Ananta, etc.
- C. Attempts at the histories of the Vaisnava institutions- *Acarya-samhati*; Govindadasa's *Santa-sampradaya-katha*, Vibhunatha's *Etaka Mahantar Juna*.
- D. Spurious works of dubious authorship and with a Chaitanyaite bias- *Santa-nirnaya*; Krsna Acarya's *Santa-Vamsavali* or *Santa-carita*; and Kaviratna's *Sat-Sampradaya Katha*.

The two groups of *carita* texts bear important differences that set them apart from each other. The early group of *carita* texts was naturally nearer to Sankaradeva's life and thus is believed to have contained more authentic information.⁴ These texts contain a more sober account of the lives of the saints and are not encumbered with the supernatural feats and miraculous events present in the later day *puthis*. The texts of Daityari, Bhusana, Ramananda and Vaikuntha see both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva as incarnations of lord Visnu. However, these texts are ever aware of them as mortals of flesh and blood. For e.g. Daityari Thakur mentions the event of Sankaradeva seizing a wild bull by its horns and throwing it away with his bare hands.⁵ The event speaks of Sankaradeva's sheer physical strength but not of any superhuman or extra-worldly ability. These texts also do not read supernatural puranic episodes into the lives of the saints.⁶

The later group of *caritas* shows certain very important new elements and modifications in contrast to the early texts. These differences are very significant for understanding the changing environment and the corresponding changes in *bhakti* ideals in the succeeding period after Sankaradeva's death. Certain important features of the later day texts that have been outlined by Maheshwar Neog are as follows⁷:

1. These texts see Sankara (Assam), Caitanya (Bengal), Harivyasa (Nimbarka School) and Ramananda (Northern India) as the quadruple incarnations of God for the purpose of the spread of *bhakti*.
2. The tracing back of the origin of the *bhakti* cult to Sankaracarya.
3. The mention of a number of holy people from outside Assam as disciples of Sankaradeva: for e.g. Rupa and Sanatana Gosvamis, Vrndavanadasa of Vrndavana etc.

4. The increase in the number of Vaikunthas being mentioned from 7 to 35 with the highest of them being described as the Goloka Vaikuntha where Radha and Krsna reside. A prominent place to Radha is being accorded in this works unlike the orthodox Vaisnava literature.
5. The mention of *Chihmayatra* as the first play being composed by Sankaradeva.
6. The story of the fisher woman Radhika passing an ordeal of chastity.
7. The passing away of Sankaradeva being ascribed to the pressure of Koch king Naranarayana for his acceptance as a convert.

The *caritaputhis* were compiled within the precincts of the *sattras* or the Vaisnava monastic institutions.⁸ By the time the later *carita* texts were composed the *sattras* had greatly multiplied. The Vaisnava monastic order became split into four important *samhatis*: the Brahma, the Purusa, the Kala and the Nikasamhatis. These samhatis were divided on the cardinal points of the faith. The first upheld the supremacy of the Brahmans in all matters and conformed to Vedic rites and idol worship and invariably had Brahman abbots. The rest three exercised varying degrees of reservation regarding these points. The most radical among them was the Kala-Samhati which had the largest following among the despised classes and tribal neophytes.⁹

Thus, attempts were made by the authors of the *caritaputhis* owing their allegiance to particular *sattras* to twist the account of the Saints' life in order to glorify their own order.¹⁰ The writing of these texts thus became coloured by the schisms and conflicts among the *sattras*. Again, experts in guru lore from different religious centres of the time travelled from *sattra* to *sattra*. They made mental notes of the local traditions prevailing within a particular *sattra* and then retold the lives of the gurus as consolidated from the various accounts. Consequently, there arose divergence of opinion as to what to omit and what to retain.¹¹ Further, these texts were written after the lapse of some decades after the death of Sankaradeva. The difference in time between the lifetime of Sankaradeva and the composition of these texts is naturally greater for the later *caritas*. Thus, as one moved away from the actual life time of the guru it became convenient for the authors to incorporate new details or modify the older ones according to the need of contemporary times. Again, while writing the *caritaputhis* the authors in order to situate the saint

within a particular context drew from their own personal experience which led to further re-modelling of the stories.¹² Infact the main motive of the hagiographical literature was to popularize the ideals of *bhakti* among people. Thus, motifs and episodes familiar and popular among people were incorporated from time to time so that the people could relate to them better.

The present study is based on four important *caritaputhis*: *Sri Sri Sankaradeva-Madhavadeva Carita* by Daityari Thakur; *Guru-carita* by Ramcarana Thakur; *Guru CaritaKatha* and *Bardowa-carita*.

Daityari Thakur, the earliest of the biographers, was the son of Ramcarana Thakur, who was the nephew of Madhavadeva and spent most of his life with the latter. Daityari acknowledges that his work was composed after discussions with several learned men including his father.¹³ Thus his text deals at length with the life of Madhavadeva and gives only a brief account of Sankaradeva. It does not provide a detailed account of Sankara's ancestry and early life, but the details increase with the years of Sankaradeva's life. The later part of the text deals with the activities of Madhavadeva's life and is profuse with narrative detail. According to Dr. Kesavananda Deva Goswami, Daityari composed the work between 1619 and 1649 A.D.¹⁴ His work became the beginning of a similar genre of literature and chronicles of different *sattras*.

The *Guru-carita* of Ramcarana Thakur has been called a spurious work by many of the scholars. Nevertheless, in style and approach it is more in harmony with the later group of *caritas*. It abounds in details about the life and miraculous feats of Sankaradeva. Every stage of Sankaradeva's life is infused with abundance of detail, several new episodes have been inserted and there is an attempt to ascribe feats and miracles to Sankaradeva, similar to the Krsna legends.

In the *Guru Carita Katha*, a conscious attempt is made to place the account in a mythological atmosphere and to model the life of Sankaradeva, particularly its early part, on the Krsna-lore. Maheshwar Neog also points to parallelism between the *Guru Carita Katha* narratives and motifs in accounts of saints outside Assam.¹⁵ The large mass of material which this text contains points to the fact that by the time it was composed different Vaisnava circles abounded in versions of the Guru's life. The style of narration of the text is episodic or anecdotal bringing in one incident after the other. The chief importance of the *Guru Carita Katha* lies in its being an

old prose work marked by an excellent prose-style.¹⁶

The *Bardowa-carita* is the redaction of some old biography, which perhaps conformed to the *Guru Carita Katha*. In some places it also looks like an amplification of Daityari Thakura's work and like it, end with the death of Madhavadeva. The redaction must have hampered some of its original beauty and content, yet as an old *carita*, it is an invaluable source.¹⁷

Thus, among the four *caritas* dealt with in this study, the first one belongs to the genre of early *caritas* and the last three belong to a slightly later period.

METHODOLOGY

The *caritaputhis* are invaluable sources of information regarding Vaisnavism in medieval Assam. Hagiographies have, however, remained mostly in the periphery of historical research. The historians are sometimes skeptical about using them as sources since they are full of fantastic tales, myths and legendary episodes.¹⁸

However, scholars at present have realized the potential of hagiographies for getting a glimpse into the world view of the common people as well as the milieu they are situated in. Paul Fouracre, while discussing Merovingian hagiographies is of the view that the hagiographies remain attractive as sources, since they remain open to interpretation in accordance to our changing views regarding medieval belief and thought. He also delineates between two different approaches followed by scholars in utilizing the Merovingian hagiographies as sources. First, there is the traditional historical approach which attempts to reduce the texts to a residue of usable historical data. Secondly, by applying the techniques of literary criticism to each text as a whole, one can hope to penetrate the thought world of which it was an expression.¹⁹ However he also points out that in the first attempt, the scholars in an attempt to cull out the historical residue from these texts tend to ignore the supernatural and the miraculous elements as detriments to historical truth. But more recent work has checked this imbalance by giving greater weight to the conventional and to the miraculous in the saints' lives, and by using these elements to gain insight into the social, cultural and religious history which is their proper context. Again, by applying modern literary criticism to these works one may succeed in peeping into the thought world which is a more reliable guide to contemporary reality than the

hypothetical past created by the historian by applying the reductionist approach.²⁰

As regards the *caritaputhis* of Assam, most studies have been based upon a literal interpretation of the texts. Scholars have focused their attention chiefly on extracting the 'history of faith' rather than looking into the processes and dynamics of *bhakti*. Radha Das in a refreshing tone points out that while utilizing the *caritas* as sources, there is the need for a shift of focus from the religio-philosophical aspects of *bhakti*, or a reconstruction of biographical sketches of saintly personalities to a broader socio-cultural analysis keeping in mind the specificities of the region.²¹ She states that both a critical approach of sifting of the legendary and supernatural elements from the rest of the texts and also an attempt at extracting the underlying meanings of legends, myths, etc. would provide more meaningful insights into the existing society, rather than literal reflection.²²

Another important issue that she points out is that the hagiographies grew out of an oral tradition and so it is important to consider the importance of oral tradition in a largely illiterate society and its influence on the written texts which grew out of it. The co-existence of the oral and the written is also to be taken into account.²³ Further these works reflect not only the socio-religious processes but also illuminate aspects such as social relations and the world view of the common people.²⁴ Legends, eulogies and fantastic tales allow us access into the underlying structures of consciousness of a particular society. They also often serve to legitimize or protest against asymmetrical relations of power that prevail in the large societies of which the communities that tell the legends form a greater or lesser part.

The background:

The *carita-puthis* can be meaningfully interpreted only when located in the specific socio-economic, cultural and political background of which they are the products. Alternately, the texts themselves can be utilized for having a glimpse of the environment in which they came to be composed.

Radha Das has pointed towards the fact that studies on the Neo-Vasnavite movement in Assam has tended to treat the contemporary society as a static entity. Maheshwar Neog discusses the existing politico-religious and socio-economic background without linking it to the later developments or the processes of the evolution of the *nama dharma*. S.N. Sharma too while delineating

the politico-religious situation totally ignores the socio-economic formations of contemporary Assam.

Medieval Assam comprised of the three states of Kamarupa, Assam and Kamata, broadly corresponding to the modern state of Assam, parts of North Bengal and the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh. Together they form a distinct geographical unit, having markedly uneven levels of topographical and socio-cultural formation. This includes the fertile river valleys inhabited by settled agricultural communities having a caste divided society, and tribal settlements outside the realm of Brahmanism in close proximity to one another. The continuous interactions between these groups having played a crucial role in shaping the historical developments in this region, hence the imperative to locate *bhakti* within this wider cultural setting. Therefore, the socio-economic structure of Assam needs to be situated in the backdrop of a loosely knit political system which witnessed the gradual emergence of a rudimentary state under the Ahoms and their subsequent attempts at centralization. The emergence, sustenance and spread of *bhakti* have to be seen in this context.²⁵

At the political level, between the 13th-16th centuries this region witnessed the simultaneous emergence of several incipient tribal states and loosely knit system of *Bhuya-raj*. Gradually emerging on the scene were the Ahoms who further complicated the complex and conflicting relationship between the tribal groups and the Bhuyas with their political ambitions. Medieval Assam represented motley of various political powers. In the easternmost tract of Assam ruled a line of Chutiya kings. To the west of the Chutiya kingdom laid the Ahom principality. Further west there was the Kachari kingdom to the south of the Brahmaputra. On both sides of the Brahmaputra there existed the Bhuyans. The western part of Assam comprising the modern districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and parts of Cooch Behar was ruled by a few dynasties during the course of 14th and 15th centuries and it was known as the Kamata kingdom. By the end of the 15th century however a new power, the Kochs under the leadership of BiswaSimha emerged as the dominant political power in western Assam. Amongst all of these it was the Ahom kingdom and the Koch Kingdom that overshadowed the other powers and emerged as dominant political entities.

The Bhuyas, the group to which Sankaradeva belonged were a dominant politico-economic group, occupying the core agricultural areas on both the banks

of the Brahmaputra in the Kamarupa region. They often grouped themselves in the face of common threat under the hegemony of an overlord (*bar raja*) or formed a confederacy (*baro-bhuyan*) headed by a chief (*shiromani*). The *Bhuyas* are mostly believed to be Kayastha by caste. Even after their suppression by the expanding Koch and Ahom states, the *Bhuyans* did not lose their local influence and were absorbed into the lower echelons of the new machinery set up for the rising state powers. The social organization of the *Bhuyas* was marked by a caste stratified society.

The socio-economic formation of the society was on the thresh-hold of a shift from the egalitarian tribal societies to a heirarchised society based on the unequal distribution of resources. The phenomenon received impetus from developments in methods of cultivation from jhum cultivation based on spade and hoe to plough based agriculture. The adoption of the *sali* variety of rice in place of the *ahu*, also enhanced productivity.²⁶ The Bhuyans acted as pioneers of improved methods of cultivation and led to a great extension of arable and cultivable land in regions southern and central Assam.²⁷ They introduced improved methods of cultivation and cleared virgin land extensively and led to the crystallization of settled agrarian communities. The increase in the resource base of the society assisted the strengthening of the material base of several upcoming political powers. The predominantly agrarian economy of the region was under considerable pressure from various directions. The tribal incursions into the plains were ruinous for the peasantry.²⁸ The *caritaputhis* show the repeated conflict between the Bhuyas and the Kacharis on the question of control over arable land and cattle.²⁹

Further, this period also witnesses the gradual conversion to a money economy. *Cowrie* shells for exchange were in use in the region since the early medieval period. However, as the volume of trade and exchange increased, the Ahom, Koch and Kachari kingdoms started minting gold and silver coins regularly. The increase in trade and the circulation of money in the economy both re-enforced each other.³⁰

The religious atmosphere of the region occupied a distinct appearance as a result of the co-existence of a variety of religious sects and cults. Saktism and Saivism had a dominating presence. Brahmanical influence had a tighter grip among the sedentary communities of the plains where it could find a fertile ground in a society

stratified both on economic and caste lines. The tribal groups had their own gods and goddesses and interaction with the sedentary groups had led to infiltration of brahmanical influence among these groups too. Similarly, both Saktism and Saivism weren't free from tribal tendencies of worship. The Vaisnava saints and preachers frequently speak of the disruption of the social fabric caused by the religious excesses of Kaliyuga.³¹

Another important aspect to which scholars have drawn their attention is the transition from a matrilineal to a patriarchal order in the social set up which formed a background to the rise of the neo-Vaisnavite movement. Sankaradeva writings betray hostility towards the Saktas who were dominant in the region during the pre-Sankarite phase. In the *Guru Caritadevi* worship through sacrifices is mentioned in very degrading terms.³² Although Sankaradeva spoke against the worship of any god other than Visnu-Krsna, yet his prejudice against the goddess seems to be much more marked.

Role of the *caritaputhis*:

It was Madhavadeva, the apostolic successor of Sankaradeva who for the first time introduced the custom of telling the story of the guru and listening to it as a part of daily religious duty of the *Sattra*.³³ In the *Guru caritakatha*, we find an account of how the narration of the story of Sankaradeva started in the Vaisnava circles.³⁴ During the time of Sankaradeva, songs narrating the glory of Lord Rama and Krsna were sung among the congregations of devotees. However, no systematic programme for ceremonials was evolved then. When Madhavadeva assumed the position of Sankaradeva's spiritual successor, he started the practice of narrating the tales of the master in the daily congregations. His apostles who went out to spread the message of *bhakti* followed his example and in course of time, the practice of narrating the activities of the master became a regular feature of the *sattra* circles. Gradually this oral practice of narration inspired attempts of putting these tales into writing by some disciples.³⁵

The *caritaputhis* thus developed out of an existing oral tradition. As such one may wonder as to why these texts had to be converted into written form at all. What were the functions served by these texts and what significance they had for the growth of *bhakti* in the region?

After the death of Sankaradeva, differences arose among his followers regarding certain vital issues of the

faith. Thus, the need might have been felt for standardizing the guru-lore and giving it a more finished form. Again, the attempt of some of the disciples to mould the life-stories of the saints in ways favourable to the order they owed allegiance to, has already been mentioned. Further emergence of the *sattras* as organized monastic spaces having an elaborate institutional structure might have necessitated the putting into writing of the oral corpus of guru lore. Further with the growth of the Vaisnavite literature the authority of the written word became gradually entrenched in a pre-dominantly oral agrarian society.

The *caritaputhis* played a significant role in the spread of the Vaisnavite movement. They provided the society with narratives to stimulate devotion and provide examples of piety, boost particular and further the interests of different groups of institutions³⁶. The *caritas* used the vernacular language and as such their composition was made keeping in view the needs of the lay and illiterate listeners. Symbols and examples familiar to them were used. The subject matter was inspired from popular themes of the existing society. For e.g. frequent comparisons are drawn between *bhakti* and agricultural processes.³⁷ The legendary episodes and miracles caught the imagination of the people and through them the ideals of *bhakti* got inculcated.

The person of the saint represented for the people a concrete object of devotion and fulfilled their practical and emotional needs. Sankaradeva was portrayed as performing miracles that would relieve people from troubles of mundane life, such as, healing snake bites, diseases, pain etc. by touch.³⁸ The people were drawn by tales which could provide them assurances against the insecurities of their mundane existence.³⁹

The pattern of composition of these texts was designed keeping in mind the needs of the lay followers. The works were mainly anecdotal and episodic in form. Each episode was compact and could be narrated in one sitting. This narrative style was ideal for narration in the mass congregation of prayer held in the *sattras*. The authors of the *caritas* too repeatedly affirmed their proximity to the audience by referring to themselves as ignorant and lacking in scriptural knowledge.

Conclusion:

The hagiographies thus are indispensable sources for obtaining a clearer image of the socio-economic, political and cultural atmosphere of medieval Assam in

general and the Vaisnavite movement in particular. They have been utilized repeatedly by scholars working on the *Mahapurusiya Dharma*. However, they have mostly been utilized in a literal sense as narrative accounts of the lives of the Vaisnava gurus. Even when a critical approach is undertaken the myths, legends and eulogies are undermined as unhistorical and thus not useful. However, a proper methodological approach towards these texts consisting of sensitivity towards issues such as the background of these texts, the internal differences between them, the plane of ideas lying behind the incorporation of new legends and fantastic elements etc. can make them fruitful tools of historical research. Thus, the enormous potential of the *caritaputhi* literature in explaining the processes and dynamics of *bhakti* within Assam is to be effectively tapped.

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