

MYSTICISM IN ASSAMESE POETRY: AN ANALYSIS OF VAISHNAVITE 'RHYTHMIC RACHANAS'

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Abstract—*The terms 'mystic' and 'mysticism' are not distinctly defined in the history of thought. The terms 'mystic' and 'mysticism' are much abused in English, being extended even to mean magic, occultism, or the esoteric. It is hard to find out certain common, definite and invariable usage of language to define the doctrine of mysticism. Yet, it can be attempted to understand as belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender.*

We find expression of mysticism in various literary and religious text of India. Bhakti Movement witnessed emergence of this belief or thought and its reflection can be very well seen in Assam and Assamese language too. This article will attempt to deconstruct few "Rhythmic Rachanas" (Podyo, Kobita, Ghusa) of Assam to discuss about the mysticism that we find knitted in its strands. The prime focus of this article will be creations of Mahapurush Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavadeva.

Keywords—Mysticism, Bhakti Movement, Rhythmic Rachanas, Sankardeva, Madhavadeva

I. INTRODUCTION

Mysticism is the belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender.

Mystic elements are prominently found in the writings of the poets of Vaishnava and pre-Vaishnava age. These periods saw numerous translation works of artistic excellence like the great Indian epics, the Ramayana and Sankaradeva's the *Dasama*.

II. MADHAB KANDALI AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS MYSTICISM

Madhab Kandali, in the fourteenth century A.D. made the first translation of the Ramayana into Assamese. Upendrachandra Lekharu observes that Assamese literature may boast of its priority in producing the Ramayana earlier than that of any other languages as the first Assamese Ramayana poet Madhab Kandali rendered Valmiki's Ramayana into Assamese verse.

III. SANKARDEVA—THE MYSTIC POET OF ASSAM

The widely travelled and well-read scholar, poet, saint, religious preacher and social reformer, all-in-one, Sankaradeva in order to preach his *Ekasarananamadharma* with a deep faith in one God and adopted the language of the common men and made the scriptures easily accessible to the masses. The religious ideology that Sankaradeva preached is called the *Ekasarananamadharma*, which means devotion to one supreme Deity and the love of one Absolute Lord, which represents the devotional mystic fervour of *dasyabhakti*, that is, attitude of servitude to the omnipotent God. Sankaradeva is the first and foremost Vaishnava poet whose poetry is second to none in Assamese literature. Intricate plots in some of his long narratives and one-act plays woven with greatest care reflect his artistic maturity, creative imagination and theatrical reality of his age. The intensity of his devotion to Lord Krishna is noticeable in his *Bargitas* and *Ankiya-natas*, namely *Patmprasada*, *Kaliyadamana*, *Keligopala*, *Rukmimharana*, *Parijataharana* and *Ramvijaya*. His other important works are *Kirtana-ghosa*, *Gunamala*, *Rukmiharana Kavya*, *Harischandra Upakhyana*, *Uttarakanda Ramayana*, *Bhakti-Ratnakara*, *BhaklipradIpa*, *Totayas*, *Bhatimas* etc. Sankaradeva's celebrated *Kirtana-ghosa* deserves a special mention. The work is a collection of thirty sections with more than two thousand three hundred couplets in different metrical forms.

IV. 'KIRTANA'—THE MYSTIC CELEBRATION

The *Kirtana* bears a deep mystic vision of the saint poet. Sankaradeva is anxious to explain that lord's humanity is not real but merely a conscious exhibition of His divine sport. At the outset, the *Kirtana-ghosa* deals with the twenty-four incarnations of God. In the *Rasalila*, the twelfth section of the *Kirana-ghosa*, the poet describes the

beauty of natural objects in the autumnal full-moon night. The earnest desire of the *Gopis* for union with Lord Krsna has been beautifully portrayed. While speaking of the *Rasalila* Laksmi Nath Bezbarua observes that there is a great difference between *Kama* and *prema*. In his words *kama's* nature is to roam from one thing to another for the satisfaction of its own cravings, *prema* is undeviating and true to one. Birinchi Kumar Barua also states that *Kirtana* besides being a book of grand verse of religious and noble thoughts depicts a full picture of mystical and spiritual aspects.

V. MADHAVADEVA—THE PREACHER OF MYSTICISM

The invigorating and marvellous impetus of Assamese literature that grew through Sankaradeva's writings was followed especially by his chief disciple Madhavadeva. The luminous mystic fervour of great poetic excellence is reflected through the valuable works of Madhavadeva. His poetry is an extraordinary example of superb beauty of the solemn and elevated feelings that flow through his metrical lines.

VI. 'NAM-GHOSA'—BUNDLED MYSTICISM

Nam-ghosa is the collection of one thousand *ghosas*, through which the high ideals of *ekasarana* is established by Madhavadeva. Madhavadeva is a successful mystic poet and he makes a complete surrender to Lord Krsna, the Absolute Reality. The *Nam-ghosa* begins with a couplet in which the concept of devotion is reflected.

*"muktita nisprhayito sehi bhakataka namo
rosa mayi magoho bhakati.
samasta mastaskamani nija bhakatara baisya
bhajohena deva yadupati".*

These lines of the couplet mark the poet's attitude to devotion with an imploration that the poet has a reverence for the devotee who is bereft of the least attachment to life, even the desire for salvation. Like Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva, too identifies Krsna as the same Supreme Reality. The mystic height of the poet's devotional feeling reach with:

*"suniyoko citta hera parama rahasyabam
tumi suddhaj hdnaraalaya*

*krsna nitya suddha buddha parama isvara deva
nachdribata hanaasraya."*

The poem vibrates with mystic fervour with a variation of tones such as of self-reproach self-questioning prayers, advice to other devotees etc.

VII. 'BARGITA' OR SUPERIOR MYSTIC SONGS

Bargitas literally mean 'the superior songs' which are sung in praise of the almighty God. These songs are much exuberant with the mystic fervour of God's realization. Banikanta Kakati describes these songs as Noble Numbers. As he describes, the English poet Herrick created some highly spiritual poems and termed them as Noble Numbers. In Assamese literature, the *Bargitas* of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are Noble Numbers. Kakati refers to the *Gurucarit*, which mentions that two hundred and forty *Bargitas* were composed by Sankaradeva. Of these two hundred and forty *Bargitas* only thirty-four have been recovered while others were burnt to ashes in the house of one Kamala Bayan near Barpeta. According to the instruction of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva wrote one hundred and ninety-one *Bargitas*. These *Bargitas* are supposed to be sung in certain specific ragas. The extant *Bargitas* of Sankaradeva and the *Bargitas* of Madhavadeva are found so far in written form, compiled by Harinarayan Duttabaruah. The *Bargitas* composed by both the saint poets reverberate the spiritual and mystic notes of the songs of Surdas, Tulsidas and Mirabai, the Hindi saint poets. The *Bargitas* composed by Sankaradeva are prayer like and those composed by Madhavadeva reflect the childhood feats and glories of Lord Krsna. The theme of these songs of both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are free from the *sringara-rasa*, the sentiment of conjugal love, whereas the essence of this sentiment of conjugal love is common with some contemporary Indian Vaishnava poets. As poems, these songs are very rich in emotional appeal. This is experienced by the reader by way of developing a sense of surrender in his own mind. Sankaradeva makes this appeal thus,

*"pave pari hari karoho katari
prana rakhabi mora,
bisaya bisadhara bise jarajara
jivana narahe thora?"*

The poet has made the earnest prayer to God to save his life. The affairs of the world are like venomous serpents and he has been smitten with this venom, which has made him useless and he has become unable to stand.

*"rama meri hrdaya pankaje raiche,
bhai chinia nachinto kaiche"*

Here, it is implied that Rama (God) exists in the lotus-heart (*hrdaya-pankaja*) of the poet and he feels a remorse for not recognizing His existence. In other words, poet's desire for self-surrender at Lord's feet has been expressed here. Similar mystic experiences of *dasya* type devotion have been found in Madhavadeva's *Bargitas*. Madhavadeva excels in the description of Lord Krsna's childhood pranks, frolics and miracles. Lord Krsna in the human form of a cowherd boy performs various miraculous feats that astonish His mother Yasoda, who suffers from pang of separation in His absence from her. In this connection, Neog (1991) states that Madhavadeva, in his *Bargitas*, has portrayed the picture of a universal mother with a universal son through Yasoda and Krsna. Mother Yasoda, *gopa-balakas* (cowherd boys) and the *gopis* (the cowherd woman), all feel the pang of separation for Krsna's absence from Vrindavana. Like the sunrays diffused over all the different vessels casting forth-varying hues with soft and pleasant streaks of light, the Absolute Lord, too makes His manifestation through the innocent creatures with His simple sweetness and attracts the minds of all. The mystic poet Madhavadeva feels the personal touch of the cow-herd Krsna as a manifestation of the divine power in his transcendental state of mystic experience. There is a delicacy of sensuousness and vivid description of natural landscape in Madhavadeva's *Bargitas* as if the poet himself was there with Krsna witnessing the *lilas*. The sound of Krsna's flute transfuses a new life and spirit which throbs the hearts of the inhabitants of Vrindavana. Yasoda's lamentation at her separation from Krsna carries a note of pathos in *Bargita* no.121, as follows:

*"moliana bansira svarhara lace tana maria
marama bhedala bara tane?"*

The *Bargitas* of both Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva are ornate with a sense of great refinement, lucidity, music and melody of a high musical pitch which have an appeal to both sense and mind of the listeners. Sankaradeva's Vaisnavism created a

new hope and solace in the people's heart. He composed the *Bargitas* for the purpose of singing in order to make the sermons more appealing to the devotees. The saint employed a similar diction in the plays. Goswami (1985) rightly points out that Sankaradeva's religion spread a new message among the masses.

VIII. 'BRAJAVALI' LANGUAGE AS A MYSTIC ELEMENT

Sankaradeva adopted a language called Brajavali in his plays and other writings, a dialect mixed with Maithili and Assamese. Such a language adds gravity and nobility to the spiritual theme of his writings. Brajavali was used as a medium for songs by some medieval poets of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. As against the everyday words, use of such an artificial language, perhaps elevated the grandeur and magnificence of musical melody of the songs. Sometimes this artificial language is called Brajabuli. Sen (1935) observes, Assamese Brajabuli seems to have developed independently through direct connection with Mithila, but in Orissa we can expect Bengali influence in the matter.

IX. CONCLUSION

Some of the followers of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva like Ramcharan Thakur, Gopaladeva, Daityari Thakur and others composed several songs, but compositions gradually underwent a phase of decadence and failed to reach mystic heights achieved by their preceptors. Towards the end of the Bhakti movement in the last decade of the sixteenth century, the post-Vaisnava poetry became more or less imitative and gradual decay occurred in the devotional mystic fervour and spiritual theme. In seventeenth century, only the *Caritputhis* were authored and growth of prose literature took place in this period. The eighteenth century showed the growth of eroticism and historical literature in the royal court of the Ahom King Rudrasimha and Sivasimha. In the glorious nineteenth century with the publication of the Jonaki mysticism in Assamese poetry experienced a new era under the influence of Western literature.

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