Social Impact of the Bargitas

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Literature of a nation is part and parcel of the national life. One is inseparably connected with the other. Just as a disciplined, healthy society of a nation inspires the litterateurs to create good literature, similarly good literatures also help create a healthy and prosperous nation. If we turn the pages of history of different nations of the world, we find how, during the ages, national atmosphere in different countries helped the creative genius of the great litterateurs to reach its zenith and conversely powerful literatures of great litterateurs helped bring the societies, facing crisis and ruin, to normalcy and peace. The atmosphere of peace and tranquility during the glorious reign of Elizabeth I helped creation of immortal literature of world famous litterateurs like Shakespeare. Similarly in the midst of peace and prosperity of the Gupta dynasty in India, the famous group of nine poets (nava-ratna) headed by Kalidasa was able to enrich the Indian literatures by producing incomparable literature.

As a healthy society helps to create good litterateurs so also good literatures create a healthy society. Milton's *Paradise Lost* was helpful enough in stirring the English society during the corrupt rule of Charles I. In the same manner the French Revolution was possible by powerful writings of Rousseau, Voltaire, Montaigne, etc., the revolutionary scholars in the field of politics and philosophy.

In the middle ages when the people all over India were confused by the mixture of various religions, thoughts, rites and rituals of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and the *Vedas*, the *Upanisads* and the *Puranas*, there appeared some great men (*Mahapurusas*) at these junctures. Their depth of feeling, understanding and transcendental vision helped bring a current of universal and immortal literature in the field of Indian literature. In many cases, they, the *Mahapurusas*, themselves used to write and thereby lifted the veil of darkness from the minds of the people.

Moreover, inspired by the ideals and goals of such *Mahapurusas*, many other Vaisnava poets were able to develop the society composing various types of literature. In Assam too, at such a juncture, there appeared two great Vaisnava preceptors, **Sri Sankaradeva** and **Sri Madhavadeva**. These two great saint-poets, by their powerful writings, helped bringing back to order, the Assamese society of that time, which was distorted by the conflicts and corruptions of religion.

The *bargitas* are a special kind of songs meant for prayer. The great preceptor Sri Sankaradeva and his chief apostle Sri Madhavadeva, composed these hymns in an archaic speech called Brajavali, a mixed Maithili-Assamese dialect containing lofty ideas of the attributes of **Lord Krsna**, with the bhakti sentiment, high moral and philosophical aspects of *Bhakti* cult as well as appropriate classical *ragas*, keeping musical time (*tala*) all round. The highest truth of the neo-Vaisnava faith in Assam has been expressed in these lyrics, which are full of Vedantic philosophy. Thus, the *bargitas* are nothing but spiritual literature. Spiritual literature is always universal. It is not only the emotions of the heart, the flow of thoughts and the feelings of the senses but also the creation of transcendental vision. It is through this insight that one can conceive God Who is the Real, the Good and the Beautiful (*satyam-sivam-sundaram*). It will not be exaggerating if we say that, through the *bargitas* Sri Sankaradeva and Sri Madhavadeva created in the heart of every Assamese, an atmosphere of tranquility based on a new religious enthusiasm and thus were able to lead the people of Assam nearer to God.

As songs stir the suppressed consciousness of the people, they are made the means of awakening such consciousness. The songs or lyrics, in the case of any national movement, are accepted as the language of the masses. Any vague idea on any matter in the hearts of the people becomes crystal-clear through the songs or lyrics and merges with the consciousness of all. Perhaps due to such a characteristic of songs, almost invariably in all systems of religion, there is the singing of devotional songs and in the context of the neo-Vaisnavite movement of

India, the devotional songs have played an even greater part. It is because of their capacity to penetrate into the heart of hearts so easily that the devotional lyrics flourished so profusely in the success of the neo-Vaisnavite movement. The *bargitas* which constitute a typical form of Assamese Vaisnava lyric, helped in spreading the Vaisnavite movement in Assam, reaching the hearts of the people, and sowed the seeds of neo-spiritualism in the country.

Like most of the saints associated with the Vaisnavite movement at different periods in India, **Sankaradeva** and his worthy apostle **Madhavadeva** have expressed the different aspects of the Bhakti cult like the superiority of **Lord Krsna** or **Visnu**, the description of the states of servitude, friendliness and filial feeling; infinite compassion and grace of God, absolute surrender to God, glory of chanting the **Name of Hari** and so forth, through the *bargitas* composed in simple language, intelligible to the masses. Like a drop of oil in water the subject matter of these devotional songs spread rapidly amongst the masses and played a great part in the welfare of the society.

The way to find out the Supreme God amongst many deities and the awakening of the consciousness to realize the Universal Truth of all truths are the main contributions of the *bargitas* for the spiritual uplift of the Assamese society. Moreover, by indicating the path of liberation, which is the ultimate goal of Indian thought, these lyrics have also carried an ideal message, as to how a healthy society can be formed, by leading a simple and pure life, by all classes of the society, following the path of devotion. The following lines from one of the *bargitas* of Sankaradeva is an example of this fact: -

There is no saviour (from worldly woes and sorrows) but Rama.I serve the flower-honeyed Feet of the Supreme Being.

Pada - Through neither pilgrimageNor vows, contemplation, oblation, arguments,

Best *mantras* (hymns), ritual performances Do we attain liberation.¹

The bargitas also impart to the society the key towards realizing the ideal of the **Supreme Being** Who is the only Lord of the entire universe, showing how by motiveless devotion to Him, one can shake off all the passions to go towards the path of liberation. These very lyrics developed the spiritual aspect of the Assamese society by allowing the people to go freely forward, by removing from their path of liberation, the terror and obscenity of rites and ceremonies and also the barrier of class distinctions from the society. The *bargitas* have established the fact that purity of heart and mind is the real means to offer prayer to God, not the observances of rites and rituals as well as other religious practices and performances. Likewise, spiritual realization is a matter of understanding between God and a pure mind; it is an inner experience of a Godintoxicated heart. The question or problem of caste distinction, therefore, cannot arise in the matter of spiritual meditation. The ever-echoing sounds of the bargitas have thus cooled the hearts of the sufferers by spreading around them the peace-giving shade of a liberal spiritual equality. The most sincere and heartfelt expression of devotion to **Lord Krsna** by the two saint poets have imparted the bliss of real happiness in the minds of the people of all classes and at the same time they have brightened with new lights the social life and religion of their land by a new, enlivening and inspired ideal. Thus it is seen that the great message of equality, fraternity, love and freedom which to-day the people of India sing standing under the three colored national flag indicating the idea of sacrifice, truth and prosperity - was established in the spiritual sphere by the two great Assamese Vaisnava poets Sankara and Madhava many centuries ago and that very message has been echoed in the bargitas.

Indians, from the time of the *Vedas*, have been praying to different deities with the hope of getting something in return. In the *Vedas* it is found, "give us wealth, good house and son with heroism"². In the same way in the *Markandeya Candi* also,

¹ Bargita, No. 1 p. 9

² rayim no dhatta, vrsanah suviram (R. V. 1/85/12d)

while praying to goddess Durga, it is sung thus – "give (us) beauty, victory, fame and annihilate the enemies". But the two saint poets have prayed to God without hoping for or seeking any type of reward or worldly gain in return. They have prayed devotedly with immense faith in their adorable Deity **Lord Krsna** and surrendered themselves completely to Him. They have, with a repentant tone, invoked in their prayers to Lord Krsna, the Absolute Being, that, in this transitory life fatigued with worldly affairs, they do not yearn for anything, **not even for liberation**, except the grace of the Deity and the **shelter of the Supreme Lord Krsna**. Realizing the transitoriness and unreality of the ordinary pleasures and charms of human life, Sankaradeva has renounced the worldly life through some of his *bargitas*. In one *bargita*, he has bewailed in a passionate prayer for shelter at the Feet of God and deliverance from worldly sufferings: -

O Sarangapani (one who holds the bow of buffalo horns - Visnu)
 rescue my sinful mind.

Save me from the hell -

O Lord! I see nothing other than Thy Feet.

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Pada - Look my life is fleeting day by day -

Body afflicted with agony and disease.

O Kamalapati (husband of Kamala, Laksmi)! At the hour of death -

Thou art my only refuge -

Bows Sankara to Thee.4

Likewise Madhavadeva also sings: -

O Hari! The ever-compassionate Lord Yadumani!O Rama! This meanest chants Thy Name.

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³ rupam dehi, jayam dehi, yaso dehi, dviso jahi.

⁴ Bargita, No. 6, p. 7

O Narayana! Please be gracious So that my fickle mind May remain fixed at Thy Feet.⁵

Being immersed in the ocean of such unattached devotional disposition of Sankara and Madhava, their worthy follower saint-poets also composed innumerable devotional lyrics with heartfelt expressions which have enlightened the thoughts and ideas, knowledge and perception of the people of Assam and thus developed the society. The *bargitas*, keeping away the minds of the people from the futile worldly affairs and cultivating the virtues, have established an ideal of leading a simple life, based on devotion, in the society.

The two great Vaisnava master poets, through their *bargitas* have manifested the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of literature. In their *bargitas* almost all the elements of literature, such as the natural feelings like happiness and sorrow, laugh and cry, hope and despair, etc., as well as the beauty of nature, creation and perception of the sentiments, the insight, beautiful expressions of the inner experience as also the magnanimity of the Supreme Lord and the eagerness for Him have been fully expressed. Being overwhelmed with the **absolute devotion to Lord Krsna**, both the devout poets, in their compositions, have fully expressed their thoughts and emotions and the transcendental vision, which could easily appeal to the minds of the masses, imparting education to them with exhilarating joy. Here lies the significant accomplishment of the *bargitas* towards the society.

Furthermore, it may be said that the two saint poets realized the idea of imparting education through literature and the *bargitas* are nothing but nice expressions of such a realization.

Moreover, the *bargitas* are the best means of worshipping God for all classes

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⁵ Ibid., No. 51, p. 40

of people of the society. Vaisnavism advocates that God can be remembered in all activities even while leading a normal life. In the ancient times of Satya, Treta, Dvapara, etc., in the practice of religion, one had to lead a life segregated from the worldly life. It was the system for spiritual aspirants to renounce the world and live alone in the jungle or in the caves of mountains to devote themselves in worshipping God through meditation and self-absorption. But with the change of time the idea of religion in the society also changed. The system of religious practice of the ancient days is not suitable for the Kali Yuga. No doubt, even today, there is solitary meditation in practice of religion, but there is no necessity of totally renouncing the worldly life. It is while leading a worldly life that one gets full scope for development of humaneness. According to the neo-Vaisnava faith, chanting the Name of Hari is the best way of worshipping God in the Kali age. Most of the Vaisnava saints who appeared in the period from the eighth century to the sixteenth century, accepted the superiority of chanting the names and activities of God.

The *bargitas* written in the simple language of the masses, but full of depth, are the easiest and the best way of invoking God - by pacifying the mind and tranquilizing the soul - in this transitory world full of temptations and sorrows and sufferings. The following lines of one of the *bargitas* of Sankaradeva are illustrative examples of this fact: -

Raga - Basanta

O Narahari! What is the way out To get rid of (the illusion of the world)?

 Being sunk deep into earthly temptations,
 Have I destroyed everything (all spiritual energies)

Pada - Life, wealth, youth - all are temporary.

Friends, brothers, children - none is ours.

These are nectar-like in appearance

But poisonous in reality.

O Rama! my mind has got steeped in them.⁶

When worshipping God by such devotional lyrics, the souls of the people become purified and their minds enlightened. These beautiful prayer songs written in the language of the people have also lifted the speculative aspect of the individual and social life of the people because of the fact that these propagate the very essence of the Vedas, the Upanisads, the Gita and the Bhagavata-purana which are the results of the high thinking and meditation of the great sages of **India.** Even while leading a worldly life one can meditate on God by hearing and chanting these hymns - there is no necessity of renouncing the world and living in exile alone in the forest. The virtue of these devotees who even while leading a domestic life, think of God, is as much connected with society as it is with God. In this way, the *bargitas*, creating a perfect atmosphere, show an easy but effective path for attaining God. The picture of the sportive activities of Child Krsna and the motherly feelings of Yasoda that have been depicted in the *bargitas* are as if the representation of the sweet relationship between a mother and a child of the common households of the society. These devotional songs are, as it were, the special treasure of the Assamese society properly agreeing with the nature, thoughts and feelings of the society.

Moreover, the *bargitas* relating to prayer are all embracing. These can be chanted by any people of any creed and caste. Further, these lyrics may be called the lyrics for the common man as these particular lyrics reveal the thoughts and ideas true to all people of all ages. Therefore, the people of any religion can easily use these as their own prayer songs, with slight adjustments. Again, the doctrine of bhakti knows no caste, creed or color and a universal spirit is the main principle of the faith. Everybody has equal right in *bhakti* and to chant the **Names of Krsna**. The bargitas are the effective means in carrying out this message. In this connection, it is worth mentioning that the bargitas touched the hearts of one and all and thereby showed the path of liberation even to the tribal people like the

⁶ Ibid. No. 15, p. 14

Garos, the Bhots (Bhutias), the Ahoms and such other communities who were scattered in and about Assam. Thus the *bargitas* acted as one of the instruments for preaching the neo-Vaisnava faith in the country.

Besides, the *bargitas* have some special social impacts in Assam. Through the ages, from the middle ages to the modern times, not only in the spiritual sphere, but also in the realm of literature and culture, these devotional songs have greatly influenced the Assamese society. The growth and development of a society depend upon the enrichment of the culture and literature of that society. It is the contribution of the *bargitas* of the Assam school of Vaisnavism that has earned a proud position in Assamese art, culture and literature giving the Assamese society a separate and distinctive identity in India and abroad. These psalms with their lofty ideals and sublime thoughts have thrown a new light in the sphere of religion, art, culture and literature and thereby helped, to a considerable extent, bring a healthy atmosphere in the society.

The *bargitas* have given a new message to the people of Assam - **to surrender absolutely to the Almighty** - by bringing a sense of discarding of the false vanity of one's own 'greatness'. Also, these devotional lyrics have brought in unity banishing ignorance from the society. Just as Sankaradeva, through the *Satra* institution and the *Nam-ghar*, brought about discipline in the society as well as unity and integrity through religious practices, so also by composing scores of excellent *bargitas* and at the same time inspiring his follower saint-poets to compose lyrics in the same way, he has given a new form and richness to the Assamese language besides laying the firm foundation of an organized and distinct Assamese culture and literature.

Again, it is very fortunate for the whole of Assam indeed that these lyrics have helped stop the religious chaos, do away with the priestly autocracy and give the people of Assam a vivid and a very unique social economy.

Thus, the *bargitas* not only enlightened the people of the middle ages, but also provided a firm foundation on which the whole of the Assamese society has been resting

over the centuries. Therefore, the *bargitas*, making a deep impact on the literature, language, music, culture and social and spiritual life, have brought about an unprecedented upsurge in the Assamese society.

The *bargitas* have not only influenced the society of the medieval period but also that of the modern period. People of to-day are distracted and led astray by the material and sensual temptations and evils of the age. Poverty, the problem of food and cloth as well as various troubles and sufferings have created in the minds of the people the feelings of hatred, enmity, crookedness, despair and so forth. Moreover, it is apprehended that people of to-day, having departed from the path of truth, have lost faith in God. It is the *bargitas* that can give solace to them.

When devotion to and love for God is kindled, the hearts are filled with heavenly light. Then and then only people get peace. Absolute faith and dependence on God brings to life peace, satisfaction, beauty and security. It is thus that the health of a society depends on the basis of religion; social life cannot exist without religion. Without the spiritual knowledge, literature, art, social welfare and politics all are polluted and get corrupted. In these respects, just like the other Vaisnavite literary works, the bargitas also have some important contributions to the Assamese society. It will not be an exaggeration if we say that the spiritual knowledge, in which the bargitas of Sri Sankaradeva and Sri Madhavadeva are soaked, has been helping in securing the welfare of the Assamese society, continuously till this day by imparting devotion to God, theological knowledge, spiritual joy and so forth to a large section of the people of Assam. These very devotional lyrics are definitely a means of establishing peace and happiness in the society, enabling the people to cultivate good qualities like devotion to God, truthfulness, love, patience, humility, rejecting petty discrimination amongst themselves as well as performing the sacred task of serving God and humanity.

Thus, the bargitas, composed by the two great saint-poets Sankara-

Madhava, which have been recognized as literature of great significance, have improved the social and cultural life of Assam by developing the mind as well as the soul of the people of this part of the country. The *bargitas* are a kind of literature, beneficial to the people. **These devotional lyrics par excellence have the highest human ideal enshrined in them that man can ever follow.**

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