

Local Colour in Srimanta Sankardeva's *Rukmini-Harana Kavya*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to examine the representation of local life-scapes of medieval Assam in Srimanta Sankardeva's famous poetic work *Rukmini-Harana Kavya*. Srimanta Sankardeva was the great medieval saint, propagator of Assamese Vaishnavism, a great poet, dramatist, scholar, and the most important figure in Assam's cultural and social renaissance. The long poetic work *Rukmini-Harana Kavya* has been one of the most significant and popular works by Sankardeva. Though the core of the story is taken from the *Bhagavata*, Sankardeva depicts this episode in Lord Krishna's eventful life in a way that the long narrative poem takes on an abundance of local colour. The paper examines how Sankardeva has been able to depict Assamese way of life and social manners and customs in a highly original manner throughout the narrative. It can be asserted that one of the biggest reasons for the perennial appeal of *Rukmini-Harana Kavya* among people across all ages is the wonderful depiction of Assamese socio-cultural life-scapes in it.

KEYWORDS: Sankardeva, poetry, *Rukmini-Harana Kavya*, Assam, folk-life

Introduction:

Srimanta Sankardeva, the medieval saint and founder of Assamese Vaishnavism, is the most important figure in the cultural and religious history of Assam. Sankardeva was a multi-faceted personality—a religious reformer, a poet, a Sanskrit scholar, dramatist, translator, actor, and painter. The Vaishnava faith initiated by him is known as “eksarana dharma” or devotion to one Supreme God—that is Lord Krishna. In order to propagate his philosophical spiritual doctrines, Sankardeva wrote a larger number of literary works—poems, songs and dramas. He drew his poetic and philosophical inspiration from the *Puranas* and from the *Bhagavata*. His works and thoughts have given a solid and enduring foundation to the socio-cultural life-scapes of the Assamese people. His influence on Assamese life and literature, according to Suniti Kumar Chatterji, is “comparable to that of Tulsidasa for the people of the Upper Gangetic Valley” (Chatterji 1). Due to various circumstances, both historical and cultural, the influence of Sankardeva could not reach other parts of India. But as a spiritual leader and a religious poet, he is one of the greatest India has produced, and he deserves mention along with the likes of Sankaracharya, Ramananda, Chaitanya, Ramanujacharya, Mira Bai, Guru Nanak, Kabir and Tulsidasa. Some of his major works are: *Bargita*, *Bhakti-pradipa*, *Kirtana-ghosa*, *Rukmini-harana*, *Bhagavata*, *Gunamala*, *Harischandra Upakhyana*, *Patni-Prasada Nata*, *Uttarakanda*, *Bhakti-Ratnakara*, *Parijata-harana Naat*, *Kali-damana naat*, *Rama-vijaya naat* etc.

Material and Method:

To discuss the depiction of local life-scapes of medieval Assam in Sankardeva's *Rukmini-Harana Kavya*, the author takes the text of this long narrative poem as the

primary text, and makes an intensive analytical and critical reading of the same. The paper also draws on some of the existing scholarly works on Sankardeva and his works.

Analysis:

Rukmini-Harana is a long narrative poem in 796 verses which is based on a puranic story. It is called a “khanda-kavya” (episodic poem), and the outline of the story is taken by Sankardeva from the *Bhagavata Purana* and some minor details from the *Harivamsa*. Though descriptive in nature, the narrative is undoubtedly one of Sankardeva’s best poetic compositions. If we look at the story line of *Rukmini Harana*, it is evident that the influence of *The Bhagawata Purana* is dominant. There are elements taken from the *Harivamsa* also, but they are very few. Only in one place, we can notice the trace of *Brahmabaivarta Purana*: the scene where the king summons his friends and relatives to consult the matter of marriage of his daughter Rukmini, since she has come of age.

One of the biggest reasons for the perennial appeal of *Rukmini-Harana Kavya* among people across all ages is the wonderful depiction of Assamese socio-cultural life-scapes in it. In the course of discussion in this paper, we shall see how skillfully and vividly Sankardeva has represented the local colour of Assam in the poem. The American scholar M. H. Abrams has defined the term “local colour” as “The detailed representation in prose fiction of the setting, dialect, customs, dress, and the ways of thinking and feeling which are distinctive of a particular region” (Abrams 145). All the characters of the poem are quite familiar to the rural folk of Assam. According to Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Bhishmak and Shashiprava are ideal and typical Assamese king and queen as they are easily relatable to Assamese people. He says that Assamese familiar with arrogant, stubborn and angry son like Rukmi in the poem. Likewise, Bezbaruah points out to the ways in which Assamese people can easily and heartily identify with a nanny like Sumalini, or a lady like Daivaki who is fond of chatting with other women in the neighborhood and with her kindness of heart (Bezbaruah 174). The poem envisages in an original manner Assamese way of life and social manners and customs, specially those connected with marriage, are reflected in the work centres around the domestic life of an Assamese Hindu family of which Sankardeva finds a prototype in that of Bhishmaka.

The sights and scenes, the village life, and the customs and cultures described in the poem are completely reflective of Assamese social life. It must be noted that Sankardeva was a person with deep and committed social consciousness and it is from this character trait that the aesthetic representation of local cultural life in Sankardeva’s work springs forth. In this regard the renowned scholar Basanta Kumar Bhattacharyya has said,

“Even though he drew from the *Bhagavatas* and *The Puranas* for his creative subject matter, his artistic spirit was nourished by the folk life of Assam. Assam, the Assamese people and Assamese language and culture was the bedrock of his literary oeuvre, and his chief mission of his creative life was to catalyze a social resurgence or renaissance by spreading the Vaishnavite religious ideals among the populace. Therefore, his eyes were constantly fixed upon the Assamese social life-scapes, and consequently, his feelings, imagination, intellectual ideas got influenced by this socio-political and cultural scenario. It is for these reasons that such a vibrant

and memorable representation of Assamese social life was found such vivid reflection in his works.” (Bhattacharyya, 70)

We can form a fair picture of Medieval Assamese houses, dwellings and buildings in our minds from the descriptions of the town-scapes of Kundin and Dwarka. The dwellings of common people of that time were built of hay, bamboos, and wood (verse 112). But the houses of the towns were impressively built. The styles and patterns of these houses described are typically Assamese. These houses were built in rows. There were yards in fronts and walls all around the houses. The buildings of the royalties were different—apart from woods and bamboos, stones were also commonly used in them. The high walls and balconies of these royal houses were adorned with sculptures of dancers, animals and birds. These houses were well-ventilated and artistically designed. The royal houses were surrounded by high walls and sentry-posts. Sankardeva gives us a realistic picture of the inside life of the royal palaces which are historically correct. The roads were wide and were connected by large intersections (verse 137)

Rukmini-Harana Kavya also gives us documentary descriptions of the flora and fauna of Assam. Sankardeva delightfully describes various animals, birds and flowers and fruits which are very common in Assam and are closely connected to Assam’s cultural and social life. Among the birds and animals, we find mention of goat, dogs, horse, cows, tiger, leopard, elephant, jackal, frogs, crocodile, crow, cuckoo, pigeon, peacock, eagle, etc. among others. Flowers and fruits described are lotus, champak, paarijat, Til flowers, Bokul, Mango, coconut, plum, Bel, etc. As the scholar Pijumoni S. Bormudoi says, “Reading these descriptions of flowers, plants and trees, we, the readers cannot but recall in our mind’s eyes, the colorful sylvan scene of Assam” (Bormudoi, 109)

Sankardeva also depicts various foods and food habits of Assam. Assam is famous for its abundant milk-production and milk products since early times, and in the poem we have a picture of this. He mentions the food items that were available in the local markets. During Sankardeva’s time, Assam was well-advanced in the practice of dance and music, and we have descriptions of these practices in the poem. He especially mentions the popular dramatic performances of the time. The poet also depicts people in the poem using various musical instruments which are used by the people of the region: Gomukh, Dhol, Do-tara, Mridang, Bheru, Bipanchi etc.

In the middle ages, common people in Assam used to wear cotton, home-spun clothes. From the poem, we can guess that rich people wore silk clothes. Sankardeva gives the readers a vivid and charming picture of the dress, ornaments and fashions of Assamese women in the poem. Married women tied their hair in a big knot and put flowers in it. They wore *kajal* in their eyes and sindur on the foreheads. Ornaments were made of gold, silver as well as precious stones and metals, and they could be bought in the local markets.

Though Assam is inhabited by a large number of tribes and communities, the poem only mentions only a few communities like Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Kayasthas etc. Sankardeva paints a lively picture of rural life with images of cattle, fields, young people at play, and eating fruits etc. Rule of law was very strict, and offenders, thieves and criminals were punished severely, and their heads and beards were shaved and their faces were painted black. In the poem, we see Lord Krishna meting out this kind of punishment to Rukmibeer. In the poem, Sankardeva briefly mentions students and gurus, and form

these brief references we can safely presume that even in that remote period of time, students could acquire an education in the households of the *gurus*.

Like any other society, Assamese society also believes in many superstitions, and various belief-systems. It is supposed to be ominous if one sees a snake on the left side or a fox on the right side. Likewise, hearing a mad person laugh loudly, seeing vultures flying overhead in the sky, uprooted tree, or encountering a mad beggar woman were taken to be bad omens during that time (verses 471, 472). On the other hand, fluttering feeling in the eyes, solders and right hip was taken to be an omen of good news (verse 244). People of Assam worshipped many gods and goddesses. Many temples were there, and it was a common sight to see people going to the temples and offering prayers before undertaking a deed—as we see in the poem.

It is in the depiction of the wedding of Krishna, that the picture of Assamese life comes out most vividly and colorfully. Sankardeva gives a detailed description of the rituals, ceremonies and customs associated with a typical Assamese wedding. Sankardeva describes the custom of worshipping of the gods (*Pancha-deva*, i.e. the five gods) at the very outset of the wedding day. After performing a few rituals, the bride, wearing ornaments and make-up, is brought to the place of wedding. Here, she is wedded to her groom with an elaborate set of rituals. The women present there sing wedding songs, and the guests give gifts to the newly-wed couple. In the wedding scene of Krishna and Rukmini, Sankardeva depicts these rituals and fanfare associated with the wedding ceremony of Assamese society.

Conclusion:

The poetic genius of Sankardeva could mould his subject matter in a way that could simultaneously instruct and entertain. The main purpose behind his literary creation was to preach his religious doctrine and to propagate a spiritual way of life and living or provide spiritual nourishment among the people. But, to do that, he did not choose dull preaching. Instead, he chose to write literary works which are characterized with excellent aesthetic qualities. In the words of K. N. Prasad Magadha, “ Although Sankardeva’s writing is a by-product of his being a preacher, a teacher and a reformer, and although it possesses a note of propaganda in the background, yet the poet in him is no less a conscious artist who knows exactly the effect he creates. He has a great poetic genius, convincing diction and plain but pleasant and impressive style” (Prasad 141). All these qualities are evident in his masterly work *Rukmini-haran kavya*. It is true that Sankardeva drew from various sources for the plot-line of the poem. But his skillful use of local color and imaginative description and delineation of scenes, places, and people have made it much more than mere translation or adaptation, and given the poem the status of an original artistic creation.

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