

## HISTORY OF VAISHNAVISM IN INDIA

The three great commentators of the Vedantic school of thought in India are Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya and Madhvacharya. All of them acknowledged the infallibility of the *Upanishads*, but differed in their interpretation of the same. Gaudapada preceded Sankara, and there were earlier teachers too of the school who preceded Gaudapada. But it is supposed that they did not give prominence to Mayavada as Sankara did. Ramanuja came after Sankara. His school of thought called Vishishtadvaitavada can also be traced to remote antiquity, commencing from Bodhayana, not removed far from the days of Vyasa, the author of the Vedanta Sutras. It owed its origin from the ancient **Bhagavata** school that was in existence even some centuries before the Christian era. *Pancaratra Tantra* by Narada, and *Bhagavadgita* are the foundation of the Bhagavata school.

The seed of **Vaishnavism** in South India was sown by the Alvars, who were the earliest Brahmin messengers to the South. They gave prominence to the emotional side of Vaishnavism and used the language of the people in their songs and hymns. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century down to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, an unbroken line of Vaishnavite reformers existed in Southern India. This cult flourished there from the early years of the Christian era under the impetus given by the Alvars, who preached *bhakti* and devotion to **Krishna** in the local Tamil, and songs composed in that language were very well understood by the mass. **Vishnu** with all His *Avatars*, and particularly the Krishna Avatar, was the object of their deep veneration. They used to adore idols of Vishnu of different forms, although the mode of worship was mainly confined to recitation of His Names and contemplation of His forms. **Satagopa** among the later Alvars was very famous, and **Andal**, daughter of a Pariah devotee, was also included in the list of Alvars. The Alvars did not denounce Brahmins or the caste system. Their denunciations of the Buddhists and the Jains clearly show that their fight was with them, and they were their contemporaries. It is evident that the earlier Alvars owed their origin to Northern Vaishnavites or Bhagavata sects. Their teachings and works were based on the *Bhagavadgita* and the *Bhagavata*. They represented the devotional and emotional side of the Vaishnava faith, unlike the Brahmin *Acharyas* who came after them representing the intellectual and philosophical side.

**Nathamuni**, the great Vaishnava sage, was born in the first quarter of the ninth century. He was a native of Viranarayanapura, the modern Mannargudi of the Chidambaram Taluka, in the dominion of the Chola rulers of the day. He was probably the scion of some early Vaishnava immigrant from Northern India, who carried the Bhagavata or the Pancharatra cult to the South in the early years of the Christian era. He was well-versed in the Sanskrit literature of the day and is said to have been adept in Yoga. He composed many works on the Yoga philosophy, of which one called *Nyayatattva* is an elaborate treatise covering the whole field of philosophy that was incorporated later on by the Ramanuja school of thought. He was a great Tamil scholar also. His provision for the recitation of the *Tamil Vedas*, as the works were collectively called, during the festivals of the God Vishnu in temples, gave birth to a school of

combined Sanskrit and Tamil scholarship. Nathamuni is traditionally considered to be the founder of the *Ramanuja* school of thought, though his grandson Yamunacharya really laid the foundation for all the doctrines that are now ascribed to Ramanuja. They are practically based on the *Pancharatra Tantra* and are said to have been accepted by the Alvar Saint Satagopa himself and by Nathamuni after him. The Tamil songs of Satagopa are sung in various Vaishnava temples to this day, and Nathamuni is said to have set them to music soon after his discovery of the work. Nathamuni made an extensive tour in Western India, visiting Mathura, Vrindavan and Dvaraka, the scenes of Krishna-lila, and went even to Badrinath on the north and Jagannathkshetra on the east.

So we clearly see that the *Vishishtadvaitavada* school, which was consolidated and founded on a solid basis by Ramanuja, had many teachers of great repute who preceded him, such as Satagopa, the author of the Thousand Tamil Songs, and then Nathamuni. Nathamuni had eight pupils, of whom Pundarikaksha was much celebrated. Pundarika was of an inferior caste.

**Yamunacharya** was the grandson of Nathamuni. In order of succession, he was the third from Nathamuni. **Kumarilabhatta** with his predecessors had held the field in philosophical speculations during the century immediately preceding Sankara. Their tirade was against the philosophical Buddhism and its atheistic tendencies, and their stand was the sacrifice-ridden Purva Mimamsa school. So both the *Advaita* and the *Vishishtadvaita* schools were the simultaneous expression of reaction and protest against this school, of which Kumarila was a powerful exponent. The *Vaishnava* school did not try to start a new philosophy, but based its teachings on *Naradiya Pancharatra* and the *Bhagavata* and laid stress on a life of purity, high morality, worship and devotion to only one God Who is above all the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. Although the Monism of Sankara was greatly appreciated by the intellectual class, the masses of people who were beyond the influence of Brahmins, hailed Vaishnavism in delight, and came increasingly within its fold. Vaishnavism checked the elaborate rituals, ceremonials, vratas, fasts and feasts prescribed by the *Smritis* and *Puranas* for the daily life of a Hindu, and also the worship of various deities like the sun, the moon, the grahas or planets, etc., enjoined by the priestly Brahmin class for the sake of emoluments and gain. It enjoined the worship of no other deities except **God Narayana** of Upanishads, Who is the primal cause of *srsti* (creation), *sthiti* (existence) and *pralaya* (destruction). It differs from the Advaitavadis, to whom one personal God is as good as another, as both are simply of phenomenal nature. In the Ramanuja school of thought, there was practically nothing sectarian. Devotion to One Deity was the teaching of this school, and the object was to enthrone Hinduism once more on its old pedestal, restore it to the ancient purity of the Upanishad days and free it from the non-Aryan influences that had given it a mixture of tantric rituals and worship of many gods. It has brought the lower classes into the fold of practical Hinduism and extended to them the right and privilege of knowing God and attaining *mukti* (salvation).

**Yamunacharya** was born in the city of Viranarayanapura, the modern Mannargudi in the south Arcot district, a few years after the beginning of the tenth century. Even in his boyhood his intelligence and retentive memory attracted the attention of his teachers, and he easily topped the list of his school-mates. While he was a

student he gained the favour of the Chola king by defeating the court pandit in Vedantic disputation. The king granted him lands and emoluments, and he lived a life of luxury for some time. During this period, he married and had four sons. He forgot the higher spiritual life lived by his grandfather, Nathamuni. At last, through the intervention of Rama Misra, the pupil of Pundarikaksha, the awakening came, and discarding the life of a householder, Yamuna became sannyasi, and devoted himself entirely to spiritual life. The Upanishads, the Gita and the Vedanta Sutra attracted his attention and like Sankara, he devoted himself to the task of their textual interpretation. He was deeply learned in the lore of philosophy and wrote several books dealing with the niceties of the faith he upheld. In his time the oral interpretations were mainly proceeded with. The formal embodiment of those interpretations was not reduced to written text until the time of Ramanuja later on.

**Ramanujacharya**, the practical founder of the *Visishtadvaita* school, on whom the mantle of Yamunacharya fell, was born about the year 1017 AD. Under Yamunacharya the Visishtadvaita had greatly developed and took a strong footing in Srirangapattam and other places. But Ramanuja, by composing philosophical works and committing to writing the special views that were being developed orally by Yamunacharya and his predecessors, gave the system a solid foundation and made it more prominent. He attacked the interpretations of Sankara of the very first famous passage of the *Chandogya Upanishad*, namely, *tat tvam asi*, “That thou art”, the cornerstone of the Advaitavadis and also attacked the *Mayavada* of Sankara as well as the Bhedabhedavada doctrines of the Bhaskara and Madhva schools of thought. After this he took up the question whether the Supreme Deity is to be styled Vishnu or Siva, or to be identified with the other gods known to the Upanishads, and concluded that Vishnu or Narayana alone is the only one who can be so named and so identified. After this he wrote the *Sri-bhasya* on the Vedanta-Sutra, the great work on which the great school of Visishtadvaitavada stands. There were various incidents in his life and some of them are quite thrilling, which the space at my disposal today forbids me to mention.

Ramanuja was remarkable for his broad-mindedness, burning sympathy for mankind in general, unselfishness, resourcefulness and absolute devotion to God. In recognising merit in people, inferior in caste, he went further than any other religious teacher of his time. His writings bear testimony to the fact of his having a keen intellect and a wide expanse of learning, and above all his sincerity and high moral character. He had no harsh word even for his opponent in controversy and was always noted for his moderation. He is rightly held to be the founder of the Visishtadvaita school, which is a qualified non-dualism. According to him, God alone exists. All else that is seen are His manifestations, attributes or *Sakti*. The *Advaitism* also maintains that God alone exists and all else is His manifestation. But Advaitism regards the manifestations as unreal and as result of *Adya* or *Maya*. So practically *ekamevadvitiya* Brahman is reduced to a Being without any attributes. Ramanuja regards the attributes as real and permanent, but they are subject to the control of One Supreme Brahman in their modifications. According to his school of thought, the Oneness of God is compatible with the existence of His attributes.

I do not propose to go into the details of the niceties of discussions on thoughts of these two schools of philosophy here, as it is not possible within the limited space of this article and as it will tire your patience. In short I would point out that the Visishtadvaita school would call Brahman *sat* and the rest *asat*, which undergoes change in its essence unlike Brahman. It can, however, be safely concluded that Ramanuja's philosophical conceptions, if studied carefully, would lead one to think that it is entitled to a high place among the world's philosophical thought and his system is a sound one, not incompatible with the conception of the attributes and the nature of the Supreme Brahman.

It is to be regretted, however, that after Ramanuja, exclusiveness became the characteristic of the class. As Sir RG Bhandarkar says, the tendency of his system seemed to give an exclusive Brahmanic form to the traditional method of *Bhakti* or devotion to God. This may account for the greater predominance of the Brahmanic elements in the sect. Dogmas and one-sidedness got the better of true religiousness and moral progress of the community as a whole; and the divergence of views created a divergence of sub-sects among the followers, although the doctrinal differences between them are trivial. Visishtadvaitavada of Ramanuja has also in course of time shared the fate of the other few practical religions in not being able to preserve itself unsullied by unseemly disputes and schisms that overtake the pristine purity of the teachings and mode of life enjoined to be led under the aegis and inspiration of the original founder.

I now come to Northern India and try to give a brief account of Vaishnavism current there. It cannot be correct to state that all the Vaishnavism found in Northern India was imported from the South, and that they were the legacy of Ramanuja and his predecessors and successors. The birthplace of Krishna and His cult were by no means lying dormant all along since the early centuries of the Christian Era, that sent forth votaries and preachers such as those early Alwars to the South to preach the cult. But it cannot be denied that Vaishnavism in the North received a fresh impetus from the South from the great Acharya Ramanuja and his successors' teachings and powerful propaganda.

In Northern India, **Ramananda**, **Vallabhacharya**, **Nimbadiya**, **Sri Sankaradeva** and **Sri Chaitanyadeva** were the Vaishnava reformers of great repute. Ramananda is said to have been the fifth in apostolic succession from Ramanuja, and he lived towards the end of the fourteenth century AD. It is generally said that there are four main *sampradayas* or sects of Vaishnavism, viz., Ramanuja, Vishnuswami, Madhvacharya and Nimbadiya. All other current minor sects are said to have been included in these four main sampradayas. It is also said that Lakshmi acknowledged Ramanuja; Brahma Madhvacharya; Rudra Vishnuswami; and Sanak, Sananda, Sanatan and Sanatkumara Nimbadiya respectively. Ramananda had twelve disciples from various lower classes. **Ruidas** was a cobbler; **Pipa** a Rajput; **Dhanna** a Jath; **Kabir** a Mahomedan; and **Sen** a barber. Some of these disciples founded separate sects of great celebrity; and as regards the mode of religious worship, divergence of views with the main system of Ramananda is very marked. Ramananda worshipped Rama and asserted the supreme efficacy of the chanting and meditating of Rama-nama, and practically discarded social distinctions. The *Bhaktamal*, a book written by **Nabhaji**, a pupil of

Ramananda or one of his successors, is practically the scripture of the Ramanandis. Nabhaji belonged to the Dom caste. The famous Tulsidas who was seventh in descent from Ramananda wrote the Hindi *Ramayana*, which is a book looked upon with veneration by, and the only text-book on religion for, millions of people in Upper India. Ramanuja wrote his books in Sanskrit, and Brahmins as a rule got the upper hand in expounding his cult; whereas Ramananda and his followers wrote their books in the current language of the people and these books, therefore, became accessible to everyone – a fact that made easy for even the people of upper castes to aspire for the status of a guru.

**Jayadeva**, the renowned author of the *Gita-Govinda* flourished in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Radha and Krishna were his objects of worship. His *Gita-Govinda* gave a great impetus to Chaitanya during his life and cult in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, about which I will speak briefly later on. **Kabir** made spiritual protests against the current Hinduism and Mahomedanism, and wanted to reconcile both the religions like Nanak, the founder of Sikhism in the Panjab, later on. Kabirpanthis do not give much importance in following the forms and modes of current Hinduism. The chanting of religious hymns is their chief method of *upasana* or worship of God.

Minor sub-sects like *Khaki*, *Molukdasi*, *Dadupanthi*, also owed their origin to Ramanandis. They worshipped Rama and Sita, and the method is to contemplate and chant Rama-nama. There are many sub-sects belonging to Dadupanthis, and the *Nagas* are one of them. Nagas fight as soldiers also when they are employed on remuneration. Sometimes past the Maharaja of Jaipur had about 10,000 Naga soldiers.

Ruidas, one of the 12 disciples of Ramananda, had also founded a separate sect. From Sen, the barber disciple of Ramananda, another sect came into existence.

In 1976 Sambat a man called **Ramcaran** founded a sect of Vaishnavas called Ramsnehi after his name.

I have mentioned before the four main *sampradayas* of Vaishnavism. Brahma-sampradaya is the second. Madhvacharya was the founder of this sect and the sampradaya is called *Madhvi* after his name. This sect is of a later date than the Sri-sampradaya of Ramanuja. Madhvacharya was born in 1121 *Sakabda* in Tulab in Deccan. Except *Sannyasis* and Brahmins no other people have any right to become a *diksha-guru* in this sampradaya. *Diksha-gurus* even do not give *diksha* to the people of the lowest class. Every guru inherits his *sishyas* or disciples as if they were paternal property, and can sell or mortgage the right of guruship if he so desires. Madhvacharis are Dvaitavadis. They acknowledge the separate entities of *jiva* and Brahman. They, therefore, differ from the philosophical conceptions of both Sankara and Ramanuja.

The third main *sampradaya* is the Rudra-sampradaya, of which **Vallabhacharya** was the founder. He was born about 1749 AD in Telangana and settled at Muttra. *Balagopala* or the Child Krishna is the object of worship for the devotees of this sect. The practical indulgence in the rhapsodies of the *Bhagavata* and the *Gita-Govinda* of

Jayadeva tended to increase luxury in the high priests of this sect and its followers to such an extent that a case that went up to the Supreme Court of Bombay in 1862 brought out to the public notice certain practices of this sect that do not do credit to them.

The *sampradaya* of Vallabhacharya traces its origin from **Vishnuswami**, the commentator of Vedas. Vishnuswami made disciples from *Sannyasashramis* and Brahmins only. It is said that Vallabhacharya, stepping into the shoes of the successors of Vishnuswami, devoted himself to the expounding of his cult. *Barta* is the name of the chief *grantha* or scripture of the Vallabhacharyas. Expositions in the *Barta* go to establish a kind of oneness of *jiva* and Brahman. Vallabhacharya's teachings contain certain unique doctrines quite unusual in the Hindu religion. He says, in God's *upasana*, no fasting, no tiresome methods, no *tapasya* are necessary. Without discarding delicacies of food, luxuries of the world such as riches and raiments and other amenities of life, worship of God is possible. This led the Vaishnavas of this sect to extreme luxury and the hankering after worldly pleasures. The *Goswamis* or spiritual heads of this sect are married men. The devotees or their disciples pamper them, with various kinds of rich food and clothing, and offer their gurus their *tana*, *mana* and *dhan*, ie, body, soul and wealth. It is evident, therefore, that gurus wield a vast influence over their disciples. Like the disciples, the gurus also go on doing business in trade and commerce. Gopala Krishna with Radha and images of his different incarnations are worshipped in their temples. The commentary which Vallabha wrote on the ***Bhagavata*** is their chief book for the conduct of their life and faith. He wrote several other books also in Sanskrit, and also one or two in the current language of the people.

In several parts of India, particularly in Gujarat and Malwa, great many rich and very well-to-do people are followers of the Vallabhacharya Vaishnavism. In Muttra and Vrindavan as well as in Puri, Dvaraka and Ajmere they have got several *maths* or temples.

A small sect of Vaishnavism originated with **Mira Bai**. She was married to the Rana of Udaipur, but as she was a staunch Vaishnava, she could not agree with her husband and his relations, who were *Saktas*, and had to leave their protection. After roaming over many places she passed the rest of her life meditating and chanting the name of her *Ista Devata*, *Ranchhod*, an image of Sri-Krishna.

The founder of the fourth main *sampradaya* was **Nimbadiya**. He lived near Vrindavana. His original name was Bhaskaracharya. He was called Nimbadiya later on, and people belonging to his sect is called *Nimat*. Krishna with Radha is their God of worship, and the ***Srimad Bhagavata*** is their main scripture. Nimbadiya had two distinguished disciples, named Kesava Bhatta and Harivyasa. Two separate sub-sects owe their origin from these two. There are many *Nimats* in Western India and particularly, in places near Muttra.

In Maharashtra, there is a sect called *Vithal-bhaktas*. In Gujrat, Karnat and Central India also disciples of this sect are to be seen. Their another name is *Vaishnavavir*. Their God of worship is ***Pandurang***, ***Vithal*** or ***Vithoba***. They consider him as the

ninth incarnation of Vishnu, ie Buddhadeva. They may, therefore, be called *Bauddha-Vaishnavas*. They have got a celebrated temple on the modern bank of the Bhima river in Deccan. They have got a large mass of sectarian literature such as *Bhakta-vijaya*, *Pandurang-mahatmya*, *Hari-vijaya*, etc. A saint called **Pundalik** is said to have been the founder of this sect. Probably he flourished in the fourteenth century of the Christian era.

This sect gives prominence to the love between the upasya and the upasaka ie the object of worship and the worshipper. Although they do not place much stress on leading a life of seclusion or giving up the worldly life, yet there are many devotees of this sect who renounce worldly life and pleasure. According to them, Pandharpur is the chief place for pilgrimage. While the Goswamis or gurus of other sects exercise sole and strict authority over their disciples, the gurus of this sect do not do that. They do not regard the Vedas and Brahmins as much supreme as the followers of other sects do. They do not place great stress on the caste distinctions, and on festive occasions take meals from the hands of everyone. There is much similarity to be seen between the Jagannatha-kshetra temple and the Pandurang temple with regard to mahaprasada or anna offered to the deity and taken by the devotees afterwards. This sect may be taken as an attempt at reconciliation between Buddhism and Hindu Vaishnavism.

I will say something now briefly about the Chaitanya sampradaya in Bengal. **Chaitanya** is generally regarded as the founder of the sampradaya. He was born in 1486 AD in the city of Nadia or Navadwipa on the bank of the Ganges. His father was Jagannatha Misra and his mother's name was Sachi. Chaitanya, whose real name was Visvambhara, renounced the world and turned out a sannyasi and preacher at the age of 24. He died or disappeared in about 1533 AD at Puri or Jagannatha-kshetra. Advaitacharya and Nityananda were his chief helpers in propagating his creed. His followers not only regard him as the founder of the faith but also as an incarnation of Krishna and the main object of worship. There had been a bitter controversy between the Brahmin pandits of Bengal and his followers as to his being an incarnation. They quoted Vedas, Smritis and Puranas to refute the claim sought to be established by his followers, depending mainly on the slokas said to be from an Ananta-Samhita. Chaitanya or, more properly, Visvambhara, was frolicsome, mischievous and annoying to his parents. At his ninth year, he was invested with the sacred thread and after that attended the school of a Pandit and studied grammar. After that he studied Nyaya under Sarvabhauma Bhattacharya. He married twice - the second one named Vishnupriya after the demise of his first wife Lakshmi. At about the age of twenty he was initiated into the Vaishnava faith by Iswarapuri a disciple of Madhavendrapuri, whose descent as a spiritual guru is traced from the great Madhvacharya. After his return from Gaya whereto he had undertaken a trip, he became subject to trances and visions and indulged in talking of and thinking of Sri-Krishna and His Vrindavana *lila* with the gopis. He imagined himself to be Radha and acted her part to perfection. When he was overpowered by the extreme avesa or the idea of Krishna he used to do strange things such as taking Krishna's image's seat on the asana or dais reserved for the idol and imagine himself as the object of worship and proclaim likewise. Advaitacharya, an elderly Vaishnava Pandit and scholar, who became Visvambhara's follower afterwards, had doubted Visvambhara's claim. He was one day literally beaten by Visvambhara and forced to accept the truth of

his divine nature. After this Visvambhara renounced his worldly life and took to sannyasa having been initiated under the name of Krishna-Chaitanya by one Kesava Bharati who lived in a village about 18 miles distant from Nuddea. Hunter in his *Orissa* says, "The adoration of Chaitanya has become a sort of family worship throughout Orissa. In Puri there is a temple specially dedicated to his name, and many little shrines are scattered over the country".

After taking *sannyasa* at his 24<sup>th</sup> year, Chaitanya roamed over different places in India, such as Muttra, Puri, etc and preached the doctrines of Krishna worship. The latter part of his life, ie for 18 years, he lived in Puri and devoted to the worship of Jagannathadeva, and preached prema-bhakti. The span of his life was altogether 48 years. The people of his sampradaya regard Advaita and Nityananda also as *amsa-avatara*, ie part-incarnation, of Vishnu.

Although the Chaitanya sampradaya traces its origin to Madhvacharya, the sect of Vallabhacharya has great affinity with this sect. Both Chaitanya and Vallabha flourished about the same time. Chaitanya adopted the worship of Radha-Krishna and there can be little doubt that Jayadeva's Gita-Govinda and the Maithili poet Vidyapat's songs played an important part in moulding his thoughts. The attitude of the soul to God was represented in his cult by the attitude of the beloved towards her lover. The love towards the gallant was considered the highest kind that the soul could entertain towards God. The ardent longing of the gopis for Krishna was considered typical of the soul's longing for the God. In the case of the devotees who are morally strong, this mode of *madhura rasa* worship could not lead them to abuse. But human nature is human nature all the same. Those who are not strong in nature that way could hardly restrain themselves from being led to pitfalls. And that was the main reason why after Chaitanya's death the sampradaya gave birth to numerous sub-sects that fell into reprehensible practices and moral degradation.

Chaitanya had a few converts from among Mahomedans amongst his followers. It appears that within the pale of Hindu religion, he recognized no caste distinctions when the devotee becomes a Vaishnava or a worshipper of Krishna. But the cult of bhakti giving prominence to *madhura rasa* soon after him degenerated into such a pass that the excesses and objectionable practices committed by the lower orders among his followers under its aegis naturally evoked criticism and condemnation that cannot be called unjust. As in Orissa and Vrindavana, in his native district in Nuddea and other neighbouring places, maths or temples have since been established, where Chaitanya's image came to be actually worshipped as the image of God. Even before his death and so on after, it became the vogue to install his image in temples for worshipping him as a divinity, and the incidents in his life were magnified and given a shape so as to establish him as being of divine nature. The deification of great saints and bhaktas is inherent in human nature and particularly in Hinduism and the latest instance is the humble saint, Ramakrishna Paramhansa of Bengal.

I now come to **Sankaradeva** of Assam, my province which has fallen from its ancient greatness and is not very well known nowadays to the people of other parts of

India. In ancient times it was called Pragjyotishapura. About one thousand years before the Christian era, the greater part of lower Bengal was probably under the sea, while a considerable portion of Northern Bengal was included in Pragjyotisha, which was then a powerful kingdom and was often mentioned in the great epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata and the Puranas. The Aryan wave extended to Kamarupa - the name by which Pragjyotisha came to be known afterwards - directly from Videha and Magadha long before the lower Bengal became habitable. Mr. Pargiter in his book named *Ancient Countries in Eastern India* writes that the kingdom known as Pragjyotisha included, at the time of the Mahabharata war, a greater part of Modern Assam together with the Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch-Bihar, Rangpur, Bogra, Mymensing, Dacca, Tippera, part of Pabna and probably a part of East Nepal. In the Ramayana, it is mentioned that Amurtaraja was the son of Kusa and grandfather of the famous rishi Visvamitra. Visvamitra performed his austerities on the banks of the Kausika, the modern Kosi river. To go into the details about the Pragjyotisha kingdom that came to be known as Kamarupa during the pauranic period would be out of place in today's lecture. In any case, it is clear that Pragjyotisha or the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa - was a much larger kingdom than most of the other kingdoms mentioned in the Mahabharata; and it was larger than most of the other sixteen Mahajanapadas existing during the time of Gautama the Buddha. The poet Kalidasa who, according to Vincent Smith, flourished in the first part of the fifth century, also mentions Kamarupa and Pragjyotisha as names of the same kingdom. Pragjyotisha was the seat of learning in Astrology or Astronomy in ancient India. It is generally recognized that the cult of the yoni and lingam is of pre-Aryan origin. The shrine of Kamakhya in modern Gauhati in Assam which represents yoni, is associated with the pre-Aryan king Naraka who is reputed to have been the guardian of the shrine. In the seventh century, the great Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chang during his travels to places of India visited Kamarupa also. He did not find Buddhism to have taken root there. Some centuries after his visit, Kamakhya became the reputed centre of the Vajrayana system of Buddhism, known as the Sahajiya cult, along with Udayana, Srihatta and Purnagiri. The debased practices enjoined by this system of tantric Buddhism earned for Kamarupa-Kamakhya the reputation of its being a land of magic or sorcery, or as the original centre of tantric Hinduism. It was to extirpate this system of debased religion the great Vaishnava religious reformer of Assam, **Mahapurusha Sri-Sankaradeva** began his preaching towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. During the next century, he and his disciple and associate, **Madhavadeva**, a Kayastha, and **Damodaradeva**, a Brahmin, succeeded in suppressing the Bauddha rites, and spreading the new Vaishnava tenet far and wide.

**Sankaradeva** was born in 1449 A.D. He was the descendant of the Siromani Bhuya Candivara, a Kayastha by caste, whom Durlabhanarayana, the king of Kamata, settled in Kamarupa about the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Kusumavara, the great-grandson of Candivara and father of Sankaradeva migrated to Bardowa within the Ahom kingdom, when Visvasimha, the king and founder of Cooch-Bihar kingdom, in order to establish his undisputed supremacy in Kamarupa was engaged in suppressing the powerful Bhuyan chiefs. Kusumavara was a devotee of Siva, and he named his son Sankara, as the gift of his ista devata. Sankara's mother died three days after his birth, and he was brought up by his paternal grandmother. Sometime after this, Sankara's father

also breathed his last. Being endowed with natural gifts, Sankara soon developed a strong physique and quick brain. He outclassed all the Brahmin and Kayastha boys of his age in study as well as in sports. On attaining manhood Sankara married and settled down to domestic life. A daughter was born to him, and he gave her in marriage to a Kayastha youth when she attained the proper age. Sankara's wife died after this.

After the death of his wife Sankara set out on a pilgrimage to the holy places of India. During his long pilgrimage of twelve years he visited different parts of India such as Puri, Muttra, Vrndavana, Badarikasrama and met Kabir, with whom he contracted friendship.

At the end of his travels he returned home and re-married, having been convinced that in order to elevate oneself spiritually and to be of service to humanity at the same time, one need not renounce the world. He then began to preach his tenets of neo-Vaisnavism with full vigour far and wide.

Writers ignorant of historical facts have often represented that Sankaradeva's school of neo-Vaisnavism in Assam is an offshoot of the Caitanya movement in Bengal. This is misconstruction and misrepresentation of real historical facts. Sankaradeva was born in 1449 A.D., whereas Caitanya was born in 1486 A.D. Caitanya was not born when Sankara set out on his pilgrimage. When Caitanya turned an ascetic in 1510 A.D., Sankara's Vaisnavism was in its full swing. Sankara could not have met Caitanya during his first pilgrimage. But during his second pilgrimage from Barpeta he met Caitanya about 1530 A.D. at Puri. There was not any conversation between them as Caitanya was then observing silence, and therefore by pouring water from his kamandalu, Caitanya indicated that devotion to God is continuous and directed to one channel only like the flow of running water, was his creed. Sankara did not long survive after his return from the second pilgrimage. He died in Cooch-Bihar in the year 1568 A.D. after having attained a very long life of 119 years.

The idolization of the female element which formed the marked feature of Northern Vaisnavism and of the Caitanya movement in Bengal, is conspicuous only by its total absence from Sankara's Vaisnavism. Caitanya's conception of madhura rasa or love relations between the lover and the beloved as the mode of worship of God by His devotee, to which he gave prominence, does not find favour in Sankaradeva's school of thought. There is neither the combined worship of Radha and Krishna of Caitanya, nor of Gopi-Krishna of Vallabhacarya, nor of Rukmini-Krishna of Namdev, nor of the Sita-Rama of Ramananda. The *Eka-Sarana* of the *Gita* superimposed upon the idealism of **dasya-bhakti** with **satsanga** or companionship with **bhaktas** of the *Srimadbhagavata* and the Hanumanti katha, i.e., the unwavering and firm devotion and allegiance to one and the only one God as of Hanuman to Ramacandra, is the main plank of Sankara's creed. Self-surrender to the Supreme God, **Sri-Krishna**, Who is the creator, supporter and destroyer, and Who is the Lord and Master of kala (time) and maya (manifestations), *and to Him alone* - and not to any other minor god and goddess; **the chanting of the Names of that Great God**, and the meditating on Him are the instructions on which Sankara's Vaisnavism stands. Though essentially based upon the *Srimadbhagavata*, it has

nothing of doctrinaire about it. It gives prominence to the chanting of Rama's and **Krishna's Names** as well as the other thousand Names of the Creator and recognises in so many symbols of that one state of supreme bliss of the liberated soul. That is why the Vaisnavism preached by Sankaradeva is called **Eka-Sarana Nama-Dharma** - the religion of Supreme Devotional Surrender to One, i.e., Krishna, Whose Name is Rama, Hari, Vasudeva, Janardana and a thousand more. The conception of relationship between God and his devotee is like that between an all powerful and all merciful master and his servant whose humility and self-surrender to his master is extreme. Vaisnavism of Sankaradeva is uncompromising in its attitude against the worship of other gods and goddesses. Bhakti or devotion of a devotee to the One becomes vyabhichari, i.e., vitiated, even by going to the place of worship of other gods or goddesses, or bowing his head with reverence before them, or by eating the prasada or offerings there. The Upanisad says, *ekam eva advitiam*, 'He is the One without a second'; *tam isvaranam paramam mahesvaram, tam devatanam paramam ca daivatam, patim patinam paramam parastat, vidama devam bhuvanesam idyam*, 'One Who is the Lord of the lords, One Who is God of the gods, One Who is the Protector of the protectors, I only know Him the greatest of all, the resplendent, worshipful and the Master of the Universe'. It seems as if the ancient voice of the Upanisads with its stern gaze at the One, broke into an ejaculation in the teachings of this great religious reformer of ancient Kamarupa-Assam, where Sakta worship with all the admixtures of tantric Buddhism and tribal ceremonial customs prevailed.

Sankara's ancestors were all Saktas. **Madhavadeva**, his renowned disciple, a man of almost unmatched scholarship, was a Sakta before his conversion into the new creed of Sankara's Vaisnavism. Sankara's **Krishna** is the One God above all gods without a complementary second. K.L. Barua, Deputy Commissioner, Assam (retired), President, Kamarupa Anusandhan Samiti, writes in his book *Early History of Kamarupa* (published lately), "The special feature of the new tenet (of Sankara) was its uncompromising hostility to the worship of minor gods and goddesses and the animal sacrifices. It was explained, on the basis of the Upanisads, that God was the only eternal, changeless spirit, the individual soul or Atman was a part of it, but all the rest was matter and, therefore, subject to change and decay. People, who worshipped matter, being oblivious of the everlasting spirit, were fools. Sankaradeva was so particular in this respect that he spurned his own faithful follower Byaskalai as soon as he came to know that the latter in order to save his son from the clutches of small-pox had offered puja to the goddess, Sitala. On the other hand, Caitanya, it appears, did not ban worship of the numerous deities and is said to have himself worshipped Siva though he was a Vaisnava".

The political situation of the country at the time was not very favourable for Sankaradeva freely to preach the doctrines of his creed. Several rival powers professing divergent religious views were creating ferment in the country, and Sankaradeva had to proceed carefully in his mission, even at the risk of his life. Although he did not set much value on the caste system, he did not throw society into confusion by entirely demolishing it. He declared spiritual equality for all men and loudly proclaimed that even a Candala is superior to a Brahmin if that Candala becomes Hari-bhakti-parayana, i.e. if he becomes devoted to Hari. He rejected caste superiority as a ground of respect among

men, otherwise equally venerable, as lovers of God. Although the giddy levelling of caste orders was not discernible in him he had among his disciples people from the Mahamedan community, from aboriginal races of Assam, as well as from high class learned Brahmins. The most pious amongst them held the forefront position in his system irrespective of his caste, and founded religious orders of their own.

In Assam as in other parts of India the neo-Vaisnavism of Sankara met with strong opposition from the Brahmin priesthood, as it was a crusade against the excesses of the priest craft. The Bhagavata cult of Sankara by cutting at the very root of the false Brahminical ceremonials roused their anger. They managed to gain the ears of the Ahom king of Assam, who were but new-comers and did not understand much of real Hindu traditions. They prosecuted Sankara at the instigation of the Brahmins as tampering with the popular Hindu faith and a trial in the court was arranged. Sankara however got off free, with credit, from the trial.

Although the Brahmins were foiled in their attempt at the time, further hostility did not cease. After this Sankara had to undergo a lot of troubles, which culminated in the beheading of his son-in-law at the order of the Ahom king. In great disgust Sankara left the jurisdiction of the Ahom kings, and sought refuge in the lower Assam which was then within the boundary of the Koch king of Cooch-Bihar.

Although he took his shelter in the kingdom of Naranarayana, the great king of Cooch-Bihar who was a Hindu, the hostilities of the Brahmins followed him up there too, and he had to face a big trial in the court once again, out of which also he came out victorious in resplendent glory. The king was greatly impressed with his piety and learning, and expressed a desire to become his disciple. But Sankara refused, as it would not be possible for kings to observe strictly in its entirety the **Eka-Sarana dharma**, i.e., the religion of love with its undeviating devotion to the One, and also the absolute prohibition of animal sacrifices. He tried his utmost to dissuade the king from his expressed desire, as by virtue of his position, a king would have to worship other gods and goddesses. To keep his creed in its pristine purity, no deviation could be allowed. But the king persisted, and Sankara was in a dilemma. Being helpless, he asked the king to observe fasting and in prayer next day to perform the initiatory rites. Next morning when the king's messengers came to take Sankara to the king for performing the initiation, they only found Sankara washing his hands and feet, then putting on new clothing, then sitting in a devotional mood under a peepul tree and chanting beautiful hymns composed by himself, and finally surrendering himself to the Supreme Being of his love and devotion by yogic communion, and thus passing away. Sankara's eldest son was with him at the time; but Sankara left the world nominating Madhavadeva, his favourite disciple, to succeed him to his apostolic seat.

As I have already mentioned, Sankara built his system upon the ethics of the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata*. He evolved a creed to wipe off the prevailing social and other evils that were current in the name of religion, and at the same time to be an expression of the deepest philosophy. **Krishna** was the all-supreme God of adoration for him; and he rejected the feminine element of the Radha cult. He composed many books in his

country's vernacular for the propagation of his creed: the *Kirtana-ghosa* was the chief amongst them. In the *Kirtana-ghosa* he lays down: -

**Sastras say that dhyana or supreme communion by concentration was for the Satya-yuga, that worship by yajna or rituals was for Treta, that various forms of worship were for Dvapara, but that for Kali-yuga devout recitation of the Name of Hari is the only religion<sup>1</sup>.**

**Hari-nama is sufficient to destroy a hundred sins, and in fact a sinner cannot commit enough sins for a single utterance of Hari-nama to destroy<sup>2</sup>.**

But the Name of Hari should be taken not like a parrot, but by the application of *kaya*, *mana* and *vakya*, body, heart and soul and voice all put together. Another condition is that the Name of Hari should be taken while steering clear of ten kinds of the *namaparadha*<sup>3</sup>, i.e., offences to Hari's Name, such as those of: -

(1) One speaking ill of Hari-bhaktas; (2) one who neglects Hari-nama and speaks ill of the Vedas, knowing them fully well; (3) one who in order to slight the Glory of Hari-nama gives different interpretations to it; (4) one who deliberately commits sins thinking that by dint of the power of Hari-nama he shall be purged of those sins; (5) one who places Hari-nama on the same level with yajna, homa, vrata, dana and pilgrimage to tirthas or sacred places; (6) one who does not listen or pay attention to Hari-nama when others chant it; (7) one who offers Hari-nama to another with no regard for it; (8) one who does not love Hari-nama, although its mahima or Glory is dinned into his ears everyday; etc.

In Sankara's system Vedic rituals such as homas, yajnas and animal sacrifices find no place. In his renderings of the *Srimadbhagavata* Sankara quotes the sayings of Sri-Krishna to Uddhava as under: -

**People interpret the Vedas according to their own whims. Their interpretations are coloured by the dominant attributes of their mind. I am not accessible through knowledge, neither through penance, nor through renunciation, nor through gifts. I am not accessible to Yoga, not to knowledge. I am tied down by Bhakti alone<sup>4</sup>.**

Sankara's renowned disciple, Madhavadeva's *Nama-ghosa*, which gives the profoundest philosophical exposition to the entire creed of his Master, contains the following: -

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<sup>1</sup> Nama-ghosa, 399

<sup>2</sup> Kirttana-ghosa, Ajamilopakhyana, 37

<sup>3</sup> Kirttana-ghosa, Namaparadha, Kirttana 2

<sup>4</sup> Bhagavata Purana XI, as rendered by Sankaradeva

**The indwelling Hari moves far away from him who places faith in rituals. But one who makes it his religion to hear and recite Hari's Name attains Krishna even if he is not freed from the ego<sup>5</sup>.**

Although Sankara's system of Vaisnavism does not encourage karma or the Vedic rites, provision has been left for karma mainly for citta-suddhi, in the early stages of a devotee<sup>6</sup>. The *Nama-ghosa* says, "For a bhakta not fully detached from the world<sup>7</sup>, it would be a fault to transcend Vedic rites. But for one undeviatingly attached to Krishna<sup>8</sup> and totally indifferent to worldly matters, there is no prescription". The real bhakta does not seek mukti or salvation, although it is within his grasp. He wants to remain in a state of eternal enjoyment of the bliss of bhakti, even when he attains mukti or salvation.

This is the *summum bonum* that a bhakta of the Sankara school of thought would fain seek. In his *Kirtana-ghosa*, the first of the four books regarded as the text of his creed, he gives the process how a devotee can attain to bhakti: The first thing he should do is to be an associate of a Vaishnava and to serve him sincerely as his guide, and worship **God Krishna** under his instructions. The second step is to offer the consequences of all pious acts to Krishna. His mind will be steady and purified by the continuous hearing of the **Name of Krishna** and His Doings (*lila*), and he himself should also recite Krishna's Name and meditate Krishna in his heart, and see Krishna in every living being of the world. He must, therefore, show his regard to each and every one not excluding even the lower orders of creation such as dogs, jackals and asses, because Krishna resides in the hearts of every one. This will lead the devotee to love and regard Krishna with deep veneration. The great Krishna Who is supreme in the universe is sure to dwell in his heart permanently. To offer bhakti to the Supreme a man need not be a deva, or a dvija (Brahmin) or a risi. It is not necessary that he should be learned in the lore of many sastras. Tapa, japa, yajna, dana are not essential for him in order to get Krishna: they are rather obstacles on the way. Krishna is pleased and is attainable simply through bhakti.

Sankara enjoins the bhakta to see God Visnu in every being in the universe and says that teachings of any other religion are only an illusion and sham. A bhakta should view an enemy or a friend with an equal eye, serve humanity specially, as mankind is superior to all other orders of life being a special manifestation of Vishnu. The bhakta must surrender his body, mind and soul to Krishna and ever recite **His Name**. The society of such bhaktas has been placed higher in point of sanctity by Sankara than the worship of idols and pilgrimages. He says that these might acquire the power of purification after a long and laborious process, whereas the bhakta purifies people by his very sight. In the

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<sup>5</sup> Nama-ghosa, 5

<sup>6</sup> This bhakti-avirodhi karma, i.e., karma which does not run counter to the doctrine of devotion, is performed only when one is not attached to the Name and Glory of Krishna, but, for the devotee taking *Eka-Sarana* in (the Name of) Krishna, such a practice is opposed to the (single-minded) singing and hearing of the Lord's Name and Glories and is therefore totally discarded. See Nama-ghosa 599.

<sup>7</sup> i.e., not taking Eka-Sarana.

<sup>8</sup> i.e., a devotee entering the Lord's Sole-Refuge (Eka-Sarana) in kaya (body), mana (mind) and vakya (speech), and hence the ultimate renunciant – editor, atributetosankaradeva.org

society of bhaktas, regard and love for Krishna is poured in through the eyes, ears and the mind, and then the sole attachment to the Name of Krishna is a natural process.

No idol was ever worshipped in any *Sattra*, that is, place for religious worship established by Sankara, particularly during the life-time of Sankaradeva and his great successor Madhavadeva, who has the following in his famous Book, *Nama-ghosha*, to show the futility of idol worship: -

**Unmanifested is the Supreme Deity, Hari. How could you then worship Him? How could you make visarjana or dismiss Him after worship Who is all pervading? How could you meditate on Him Who is formless? So purge your mind by the reciting of the Name of Rama<sup>9</sup>.**

Sankara in his *Kirtana-ghosa* says: -

**He who seeks spiritual purgation in holy waters, believes in divinity as dwelling in idols, but never entertains the same ideas in regard to Vaishnavas, is worse than a cow, - so says Krishna<sup>10</sup>.**

But for the purpose of concentration the construction of the mental image is advised by Sankara. He says: Recite the Name of Rama on your lips and contemplate his Image in your heart to get mukti<sup>11</sup>.

*Srimadbhagavata* enjoins nine kinds of bhakti for a Vaisnava devotee, viz. *sravana*, *kirtana*, *smarana*, *archana*, *pada-sevana*, *dasya*, *sakhitva*, *vandana* and *deha-samarpana*. For the Kali-yuga, *sravana*, i.e., the hearing of **Rama Krishna's Nama** and *Kirtana*, i.e., the chanting of It is prescribed as the only dharma and in Sankara's system of Vaisnavism these two kinds of bhakti are mainly enjoined.

Sankara preached the *dasya-bhakti* as the relation between Sri-Krishna and His devotee. The devotee must conceive of God as a servant does of his master. The madhura conception may be lofty as a personal ideal but Sankara discarded it as he clearly saw that it could not be worked out practically in this world, particularly when it would fall into less enlightened minds. It is bound to get degraded, and corrupt and immoral practices are bound to creep in in course of time when the master-mind of the founder is removed.

The extreme humility and self-surrender of a devotee giving vent to his *dasya bhakti* in Sankara's system is: -

**Thou guidest me, O Lord! outwardly and in inner workings of my heart. In Thee I am possessed of a Lord. Remove my delusion. I take up a straw between my teeth and bow unto Thee. Show me how I may remain in Thy service. Buy me, O Lord! as Thy slave. The price I want is not any filthy lucre, but only the supreme treasure of**

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<sup>9</sup> Nama-ghosa, 8

<sup>10</sup> Kirtana-ghosa, Pasanda Mardana, 61

<sup>11</sup> Kirtana-ghosa, Syamantakaharana, refrain 1

**Thy Nama. I am the last in the list of the sinners in this world. There is none who purgest sins like Thee, O Lord! Do unto me as Thou thinkest best. This is my humble supplication at Thy Feet<sup>12</sup>.**

Such is the prayer in Sankara's system of Vaisnavism.

Sankara did not start with any Vedantic thesis on the nature of Godhead as the basis of his teachings. The Deity of the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata* was sufficient for him. God is Supreme Intelligence, without limitation, all pervading, without form, without attributes. He expresses Himself, taking recourse to *Maya*, to favour His bhaktas. He is the beginning, the middle and the end of the Universe. He is the controller of *Purusa* and *Prakrti*. No other gods or goddesses can give salvation or mukti; He only can. To the bhakta He reveals Himself. Such are Sankaradeva's Teachings.

He adores Madhava as adorable even to Laksmi, Brahma and Mahadeva. He chants Rama's and Krishna's Names. His practical application of the sastric saying, *candalo 'pi dvija-sresthah Hari-bhakti-parayanah*, was visible when he received disciples from all classes and castes of people, not excluding Mahamedans, and the tribes such as the Garo, Miri, Naga, etc. Sankara's neo-Vaisnavism threw open the doors of the temple of God to all classes of people. People flocked in thousands under the banner of his new faith.

I give below the rendering of a hymn from the *Nama-ghosa*: -

**I do not belong to the four castes, nor do I belong to the four asramas. I have no business in offering gifts, observing vratas, and going on pilgrimages. But I aspire to be a slave of the slaves of Him, Whose Lotus-Feet shine in the ocean of full bliss and Who is the Lord of the gopis.**

Sankaradeva was a prolific writer of Assamese verses and a poet of very high order. In order to popularise his tenets he and his great disciple Madhavadeva turned out a vast religious literature in the current language of the people.

Sankara also wrote a Sanskrit work named *Bhakti-ratnakara*. Sankara translated the *Bhagavata* and composed a unique book called *Kirtana-ghosa* to be read and chanted by the devotees of all classes. The Kirtana-ghosa contains the quintessence of His creed. He composed popular religious songs upon the Life and Doings of **Sri-Krishna**. He introduced a new feature in his movement by composing dramas inculcating the cult and depicting the Life-Story of Sri-Krishna, to attract people by dramatic performances, and thus popularise his teachings. No Vaisnavite reformer of his time seemed to have done this. The entire Life-Story of Sri-Krishna was rendered into music, poetry and drama by him, and Madhavadeva contributed His share to all these literary performances.

Immediately after Sankaradeva's death, there was a cleavage between his apostolic successor, **Madhavadeva** and **Damodaradeva**, a Brahmin follower and

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<sup>12</sup> Nama-ghosa, 60-61, 79, etc.

associate of Sankaradeva. Since then the sect has been divided into two; one came to be known as *Mahapurusiya* and the other *Damodariya*. The followers of Madhavadeva are called *Mahapurushiyas* and of Damodaradeva *Damodariyas*.

In coming to the end, I trust it may safely be concluded that there cannot be any doubt as to Vaisnavism remaining always a living religion. It may lose its nomenclature in course of time here and there, and become indistinguishable in its separate entity having been merged in this or that great religion of the world. But the ground on which it stands and its all-pervading vitality will remain all the same; because it is based on eternal truths, such as love, ahimsa, humility, and at the same time unbending rigidity in principles, devotion to one and the only God Who is *sat, cit* and *ananda*.

To what the ancient seers of the Upanisads had evolved after ceaseless contemplation as an abstract conception of God, Vaisnavism gave a concrete form to be easily understood and be accessible to all and sundry, so that even the humblest of the humble could come to Him, irrespective of caste and creed. The fountain-heads of Vaisnavism, the *Gita* and the *Bhagavata*, simply worked out the abstract propositions of Vedanta-Sutra and gave them a concrete shape and made them accessible to all. Winnow the chaff and dirt that have crept into the different systems of Vaisnavism prevailing in India, and you are sure to find the real solid grain that is the solace and sustenance of life. Our duty is to break the artificial barriers of the different *sampradayas* and sects, and blow away the froth and foam of hair-splitting controversy, and dive into, and gather the pearls from the bottom. That will give everlasting peace and happiness to all, and it will then be found that there is no room for untouchability, or higher caste or lower caste which is purely intended for the maintenance of the social fabric and not for generating class hatred. This is the true significance of Vaisnavism.

Vaisnavism has opened wide the portals of the temple of God for everyone from the highest to the lowest, and binds them with the sacred tie of brotherhood. The *Nama-ghosa* of Madhavadeva says: In other prevailing forms of religion, different people are entitled only to rites variously prescribed for different castes; but in reciting the **Name of Hari** all are equal. Therefore, this is the best of all religions.

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