



## The Carit Puthis: an Evaluation

### KEYWORDS

Carit Puthis, hagiography, Satra, Buranjis

### Arani Saikia

Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, Kaliabor College, Nagaon under the Gauhati University and a doctoral scholar in the Dept. of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, India

**ABSTRACT** *The Carit Puthis of Assam constitute a remarkable legacy of the bhakti movement initiated by Sankaradeva (1449-1568). Carit Puthis literally mean narration of celebrated characters. The Guru Carita Katha is the biographical record of twenty five Vaishnava saints. These puthis distantly resemble the Christian hagiographies of the Middle Age. In spite of the hagiographical features of the Guru Carita Katha and other Carit Puthis, they are important as historical texts. This paper proposes to relook at the text to see what extent they are useful as sources for construction of medieval history.*

**Introduction:** Life writing is an open term which describes in an integrated way autobiography, biography, memoirs, diaries, letters and reminiscences etc. In spite of its differences from other genres of literature, life writing is a less exclusive genre with all kinds of personal essays and narratives. The three major missions of humanities are religion, politics and literary activities. They are also the basic factors for most of the life writings.

**Main Body of the Paper:** History of the life writings across the globe reflects their usual origin in class based societies. The leaders took the privilege of getting their lives documented as extraordinary from the commons. In the Middle Age and in the later periods also, life writings of religious authorities sought to establish their own faith. Intense emotions replaced material standard with the spiritual reverence for the biographical subject. The persons who stood out from the masses were endowed with unusual qualities. It gave them uncommon degrees of power and charm. Their biographers had the natural purpose of magnification of these heroes (Thayer, 1920). The portraits of most of them were imaginary and drawn by authors as ignorant as their readers. They are known as hagiographies. These hagiographical writings narrated human facts in such a way that the readers would get answers to their curiosity for a certain faith. The lives of the medieval saints were documented in a graceful style with a chosen vocabulary. Miracles went side by side the true stories. As it was thought, only by miracles the saint could be proved of his sainthood. The proportion of imagination and facts was maintained by the biographer's skill of balancing the evidence with the interpretation.

The first form of biography in Assamese was the Caritas or the lives of the Vaishnava saints. From the late sixteenth century, there emerged a written tradition through the Caritas to render devotion to the Vaishnava saints in and around the ambience of Satras or the Vaishnava monasteries. In order to show the Godliness of the saints, supernatural elements or exaggerated events were instilled in them (Sarma, 1963). These Caritas were a means to spread Vaishnavism through the stories of the Vaishnava gurus. Therefore, Assamese Caritas are considered as hagiographies like their medieval European counterparts (Sarma, 1990). The concerned religion was the motivating force for the hagiographers. Hagiographies were based on the memory of events or thoughts of the authors. It means the circumstances of the author's immediate past that help him in the imagination of the subject and in making his impression of the subject as the 'total man'. At the same time, they are the same raw materials as those of chronicles and histories. Then too, reliability of hagiogra-

phies is often doubtful. In the context of Assam, from the thirteenth century, the Ahoms introduced the tradition of recording Buranjis which were chronicles centring round the Ahom royalty and the Ahom capital. But they did not have the detail accounts of individual lives. The Ahom tradition of chronicle writing translated from the Tai-Ahom language to Assamese. It inspired the Vaishnava followers to write down the lives of their gurus (Sarma, 1990). Unlike the Buranjis, the Caritas recorded the life stories of the Vaishnava saints. Madhavadeva was the earliest exponent of the Caritas who imbibed the life of Sankaradeva after him. Then on began the two parallel traditions of memorising the life and achievements of Vaishnava leaders and devotees of prominence, one through oral presentations, the other in written form. Chanting of these sacred texts took the form of performance. They were the glorified accounts of a number of Vaishnava saints. Reverential tone of the author was always prominent in them. The authors were more concerned with the man and his mission in the world, as if, they had a predestined role to play. These hagiographical writings were accepted as such and they had their readers.

The Guru Carita Katha is one such biographical work which covers the lives of twenty five Vaishnava saints, more particularly Sankaradeva (1449-1568) and Madhavadeva (1489-1597). Scholars are not unanimous regarding its date and author as it had no mention of it. It has been written in prose and the Assamese prose was then at its initial stage of development. There did not exist too a model of narrating lives as we have today because the art of life writing has attained maturity only in the last few centuries. However, there were some commonalities in the Assamese Caritas like the continental Christian hagiographies of the Middle Ages; 'not the whole life but a few key incidents, not the man but the way he reflected the universal faith' were taken to record (Garaty, 1957) No doubt, these Caritas were produced with a bigger aim of celebrating the Sankaradeva movement, yet biographer's selection of his subject as extra ordinary individuals did not mean that he was confined to the exemplary lives. It is always a person is known in terms of his involvement with his environment. The political and economic factors as well as the achievements of the then people, their traditions, needs and aspirations came under observation of the writer.

Life writing is one stage in the process of cultural production. It is through it social and historical realities come in. Readers are given a representation of a larger context of life and culture of a specified period. Thus life writings are culturally motivated and historically situated. As any other biographical document, this Carita does have three features: an element of dialogue, a sense of performance and spectatorship, and

a referential quality. If not explicitly, ideological moorings of the compiler spontaneously came in the narrative.

The Guru Carita Katha is essentially a humane document portraying human situations. Going beyond the debatable points in the Caritas, the Guru Carita Katha contains ample information regarding the society of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. One would come across in it social ideology of medieval Assamese society. In this paper, focus is on issues like caste, social exclusion and slavery. The caste system was deep in the society. The brahmanas were held in high position. The origin of both the ruling class and the priestly class or the religious preceptors was regarded to be from the divinity. Apart from the priestly class and agriculturist masses, there were references of various professional people like weavers, rearers of silk cocoons, potters, wood-carvers, potters, blacksmiths, oil presses, fishers, net makers, barbers etc. There were centres of learning called chatrasalas or schools which admitted pupils across the castes. The moment Mahendra Kandali, the teacher of Sankaradeva praised Sankaradeva, other students left the school and made a complaint of it to Ragha Acharyya, Acharyya asked Kandali not to praise a sudra pupil. Otherwise the brahmin pupils of his class would be compelled to leave learning. (Guru Carita Katha p.23)

There is mention of a situation when Madhavadeva's elder brother, Damodardeva was worried to perform the last rites of his father because of the high demands of the brahmin priests in the social functions. (Guru Carita Katha p.53)

Sankaradeva translated a few chapters of the Bhagawat into Assamese. He was then warned by a brahmin that he being

a sudra, should not write or read the Bhagawat. (Guru Carita Katha p.162)

There existed the notion of purity of castes. People were conscious lest they lost caste. A man would lose his brahmin quality on taking food in a sudra family for three days. (Guru Carita Katha p.162)

Bonded labourers were there in the affluent houses. However the institution of slavery was not rigorous and the slaves lived among the family. One conversation with Badula aata is recorded where Badula aata admitted that he had no rice to feed but had five slaves. (Guru Carita Katha p.379) The slaves serving in the house of Sankaradeva had the same dignity as that of the monks of the satra. But they were not always kindly treated and they often changed hands. The slaves were known differently as golam, bahata, bandha and lathariya.

**Conclusion:** There are some of the instances from the Guru Carita Katha from where we get some idea of the social history. No denying the fact that it is an invaluable source of history and much like any other source, it has its own bias. About this Carita, critics rightly observe, 'not only to be the most voluminous and complete but very trustworthy and authoritative as it was compiled within the sacred precincts of a satra, Barpeta satra.' (Kakati and Barua, 1952) The Guru Carita Katha is free from the kinds of shortcomings that most of the hagiographies generally have. Behind the artificially created feeling for the saints, the presentation is more towards truth. An attempt to understand the narrator's motive and his attachment with the society in presenting his subject thus shows the place of the Caritas in between hagiography and history.

## REFERENCE

- Garraty, John A., 1957, The Nature of Biography, New York, Alfred A. Knopf. p.55 | Kakati, B. & Barua, B.K., Preface in Lekharu, U.C.(ed.), 1952, Katha Guru Carit, Guwahati, Dutta Baruah & Company. | Malakar, Bipul, 2009, Asamar Carit Puthit Asamiya Samaj Jivan, Nagaon, Krantikaaal Prakashan. | Neog, Maheswar (ed.), 1987, Guru Carit Katha, Guwahati, Gauhati University. | Sarma, Anjali, 1990, Among the Luminaries in Assam: A Study of Assamese Biography, New Delhi, Mittal Publications. pp. 15-16. | Sarma, Satyendranath, 1963, Carit Sahitya. In Sahityar Abhas, Gauhati, Dutta Baruah & Company. p.90 | Thayer, William Roscoe, 1920, (Reprint 2001) The Art of Biography, New York, Elibron Classics. p.147 |