

CHAPTER-V

ŚAṆKARADEVA'S OUTLOOK TOWARDS WOMEN

Śaṅkaradeva, the architect of the Assamese society, took charge of the arduous task of a social reformer and brought changes to the socio-Economic condition and religious practice of the people of Assam in the 15th and 16th centuries AD. He wanted to unite the heterodox people under one thread of religious belief, and therefore, initiated *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, a simpler and easier cult to practise than the other extravagant cults prevalent in his times, and with a view to preach it, he composed a huge bulk of literature in different genres. Śaṅkaradeva could perceive that the active participation of the women folk in every aspects of a society is inevitable for the all-round development of a particular society, lest the society will be lagging behind. As the women folk are the half of a society, no society will be completed without women, nor be a fully developed one without the development of the womenfolk, rather it would be the searching of a piece of ice in a pan of boiling water. Śaṅkaradeva, therefore, gave the same importance to the female characters as he gave to the male characters in his writings, and used them in the preaching of his religious principle as well as spreading of his reformatory social ideology. He strived for the equality and liberty of women, and opened the door for them to take part even in religious matters too. He never advocated for practising of celibacy nor ever told his disciples to maintain distance from the womenfolk. On the contrary, he lived a married life with his wife and children, and carried out the

householder's duty, besides performing the duty of a religious preacher as well as a social reformer. Hence, the proposition- *strī puṣuse haibā ekamati tebese sijiba hari bhakati* (both men and women should be in accord to each other in every aspects of their lives to have the blessings of God), is the most popular proposition amongst the people after his passing away to his heavenly abode. From the very beginning of his literary work with the composition of the myth of 'Hariścandra', Śaṅkaradeva showed his generosity towards women. He showed his generosity to Śaibyā through the portrayal of her and of Hariścandra's characters. Hariścandra's begging pardon from Saibyā, thinking himself as a blessed one, for having Saibyā as his wife, showed that Śaṅkaradeva was free from male chauvinism in delineating different characters in his writings. He gave importance on his characters based on the requirement of the themes, but not based on their sex.

Women have occupied an important position in a family as well as in a society. A woman is the nucleus of a family. She nurtures the children and takes care for the well-being of the other members of her family. The upbringing, the moral, educational and spiritual developments of a family depend on the role of the women members of that family. A society is comprised of a number of families; therefore, the all-round development of a society signifies the development of those families which constitute the society. On the other hand, all-round development of the womenfolk, of whom centering round different families have been evolved, is must for the development of every family. Śaṅkaradeva as a social reformer was well aware of this fact, and he tried his best to change the social outlook of his times towards women. He elevated

their social status through his *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* and projected them as the spokespersons of his *bhakti* cult.

In respect of Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards women, opinions of critics vary from critic to critic. Some critics opined that Śaṅkaradeva was sympathetic and generous towards women, and showed his generosity by advocating for their right, liberty and equality in his writings as well as in his personal manners, but some others commented that Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards women was not favourable. It is because of some verses, which have been directly translated into Assamese from the *Bhāgavata*, or taken from other sources, and incorporated in his writings without any change. In the time of Śaṅkaradeva, schism was the order of the days. People were intently accustomed to different rites and rituals, and were reluctant to give up their traditions and customs. It was traditionally prevalent from the origin of almost all the religions that the religious preachers always condemned women, wealth and worldly affairs, for, most of the religious preachers believed that attachment to women would evoke the desire and longing for mundane affairs. On the other hand, the feudalistic patriarchal system that entrapped women in the cage of social restraints was prevalent. Śaṅkaradeva could feel the pulse and the temperament of the people of his times, and he realized it better that, in such a state of condition, nothing serious could be done with one stroke, or no society could abruptly be reformed discarding all the prevalent traditions and customs. He, therefore, incorporated such verses in his writings, but he did not bear any ill will towards women. In this context, it is better to discuss the outlook of Śaṅkaradeva towards women in the light of the comments of some renowned scholars.

Satyendranath Sarma rightly comments— “It has been a custom with spiritual seekers of all times to condemn woman and wealth with a view to evoking detachment. Attachment towards the world is evoked, sustained and increased by woman; as such close attachment to her should be avoided if possible. Assamese Vaiṣṇavas also have not spoken favourably of woman and in several passages have decried the evil influence of woman and wealth, which a devotee should avoid. (Śaṅkaradeva : Kīrtana-ghoṣā, section-8, Verse 529, p.131). No doubt, they must have decried the sex aspect of woman, which keeps man in a state of intoxication by enveloping his better senses. In practice, they seem to have shown no ill will against woman as an individual, and have shown commendable generosity not only by initiating women to the devotional cult, but by acknowledging one woman or by two as religious heads. The cases of Śaṅkaradeva’s grand daughter-in-law, Kanaklatā, and Harideva’s daughter Bhubaneśwarī, who were recognized as religious heads of their respective sub-sects, deserve special mention.”¹

Chaganlal Jain compares and contrasts the life and teachings of Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva with the life and teachings of Bhagawān Mahāvīra. Both of them are akin to each other in some aspects of their cults, and in some others, they are different. Their attitude towards caste system, classified society, equality and liberty of men disregarding gender are similar in the domain of religion and society. The author commented , “By preaching against the caste system and advocating equality of all men in the domains of religion and society, the masters raised a new hope and strength

¹ Sarma, Satyendra Nath. (Re-print, 2016). *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. P 65

in the oppressed and downtrodden members of the society. They also raised the status of the woman in the society by accepting their equal rights in practising of religion, and other spheres of life. Śaṅkaradeva went still further and declared –You should show respect even to dog, fox or ass knowing that the same soul of God pervades them also.”²

Siva Nath Barman, a noted writer and critic comments, “The religion that Śaṅkaradeva preached is the religion of patriarchal society and is more suits to that Assamese society which is newly transformed into a feudalistic society. The status of women in a feudalistic society is naturally not in an elevated position because though women are the inventors of agricultural system, but the power of cultivation in large fertile field rests in the hands of men. Consequently, women have lost their economic power, and they are compelled to follow the command of men. It is therefore natural that the social status of women in such a male dominated society is not in an elevated position. In support of his comment, he quotes from the myth of Hariścandra of Śaṅkaradeva’s writings.

strījāti bhaile tāra svāmī jive prāṇa I

svāmīye devatā yata tapa japa dhyāna II 439”³

(Hariścandra Upākhyāna.)

Śaibyā spoke the above quoted verse in such a heart-rending situation in which both Śaibyā and her husband Hariścandra became hapless victim of destiny. They had lost their state, power and wealth for the curse of the sage Viswāmitra and suffered

² Jain, Chaganlal. (2nd Edn., 1998). Mahāpuruṣa Śaṅkaradeva and Bhagawān Mahāvīra. In Bhaba Prasad Chaliha (Ed.), *Śaṅkaradeva, studies in culture*. (Pp 56-60).

³ Barman, Sibanath. (5th Edn., 2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkardev: Kriti Aru Kṛititva*. P 94

lots of misfortune; even they lost their sole son Ruhitāśya too. Having lost their son, they had nothing more to lose, and became so broken-hearted that they lost all hopes of life and did not want to live anymore without their son, but wanted to burn themselves alive with their dead son in the same pyre. In such a heart-rending situation, Śaibyā spoke the above quoted lines. This is the spontaneous utterance from the heart of a bereft mother and a wife, who has lost her son, and is now going to lose her husband, but not from a male dominant woman. The depth of love of a wife to her husband, or the affection of a mother to her off springs neither can be defined in any principle nor can be measured by any tool, and have no boundary to find expression. The expression of Śaibyā is the expression of every mother and wife, whose heart is broken for having lost her son and going to lose her husband, whose heart is full of disdain for this world, and who loses all hopes of life. This expression signifies the depth of Śaibyā's love and affection for her son and husband, and disdain for this world, but does not imply an expression made under compulsion of male chauvinism.

William L. Smith, a renowned litterateur, critic, researcher, in his article "The Wrath of Sītā: Śaṅkaradeva's Uttarākāṇḍa" introduces the Sītā of Śaṅkaradeva's Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa as a revolutionary woman in contrast to that Sītā revealed in different versions of the Rāmāyaṇa. Lakṣmaṇa's abrupt abandonment of Sītā in the forest following the command of Rāma, and Sītā's being shocked to realize that Lakṣmaṇa was commanded by her husband to leave her alone in the forest to die, was the point that Śaṅkaradeva stressed. In Sanskrit, original Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma sent a messenger to the sage Vālmīki, not to Sītā, for the negotiation of a second test of her chastity, Sītā appeared before the assembly and stood with downcast eyes, and Rāma

apologized for his behaviour not to Sītā, but to Vālmīki. Here Sītā was produced as meek and innocent. However, in Assamese version, Rāma sent a negotiator not to Vālmīki but to Sītā, and he was overwhelmed by guilt at having Sītā abandoned. Sītā was conveyed the message that Rāma was suffering as much as her, but the response on the part of Sītā was not positive. Such differences pointed out by the author between the Sītā of Śaṅkaradeva's and the Sītā of Vālmīki's is enough to acknowledge Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards women that he was not overwhelmed by male chauvinism in portraying his characters, but was guided by his wit to expose the truth. "In Vālmīki's version of the final scene, Sītā does not speak a word to her husband. She swears her innocence, calling upon Mādhavī, her mother, the Earth Goddess, to open a fissure in the ground and admit her as she has never had thoughts of a man other than Rāma, and so it happens, and Sītā disappears triumphantly into the depths of the earth. In Śaṅkaradeva's rendering Sītā has far much more to say. She is humiliated and enraged at the necessity of having to undergo a second public test of her chastity and her rage is obvious to the crowd which has to witness the spectacle."⁴

Śaṅkaradeva was generous, sympathetic and impartial towards every living being and advocated for equality, liberty and freedom of every individual disregarding social status, political or economic power and gender. In this context, the comments of W. L. Smith have been discussed in the third chapter in the character of Sītā.

H. V. Sreenivasa Murthy discussed the attitude of Śaṅkaradeva towards women and alleged that Śaṅkaradeva did not permit women to join in his devotional

⁴ Smith, W. L. (1994). The Wrath of Sītā: Śaṅkaradeva's Uttarakāṇḍa. *Journal of Vaiṣṇava Studies*. Vol. 2 No. 4. Fall 1994. P 5-15.

cult. In support of his allegation he quoted the comment of T. Rājāgopālācārīār from *Vaiṣṇavite Reformers of India*, P. 113,—“Unlike the Bengal School of Vaiṣṇavism, Śaṅkaradeva did not grant women the right to join the order—a position which was maintained by the teacher of Viśiṣṭādvaita, Rāmānuja. Rāmānuja in whom we have the philosopher and the devotee happily combined denied the privilege of Vedic study to women and they were never permitted to mix with men in devotion or abandon their usual household duties much less to assume the character of nuns.” and commented, “In the system of Śaṅkaradeva also we find only monks (kevaliyā) but no nuns. Śaṅkaradeva warned his follower not to entangle themselves in the web of women.”⁵

To address such allegation, we can rightly cite the comment of S. N. Sarma—“Closely connected with the question of the attitude towards woman is the problem of marriage and celibacy. Renunciation of the world for the sake of religion is nowhere extolled by Śaṅkaradeva, rather there are instances narrated in his biographies where he is said to have favoured the life of a householder. Himself leading an ideal householder’s life with wife and children, he did not think marriage to be a drag upon the path of devotion. Most of his principal colleagues with singular exception of Mādhavadeva were married persons. Śaṅkaradeva is said to have even insisted upon the desirability of marriage of Mādhavadeva as a safeguard to the allurements of woman and wealth.”⁶

The author again commented –“If Śaṅkaradeva did not accord the same status to women as that of men, it was not because he bore any ill-will towards them,

⁵ Murthy, H. V. Sreenivasa. (1st Edn., 1973). *Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva and Rāmānuja*. P 201.

⁶ Sarma, Satyendra Nath. (Re-print, 2016). *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. P 65, 66

but because he was afraid that the sex aspect of women may intoxicate man, thereby close his better senses. Elsewhere he speaks of women appreciatively:”⁷ Such comment of the author stands as the proof that Śaṅkaradeva did not bear any ill will except urging his disciples to keep away themselves from the company of lascivious women, rather he cherished a high regard towards women in general.

Nara Kanta Adhikarī discussed the status of women in the Satras and opined that, in the Satra tradition of Assam; women had received high status, and got dignified position in the society. The author discussed the attitude of Śaṅkaradeva towards women and mentioned that Śaṅkaradeva himself initiated women too, and he focused on the contributions of the women who glorified the tradition of Vaiṣṇavism in Assam.⁸

In an article captioned as ‘*Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharmat Nārī*’, the writer, Apurba Kumar Talukdar, discussed the status of women in the tradition of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, and the attitude of both the preceptors, Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva, towards women with reference to the verses composed by them in relation to women. The author is of the opinion that both Śaṅkaradeva and Mādhavadeva have shown respect to the womenfolk in general.⁹

“From the very birth of Satī Rādhikā to the erection of the dam on the Śānti Yāna, all the happenings that took place in her life, are mentioned in Kathā-gurucaritra or Guru-carita-kathā by Cakrapani Vairāgī, in Guru-carita by Rāmcharaṇ Thākura, in Barcarita by Dina Nath Bezbaroa, in Bardowācarita by Puwaram Mahanta, in

⁷ Murthy, H. V. Sreenivasa. (1st Edn., 1973). *Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva and Rāmānuja*. P 202

⁸ Adhikari, Narakanta. (1st Edn., 2014). *Ekabīṅśa Śatikāt Śaṅkaradeva Āru Satra*. Pp 144-154.

⁹ Talukdar, Apurba Kumar. (1st Edn., 2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Āru Ekaśaraṇ Nāmdharma*. Pp 176-183.

Santāvalī by Baikunṭha Dwija alias Dwarikā Nāth. Ismail Hossain, the author of the book, Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Āru Rādhikā Śānti, has taken into account all these *Caritputhis* to discuss the attitude of Śaṅkaradeva towards women. The writer is of the opinion that Śaṅkaradeva's selection of Rādhikā, a woman from the lower caste, Kaivarta, of the society, to block the Tembuwānī Yān is a proof that Śaṅkaradeva was generous towards the womenfolk without any discrimination of sex and castes.¹⁰

Women had occupied an important place in the literature, religion and in the individual life of Śaṅkaradeva. They played the role of mother, maidservant, wife, consort, friend, sister, and devotee in the religious, cultural, literary, social and individual life of Śaṅkaradeva. They appeared more prominently than their counterparts did in Śaṅkaradeva's literary works. The worth mentioning women characters, who appeared in his literary works are Yasodā, Rukmiṇī, Satyabhāmā, Sumālinī, Sītā, Saibyā, Śaśīprabhā, the wives of the serpent king, Nāga, the women of Vṛndāvana and the wives of Bipras etc. On the other hand, Khersūtī Āi, Kālindī Āi, Candarī Āi, Satī Rādhikā, the wife of Ananta Kandalī, the wife of Gopāl Ātā, the wife of Jayanti Madhāi alike were mentioned in his hagiographical accounts. These women have played the pivotal role in preaching and spreading his *Eka-Śarṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. Śaṅkaradeva had a soft corner in his heart for the womenfolk, if he had not then these women would not have got respected positions in their respective fields, and would remain confined within the four walls of societal norms in the name of social restraints of the patriarchal society which were prevalent in his times. Śaṅkaradeva tried to elevate the social status of women. He introduced the character of

¹⁰ Hossain, Ismail. (1st Edn., 2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Āru Rādhikā Śānti*. Pp 9-15.

Candālinī, a woman from the so-called lower society, as a representative of the underdogs of the society in his *Bhaktipradīpa*. It is discussed in the Chapter -III.

The all-round development of a society depends upon the development of individuals. The well-being of each of the families that formed a society determines the index of the development of that society. It is so, because a family is a small unit of a society, on the other hand, a family is evolved centering a woman, therefore, it is out of imagination to find a developed society without the development of the women of the society. The role of woman is more important than the role of her counterpart, for the development of a family. A woman rears and nurtures the children, takes care of the other members of the family, and thereby plays the pivotal role in the growth and development of her family, and creates a serene and sound atmosphere for the development of the society thereof. Yet women are dominated and exploited all through the ages in the name of religion and societal norms, particularly in the patriarchal society of the medieval age, and more or less in the modern age too. Śaṅkaradeva, as a social reformer, realized that the development of a society is impossible without the development of the womenfolk, since the womenfolk is the half of the society. He, therefore, stood for the oppressed-women of the patriarchal society of the medieval age, and being free from male chauvinism, strived to abolish the codes of conduct that seemed defamatory to women, and as a trap to confine them.

He never circumscribed the wish, desire and eagerness of women nor did he ever want to impose his religion forcibly on anyone else, rather, he was impartial and generous to everyone. Best examples of such attitude towards women can be cited from his household life. Śaṅkaradeva's wife worshipped the *grha devatā* to avoid

ominous effect upon her children. This practice of worshipping the *gr̥ha devatā* was evidently an act of contradiction on her part, as she was the wife Śaṅkaradeva. Perhaps it happened so, because of the tradition, which influenced women so intently that they were reluctant to give up their customs breaking the prevalent tradition. Kālindī Āi, the wife of Śaṅkaradeva too was not different in this respect, but Śaṅkaradeva did not forcibly impose his religion on her. He respected the thoughts and culture of his wife, and did not want to crush down her belief with the vanity of the then patriarchal society. Later on, this tradition and culture of worshipping the *gr̥ha devatā* of Kālindī Āi was transformed, and the materials used in worshipping other gods were washed away in a river by Mādhavadeva, and she was given to understand the futility of her worshipping of other gods, as the god himself was at her home. It is discussed in details in chapter IV.

The history of formal Education for women in the Medieval Age of Assam is not available, but the hint of non-formal education through which women received Education, acquired knowledge, and became skilled is sporadic. Formal Education is not compulsory to make one educated; of course, true, pure, refined and ideal Education is must in the true sense of the term to make one really educated, however, it does not matter, where and how one has received such Education. Practice of high spirituality and religious matters provides such Education to humankind. Śaṅkaradeva's preaching of his religion, and its practice among the devotees not only educated men, but also created an atmosphere for the women to be educated with moral and spiritual education. Discussion on religious matters and explanations of religious scriptures were frequently held among the devotees at the residence of

Śaṅkaradeva, and an environment of spiritual learning was gradually developed thereof. For which, the maid like Candarī Āi could appear as a wise, skilled and educated woman, and could point out the pinpoint of the *Kalpataru Br̥ksa* when Śaṅkaradeva was painting the portrayal of *Sapta-vaikuṇṭha-paṭa*, the seven earths, for the enactment of his play the *Cihna Yātrā*. Candarī Āi's explanation of the might of the *Gītā* to a group of Brāhmaṇa paṇḍitas and her pointing out the breach of the chronology of the *Baṭa Br̥ksa* in the *Vṛndāvani Vastra*, that Śaṅkaradeva had having been weaved, proved that she acquired mastery in religious matters. The intellectuality of Candarī Āi that she developed with the company of Śaṅkaradeva, and Śaṅkaradeva's paying importance to the words of an ordinary maid like Candarī Āi are the proof of his uniform and impartial outlook towards women. Kālindī Āi, the wife of Jayanti Madhāi, the wife of Gopāl Dās Ṭhākura Ātā, the wife of Gopāl Ātā and several others besides, had come out from the boundary of the four walls of social restraints, and availed the opportunity for their spiritual development. Though these women did not have any formal education, yet they could develop their spiritual intellect through non-formal education. Had it not been Śaṅkaradeva these women would not have become spiritually educated.

It is revealed in the writings of Śaṅkaradeva that women have occupied an important place in his writings, for he wanted to establish equality between men and women in religious as well as in social matters. The devotion of the wives of Bipras is culminating into the zenith in the play *Patnīprasāda*. In *Bhaktipradīpa*, the character of Candālinī is introduced as an important character. Though Candālinī was a woman from the lowly class of the society, she could raise herself into an elevated position in

the society through her unstained devotion to Kṛṣṇa, even Maharṣi Nārada also praised her unique devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa himself referred the devotion of Candālinī to Arjuna, and said that to attain salvation one has to worship Him rather than worshipping other gods and deities. Śaṅkaradeva insisted on the role of women characters instead of their counterparts to produce the effect of devotion to Kṛṣṇa. From this point of view, the names of Rukmiṇī, Sītā, Yasodā, Daivakī, Candālinī, Kunjī, Mohinī and the Gopīs can be mentioned. Moreover, Śaṅkaradeva wanted to elevate the social status of women, therefore, he had had blocked the Tembuvānī rivulet by Rādhikā, a woman from the lower stratum of the society, the Kaivarta caste, and Rādhikā, in spite of being a woman from the lower class of the society, could prove herself as a chaste woman. Though the data available in respect of Rādhikā's character are based on the hagiographies, yet it cannot be denied that the character is a real woman of flesh and blood. She was intelligent, brave, skilled and a woman of progressive thinking, moreover, being a woman of the *Kaivarta* caste, she grew up in the bank of river, and naturally, she possessed the knowledge how to deal with river, stream or rivulet. Śaṅkaradeva, therefore, selected Rādhikā to block the Tembuvānī rivulet, and projected her as a representative of the downtrodden of the society with a view to elevating the social status of women, and to strengthening his mission of uprooting the class system that was prevalent in the society in his times. Śaṅkaradeva wrote in *Bhāgavata* –

“*strī bālyā vṛddha samastare adhikāra /*
cāṇḍālako kare nāme tekhane uddhāra || 13”¹¹

¹¹ Hazarika, Surjya. (ed.). (1st Edn., 2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Vākyāmrta*. Bhaktipradīpa, P 222.

Women, children and old ones, every bodies have the equal right to listen and chant the names of God, and even the Cāndāla, the downtrodden of the society, also can have the blessings of God through listening and chanting of His names. “Śaṅkaradeva showed that every individual has the equal right in the society by introducing a couple Purnānanda and Rādhikā from the lower class of the society, the Kaivarta caste, in an honoured position. It is unexpected in respect of devotion to differentiate people as higher or lower on the basis of caste.”¹² Such references proved that Śaṅkaradeva not only wanted to develop the social status of women, but also projected everyone in their respective positions, as they deserved.

Some hagiographers are of the opinion that Śaṅkaradeva was reluctant to initiate Kings, Brāhmaṇas and women. *eteke rājāra strīra, karmmakāṇḍi Brāhmaṇara guru nahañ ei tinira*.¹³

rājā strī karmakāṇḍi Brāhmaṇa sabara /

*kadācito āmi guru nuhui esabara // 3835*¹⁴

“I shall never be the religious preceptor of Kings, women and Brāhmaṇas.”

With reference to such opinion, some critics commented that Śaṅkaradeva’s attitude towards women was not favourable. However, it was not mentioned in all the hagiographies that he never initiated women. In the Ramcharan Thakur viracita Gurucarit, it is mentioned that the maids Ubanā Banbarā, Dhvajā, Mādhai, Candarī Āi alike had been initiated by Śaṅkaradeva himself.

¹² Borkakoti, Sanjib Kumar. (ed.). (2nd Edn., 2013). *Purnāṅga Kathā Gurucarit*. P 70.

¹³ Neog, Maheswar. (ed.). (4th Edn. 2012). *Guru-carit-kathā*. P 300 &

Lekharu, Upendra Chandra. (ed.). (5th Edn., 2006). *Kathā-gurucaritra*. P 174

¹⁴ Dutta Baruah, Harinarayan. (ed.). (12th Edn., 1985). *Rāmcharaṇ Thākura Viracita Gurucarit*. P 760.

Again, in the same hagiography it is mentioned that Śaṅkaradeva had initiated the wives of Cilārāya Dewān

cilārāya dewānara śateka ramaṇī I
sevilanta sakalove bita-bastu āni II
eko yorā kāpor āru ṭakā fula mālā I
hāte hāte āni sabe guruka sevilā II 3731
tāra pice rāṇīsabe prārthanā karilā I
*eka citta jāni guru śaraṇaka dilā II 3733*¹⁵

Śaṅkaradeva not only initiated women, but also cherished high regards towards them, and wanted to elevate their social status. He never regarded the womenfolk as a source of sensual pleasure, and never did he introduce sensual vulgarity in his literary works, rather, he adroitly transformed sensuality into spirituality in his writings. “Śaṅkaradeva, listening to the couplet—

“bilāpa kari kānde māi Rukmiṇī I
kuna aṅge khuna dekhi nāilā Jadumaṇi II

(Rukmiṇī lamented for the lack of what thing in her physique Jadumaṇi had not come to her), composed by his predecessor poet, Pītāmvara, commented that he had not acquired the quality to be a religious preacher.”¹⁶ It is revealed in the couplet that Rukmiṇī tried to attract Kṛṣṇa by her physical beauty, but not by her devotion. Śaṅkaradeva referred to the illusive form, the sex aspect of women, as ugliest, for it may intoxicate man and thereby close his better senses, but he did not generalize it nor

¹⁵ Ibid, P 739.

¹⁶ Sarma, Satyendra Nath. (4th Edn., 1989). *Asamīyā Sāhityar Samikṣātmak Etibṛttva. P 115.*

ever did he bear any ill will to the womenfolk in general. He vividly elaborated the evil effects of the illusory form of women in the *Haramohana* section of the *Kīrttana-ghoṣā*. Mahādeva, the mighty sage too had been stupefied and put in an intoxicated stupor enveloping his better senses by the illusory form of women, but after having released from the grasp of illusion, Mahādeva ashamed to go to his wife Pārvatī. In the following verse, Śaṅkaradeva referred to only the sex aspects of women, but not the womenfolk in general.

ghora nārī māyā sarvva māyāte kutsita I
mahāsiddha muniro katākṣe mohe citta II
daraśane kare tapa japa-yoga bhaṅga I
jāni jñānīgaṇe kaminīra eḍe saṅga. II 18¹⁷

“Of all the terrible illusions of the world, woman’s is the ugliest. A slight side-glance of hers captivates even the heart of mighty sages. Her sight destroys prayer, penance, and meditation. Knowing this the wise avoids the company of lascivious woman.”

The main sources of Śaṅkaradeva’s writings are the *Bhāgavata*, the *Purāṇas* and the *Gītā*. Sometimes he directly translated some *Ślokas* of the *Bhāgavata*, and therefore, the *Bhāgavata* has evidently influenced some parts of his writings. In the all-Indian Vaiṣṇavite tradition, there was no high regard for women. Such attitude found expression in the *Bhāgavata*, as it is the chief religious scripture of all-Indian Vaiṣṇavism, and also got way into the writings of Śaṅkaradeva as some of his writings are based on the *Bhāgavata*.

¹⁷ Goswami, Jatindra Nath. (ed.). (6th Edn., 2001). *Kīrttan-ghoṣā āru Nām-ghoṣā*. P 126.

Some critics are of the opinion that Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards women was not favourable, for their inability to render the real significance of the verses that seemed to be unfavourable to women in general. It was not come into the notice of anyone else, until W. L. Smith, a Non-Indian litterateur, critic, researcher, brought into light that Śaṅkaradeva was the first exponent of women liberation. The research work of W. L. Smith proved that the first exponent of women liberation was not Ibsen, but Śaṅkaradeva, the initiator of the *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* in Assam. The character of Sītā in *Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* is the representative of Śaṅkaradeva's feminist view.

In Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa Sītā* does not speak any word against the injustice of Rāma. Even at the time of her entering into the fissure of *Basumatī*, the mother Goddess, for her final rest, she wishes to have Rāma as her husband in her coming life. Here, she is produced as a meek and passive character. The other versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the vernacular languages are lack of the *Uttarākāṇḍa* except the *Kirtivāsī Rāmāyaṇa*. The Sītā in *Kirtivāsī Rāmāyaṇa*, though complies with the command of Rāma, she feels hurt at his command, and protests against his injustice, but her protest is not very strong. The Sītā in Śaṅkaradeva's *Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* is more courageous, strong, progressive and revolutionary, and is cautious for self-respect and vanity than the Sītā in Vālmīki's and Kirtivāsa's. She does not remain tight lips as a typical wife at the time, when Rāma, in afraid of the effect of the slander among his subjects, asked for the second test of her chastity. Rather, she has pointed out the inability of Rāma to save her from her being abducted by the demon King Rāvana, and exposes the weakness of Rāma at the court in the very eyes of the councilors.

karilā parīkṣā rāme aganita pelāi I
tathāpi nabhaila śānta rāghavara citta II 21
bulilā bujāi āsi pāshe bāpakhāne II
*tebese āmāka sambarilā śuddhamane II 22.*¹⁸

“Rāma was not contented having tested the chastity of Sītā throwing her into the fire until Sītā’s father consoled him to accept her”.

Sītā does not want to set herself as an example of typical woman, who is loyal and devoted to her husband without any protest against the injustice and dishonour to her. On the contrary, Sītā, having been abandoned in the forest to die in her pregnant state, harangues the activity that callously carried out by, and vents her bitterness at the behaviour of Rāma. She does not left to rail at Rāma and boldly unveils the flaws of Rāma even at the time of her finale rest in the lap of her mother, the Earth goddess.

rākṣasatudhika ito tomāra kumati I
nāi eku tilu tiribadha pāpa bhīti II 44
tomāra upari baṅsa āshila jateka I
kowā kone karileka enuwā pātaka II 45
binā aparādhata karilā hena śāsti I
*saṅsāra jurile eto mura kukhiāti II 46*¹⁹

It is crystal clear that, unlike the Sītā of Vālmīki’s or in the other versions of the Ramāyāna, who does not speak a word, but swears her innocence as she has never had thought of a man other than Rāma, Śaṅkaradeva’s Sītā boldly expresses her

¹⁸ Sarma, Kanak Chandra. (ed.). (1st Edn., 1998). *Kavirāj Mādhava Kandalī Viracita Rāmāyan*. P 443.

¹⁹ Ibid, P 443.

rage at the necessity of having to undergo a second public test of her chastity. This protest of Sītā, revealed in the *Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa* of Śaṅkaradeva, against her husband is the beginning of the feminism in the world.

Śaṅkaradeva was not only the pallbearer of the Assamese literature, but also the pioneer of reformation and reconstruction of the Assamese society. He insisted on social reformation to mould the greater Assamese society along with the preaching of his *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, and tried to abolish class distinction, which was prevalent among the people in his times, by advocating equal right to everybody disregarding caste, creed, race and sex in practising his religion. For the liberation of women from the grasp of the feudalistic patriarchal society, and for their all-round development Śaṅkaradeva portrayed the dynamic, bold and revolutionary character like Sītā in *Uttarākāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa*. Through the character of Sītā Śaṅkaradeva raised the voice of the oppressed women for their right and liberty in sixteen century. Hence, he can be regarded as the initiator of the Feminism in the world.

Śaṅkaradeva portrayed various women characters in different forms in his writings. He highly appreciated different qualities and humours of women and vividly delineated the might of motherhood in his writings at the time of medieval ages when overall outlook towards women was not favourable. The encomium of the might of motherhood of Yaśodā is revealed in the *Śīśulīlā*, *Kāliyadamana*, *Daivakī putra Ānayana* and *Gopī Uddhava Sambāda* sections of the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, in the 1st and the 11th *skandhas* of the *Bhāgavata*, and in the plays *Kāliyadamana* and *Rukmiṇīharana* too. Śaṅkaradeva elevated the status of women through the delineation of their dedication, self-sacrifice, love and affection for their children in his *Bargītas*

and other writings. In the *Hariścandra Upākhyāna*, Śaṅkaradeva introduced the greatness and might of women in the society through the character of Śaibyā. This is revealed in the following expression of *Hariścandra*-

tai hena bhāryyā pāilu kata janma bhāge I

tohora kathāka ābe ki kahibe lāge II 435

karma samayata toka mantri buli lekhi I

rangara belāta jena tai prāṇa sakhi II

snehara prastābe tai mātri yena ṭhāna I

śayana belāta tai dāsīra samāna II 436²⁰

(I have got a wife life you for my good luck after many births, now what have I to do for you. You are the counselor of my works and the best friend in my pleasure. With love and affection, you play the role of a mother, and in slumber, you serve me as a maid.)

Śaṅkaradeva introduced the same woman in different form in different places and times through the character of Śaibyā. In the *Balichalan* section of the *Kīrttana-ghoṣā* and the *Bhāgavata*, the love and affection, and the sanctity of Bindhāwalī is revealed. The *Aṣṭa Mahiṣī* (eight consorts) of Śrī Kṛṣṇa followed Him after He had left for *Vaikunṭha* (the Heaven) completing His *Līlā* (sports performed in the guise of a human being) in this world. Kuntī the mother of Pañcapāṇḍavas and the other Gopis also burned themselves to death in pyres to detach themselves from this mundane world and followed Śrī Kṛṣṇa, in the *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Vaikuntha Prayāna* section of the *Kīrttana-ghoṣā* and the *Bhāgavata*. These devotees are the symbols of living being and

²⁰ Hazarika, Surjya. (ed.). (1st Edn., 2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Vākyāmr̥ta*. P 890.

Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the symbol of the Supreme Being, and the self-sacrifice of the devotees signifies the wish of living being to mingle with the Supreme Being. Such descriptions, from the religious point of view, undoubtedly reflect the spiritual love and devotion of these devotees to Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Supreme Being, and their enthusiastic desire to mingle with Him.

The women in the writings of Śaṅkaradeva are the symbol of beauty, love, sanctity, faith, patience, forgiveness, universal motherhood, devotion and above all the spokespersons of his *bhakti* cult. Śaṅkaradeva showed the path of *mokṣa* (salvation) to the *bhaktas* (devotees) providing them the taste of spiritual love through the description of spirituality in the love of the women characters of his writings. In the plays *Patnīprasāda*, *Pārijāta-haraṇa* and *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa* women characters are introduced as devotees to Śrī Kṛṣṇa. The wives of the Bipras, in *Patnīprasāda*, bring back their husbands to the path of devotion who kept themselves busy with extravagant rites and rituals of sacrificial ceremonies. Śaṅkaradeva neatly delineated the jealousy of Satyabhāmā for Rukmiṇī in the play *Pārijāta-haraṇa*, and showed that though Satyabhāmā was a devotee, she could not raise her devotion from worldly attachment to a state of indifference to all the worldly attachment as Rukmiṇī could. In *Rukmiṇī-haraṇa*, the love of Rukmiṇī for Śrī Kṛṣṇa was all submissive, phlegmatic and phenomenal. Rukmiṇī could overcome all the hurdles to have Śrī Kṛṣṇa as her husband. She was a courageous, intelligent and witty woman, who could crack the hard nut to reach at her goal. Śaṅkaradeva taught his followers by introducing the character of Rukmiṇī as a spokesperson of his *Bhakti* cult that an ardent devotee could have the blessings of Śrī Kṛṣṇa through fervent devotion to Him.

Śaṅkaradeva did not want to expose the dark side of women; rather he painted the glaring side of women with humanitarian touch in his writings. He dethroned his women characters from the altar of a deity, and keeping in mind a socialistic outlook and a generous attitude towards them, portrayed them as real human beings of flesh and blood, however in doing this, he never produced any ill will against women.

Śaṅkaradeva as a preacher and a reformer realized that his religious philosophy would not attract the common people, if he could not make them free from the prevalent religious superstitions. Women should have to be properly educated to form a well-cultured society, because, a family is evolved centering a woman, and a society is comprised of a numbers of families. If women would not get proper education, none could expect a serene family with good-tempered progenitors, and a well-mannered society would not be formed without a numbers of serene families. It is therefore, necessary to provide spiritual teachings to the womenfolk to form a spiritually uplift and morally developed society. Śaṅkaradeva advised his disciples to adhere to the advice that Śrī Kṛṣṇa prescribed to Uddhava in the *Vaikuṇṭhaprayāṇa* section of the *Bhāgavata*, because this is one of the basic principles of his *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, where equality to every human being is advocated without any discrimination of sex and caste. This is suggested in the *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Vaikuṇṭhaprayāṇa* section of the *Bhāgavata*, when Śrī Kṛṣṇa taught the inner essence of *bhakti* to Urdhava, He asked Urdhava to provide the teaching of *bhakti* to strī (women) and *sūdra* (the lower class of the society). Śaṅkaradeva, accepting this teaching of the *Bhāgavata*, beautifully translated into Assamese, and incorporated in his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*.

śtrī sudra karai yebe āmāta bhakati I

tāhāta kahibā eṭo jñāna mahāmati II 262²¹

A question may be arisen why *śtrī* and *sūdra* (women and the lower class of the society) are referred to here. Śaṅkaradeva as a social reformer was well aware of the social status of women, and observed that women kept themselves busy with the household affairs. They could not spare time to take part in devotional activities, and even if they could, they were reluctant to take part in the worship of God along with their counterpart. At the time of Śaṅkaradeva, the people of the lower class of the society had no right in religious matters. They were deprived of getting spiritual teachings, and in the same way, it was impossible for women to practise religious matters, for they had to keep themselves busy with the service of their husbands, children and their house hold chores. They even did not know that one could achieve spiritual uplift through practising religion. Śaṅkaradeva could perceive such deplorable condition of women and the *Sudras*, therefore, he incorporated the couplet from the *Bhāgavata* in his *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, and carried forward the message to common people that one need not be a member of the upper class of the society nor be a male one to practise *bhakti*. Here it is revealed that Śaṅkaradeva advocated equality to women and to the *Sūdras* in practising of religious matters so that women and the *Sūdras* could avail the opportunity to get the teachings on *bhakti*. On the other hand, the contribution of women in the formation of a society is outstanding; children receive preliminary knowledge of adulthood, and form the base of their lives from the teachings provided by their mothers. Therefore, Śaṅkaradeva advocated equality to

²¹ Ibid, P 659

women in every aspects of the society as it is inevitable for a mother to be educated with moral and spiritual learning.

Śaṅkaradeva suggested the company of faithful wife on the way for pilgrimage against the notion that women should be avoided in a journey. He advised one Rupa Goswami to take his wife along with him in the party of his (Śaṅkaradeva's) pilgrimage to different holy places, because Śaṅkaradeva insisted on the company of faithful wife to avoid allurements of lascivious women, which might deviate one from the path of piety. Śaṅkaradeva initiated the women Candarī, Dwajā, Mādhāi, Ubanā etc. and the wife of Ananta Kandalī also. Ananta Kandalī punished his wife for taking initiation from Śaṅkaradeva, but for that, he lost his religious deity. Śaṅkaradeva advised him to woo his wife to satisfy his religious deity. Ananta Kandalī did so according to the advice of Śaṅkaradeva. This incident proved that Śaṅkaradeva had a higher regard for women than for men.

Śaṅkaradeva portrayed the character of Rukmiṇī and the character of Sītā in the plays *Rukmiṇīharaṇa* and *Rāmbijaya* respectively as the embodiment of the Universal women ideology. Shakespeare introduced women in his play Hamlet as immoral and cunning, "frailty thy name is woman"²²; however, Śaṅkaradeva introduced the moral ideology and the might of women in his literary works before a century ago. He never painted any immoral or ugly form of women in his writings nor ever did he debar women from chanting and listening to *Harināma*. Barabāhi Āi, the wife of Ananta Kandalī, the wife of Nārāyan Dās Ṭhākura Ātā, the wife of Jayanti Madhāi etc. had offered their service to the devotees gathered for congregational

²² Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Act ii, Scene ii.

prayer, and they too chanted and listened to *Harināma* (the Names and glory of Kṛṣṇa). Both men and women did not perform the congregational prayer jointly, because, Śaṅkaradeva thought, it might arouse attraction to each other and detract the devotees from the path of *bhakti* (devotion). Śaṅkaradeva advised his disciples to remain detached from the allurements of lascivious women, but it did not imply that the womenfolk in general should be avoided. He also showed the path of salvation of these lascivious women that if they could acquire the true meaning of devotion they would have attained salvation.

dusta- citte jadi hari sumare I

*tathāpitu tāra pātaka hare II 18*²³

Unlike Caitanya Deva, or the other Gauḍīya vaiṣṇava poets, Śaṅkaradeva did not accord a higher status to Rādhā in his literary works. The peer of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa is not worship in Assam; on the contrary, the Gopīs have prominence, and that too in the form of devotees. Śaṅkaradeva emphasized on *bhakti* rather than eroticism. Some critics reckoned Śaṅkaradeva as a misogynist, for he ignored Rādhā and composed a bulk of literature centering Kṛṣṇa as the Godhead. However, the fact is that he did not recognize illicit love, rather, he extolled *bhakti*, because, as a social reformer, he was always conscious of the prevalent social customs, and therefore, he kept a holistic view on the traditions and customs of the society of his time.

“In Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism the theory of illicit love is accepted. Śrī Kṛṣṇa is regarded as a polygamist, and among his paramours some are his consorts like Lakṣmī, and the others like the Goīs of Braja particularly Rādhā are illicit. According to the

²³ Goswami, Jatindra Nath. (ed.). (6th Edn., 2001). *Kīrttan-ghoṣā Āru Nām-ghoṣā*. P 18

Gauḍīya vaiṣṇava poets, deep attachment is evolved in one's mind from illicit love. Rupa Goswami, a noted commentator of Vaiṣṇavism, described the characteristics of illicit love in his *Ujval Nilamani* as follows-

ragenaibarpitatmamanu luka yugmanapekhina I
dharmenaswikṛta yastu parakiya bhavanti tah I

One, Jiva Goswami, explains “the illicit love as the illegal love of those lascivious women who ignoring this world and the other world surrender to other persons under the urge of intent passion without waiting for solemnization of their marriage”.²⁴

It is already mentioned that according to the theory of illicit love, the paramours of Kṛṣṇa are of two types, one is his legal consorts, and the other is his illicit paramours. Those who, in spite of having their respective husbands, are in love with other persons are called illicit lovers, and their love is called illicit love. The propensity of attraction in legal love is less than illicit love. Illicit love had been acknowledged in *Sahajiyā panthā*, and was in vogue before Śaṅkaradeva, but Śaṅkaradeva kept aside the concept of illicit love as the way of *mokṣa*, and the character of Rādhā from Assamese Vaiṣṇavite literature. He kept in mind the unruly state in the society that might evolve centering the illicit love of Rādhā, hence, the character of Rādhā has no prominence in Assamese Vaiṣṇavite literature, but it does not imply that Śaṅkaradeva is a misogynist.

Spiritual seekers are always of the opinion that women should not be accorded the same status with men in respect of religious matters. Gautama Buddha, Hajarat Mohammad alike emphasizes on *Mokṣa*, and it is possible only after being relieved

²⁴ Bhattacharya, Parag Kumar. (3rd Edn., 1997). Premadharmā Āru Vaiṣṇav Kāvya. P 25.

from worldly attachment. They express their fear of being deviated from pursuing the path of mokṣa with the attachment of women; therefore, they advocate the rejection of the company of women. Surprisingly, the same thing was happened in the Vaiṣṇavite society in Assam after Śaṅkaradeva, and a new class of *bhaktas* was emerged, who never came in touch of women, and practised celibacy, though Śaṅkaradeva never advised his disciples to practise celibacy. Śaṅkaradeva did not advocate for the rejection of the company of women, nor ever did he show abhorrence to them, rather he encouraged the participation of women in religious matters. Moreover, he advised his disciples to get married, and explained the reasons behind getting married of women. Śaṅkaradeva explained that getting married, and living a householder's life is a protection against of being deviated from the path of pursuing *bhakti*. According to him, purification of sense and desire through conjugal life leads one in the true path of pursuing *mokṣa*, lest one might be distracted from the path of *bhakti* by the allurements of lascivious women. He, therefore, advised his disciple-in-chief Mādhavadeva to get married to keep himself safe from the allurements of lascivious women, so that he might proceed in the path of *bhakti* without any fear of being misrouted. *bule barār po, gaḍbāndhi yunjile saj, prāṇar saṅśay nāi I Bināgaḍe yunjile bhay.*²⁵ If Śaṅkaradeva had any ill will or hatred towards women in general, he would not have got married for two times nor did he advise or encourage his disciples to live a married life. The verse, *putra parivāra sabahi asāra*, (Bargīt: lyric no 17).²⁶ (Sons and wife all are meaningless), does not imply the abhorrence or distraction to women or children. It

²⁵ Lekharu, Upendra Chandra. (ed.). (5th Edn., 2006). *Kathā-gurucaritra*. Pp 54, 55.

²⁶ Das, Kailash. (ed.). (3rd Edn., 2006) Mahāpuruṣ Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Āru Śrī Śrī Mādhavadeva Biracita Bargīt. P 17.

means that no one accompanies none in the journey of life, or in the path of passing away for abode, but living beings, being entrapped in *māyā*, (the illusion), are unable to conceive this fact. Yet one will have to follow the rules of the mundane world, lest it will affect the creation of the Creator. Śaṅkaradeva, therefore, never advocates the practising of the life of a monk. Living beings are naturally bound to experience *māyā*. They have to strive to come out from the bonding of *māyā* to suck the honey of *bhakti*, and this is applicable in respect of both men and women. Śaṅkaradeva regarded only those women as *parāma anathakāri* (absolute harmful) who allured and entrapped a man with her physical charms, and misrouted him from the path of *bhakti*. At the same time, he elevated the social status of women whosoever might be, a woman of high spiritual knowledge, or an ordinary housewife, or a house-maid disregarding caste, creed or race but have faith in *bhakti* for Kṛṣṇa.

“Mādhavadeva conferred the charge of the daily maintenance of Kālindī Āi on Rāmānanda after the passing away of Śaṅkaradeva for heavenly abode. Rāmānanda could not carry out his duty properly; therefore, Kālindī Āi sent Rāmānanda to Ganakakuci and asked him to call on Mādhavadeva. Mādhavadeva, getting the message from Rāmānanda, told him that he would certainly go to her in the next day along with the other *bhakatas* and would do necessary things. He could not, but follow the words of Kālindī Āi since he regarded her as the half of his religious teacher Śaṅkaradeva.

gurura sarīra ardha āche mura āi I

tāhāra bacana mai pālībe jowāi II

Mādhavadeva reached at Patbausi in the next day following the call of Kālindī Āi.²⁷ The attitude of Mādhavadeva towards Kālindī Āi defines the status of Kālindī Āi in the Vaiṣṇavite society of her time.

Some modern critics find male chauvinistic tone in some verses of Śaṅkaradeva, such controversial one is found in the *Bhaktiratnākara*.

“*parāma anarthakārī nārī samastaya I*
nārīsange bahu dukha puruṣe labhaya II”

In respect of the verse cited above, two different arguments are forwarded by Malini Goswami.

1. The *Bhaktiratnākara* is a systematized collection of the essence of *bhakti* of different scriptures with a commentary of Śaṅkaradeva in which only the first three *śloka*s are composed by Śaṅkaradeva. The initial *śloka*s contain the eulogy of God and the introduction of the book.
2. The above-mentioned verse is written in Assamese. It is a verse from the translation of the *Bhaktiratnākara* by Gopālcaraṇ Dwija, but not a quotation from Śaṅkaradeva’s Sanskrit *Bhaktiratnākara*. On the basis of both the arguments inference can be drawn that the above-mentioned verse is not the original work of Śaṅkaradeva.”²⁸

Śaṅkaradeva is a religious preacher and a social reformer; it is therefore, natural that some of the prevalent traditions and customs have their way in his writings. Such traditions and customs related to women are versified, and incorporated

²⁷ Chetia, Minaksi. (2nd Edn., 2008). *Mahāpuruṣ Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradevar Śikṣā Āru Ājir Samāḥ*. P 192.

²⁸ Goswami, Malini. (1st Edn., 2012). Śaṅkaradevar Dharanāt Narī. In Ranjit Kumar Devagoswami. (ed.). *Anunād*. P 390.

in his writings. They reflect the holistic view of the society towards women, but not solely represent the outlook of Śaṅkaradeva towards women.

The theory of division of labour was followed in either way in the society from the very beginning of the idea of family. Women conceive, bear, nourish and bring up children, besides doing household chores. They need not go out for earning money. Men have to go out for agricultural works and for doing business, and have to muster livelihood for their families. Both men and women carry out their stipulated duty without any hesitation, and there is no question of exploitation of women. The above quoted verse refers to only the duty of women that is to be done as their part, but not as an imposition.

Before the immergence of Śaṅkaradeva, women were harassed and sexually exploited in the name religion, but Śaṅkaradeva accorded the same status to women with men in terms of religion. In the *Hariścandra Upākhyāna*, Śaṅkaradeva expressed his attitude towards woman through the character of Harichandra. Hariścandra boldly expressed -

strīka durbala kare kunnu nisksale I
jalanta bahnika bāndhe bastrara āncāle II 75²⁹

Śaṅkaradeva could realize the power of women energy; he therefore compared them with burning fire. Such verses proved that Śaṅkaradeva's attitude towards women were in higher level.

In summing up, it is evidently clear that Śaṅkaradeva was generous and liberal towards women, and sometimes he elevated their social status into a dignified position.

²⁹ Hazarika, Surjya. (ed.). (1st Edn., 2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Vākyāmr̥ta*. P 861.