

PREFACE

The all-Indian Vaiṣṇavite movement got its way in Assam in a new form under the mighty leadership of the great-saint poet Śaṅkaradeva. Śaṅkaradeva appeared in 1371 Śaka, 1449 A.D. and breathed his last in 1491 Śaka, 1568 A. D. He lost his parents at his early childhood, and was brought up by his grandmother Khersutī. Śaṅkaradeva made two long pilgrimages to different holy shrines across India and became acquainted with the all-Indian Vaiṣṇavite movement. He met different vaiṣṇavite reformers through his two pilgrimages, and interacting with them, he became inspired to start a similar movement in Assam. Śaṅkaradeva, returning from his pilgrimage, began a reformatory movement in Assam and initiated a new religious belief as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Nāma-Dharma*, single-minded devotion to a personal God Kṛṣṇa, which later became known as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* or *Mahāpuruṣīyā-Dharma*. Śaṅkaradeva used his pen, and brought a revolutionary change to every aspects of Assamese society. Before the emergence of Śaṅkaradeva, the Assamese society was in a chaotic state; different superstitions, religious exploitation, inhuman practices, and political unrest made the lives of common people horrible ones. Purity, serenity, peace of mind, and spirituality in religion, and equality, liberty, generosity, fraternity in the society were far-flung imagination, which had no use in the society. The women and the underdogs of the society were the worst victims. Moreover, the patriarchal system was prevalent at that time, and naturally, the women were confined within the frame of societal norms. They enjoyed little right, and had no liberty at all, but had to pay for the satisfaction of their menfolk as well as

for the so-called well-being of the society in the name of religion. In such a gloomy state, Śaṅkaradeva introduced his *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, and strived to reform the society as well as to elevate the status of women in the society. Śaṅkaradeva used literature and performing art as means of the preaching of his religious principle. In this process, he emphasized on the role of women, and introduced them as the spokespersons of his cult.

The life and the literary works of Śaṅkaradeva along with his religious activities have been discussed at different times and places by various eminent scholars from different perspectives, but Śaṅkaradeva is such a versatile genius, and his activities are so variegated that there are so many areas which are yet to be discussed to unearth their intrinsic values. The role of the women characters of Śaṅkaradeva's writings and the role of the women mentioned in his hagiographical accounts in the preaching of his cult cannot be ignored, because these women had lots of contribution to the individual life of Śaṅkaradeva and in the preaching of his cult. The researcher, therefore, selected this topic to present the role of women as spokespersons of Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti*-cult.

In order to make a detail and comprehensive study on the role of women as spokespersons of Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult, the proposed scheme of this research work has been divided into six chapters including the Introduction, the conclusion and findings.

In the introductory chapter, an explanation of the term, 'Spokespersons' has been given to clarify the meaning that the term carries in this research work. The concept of *bhakti*, its meaning and definition have been discussed with reference to Śrī

Śaṇḍilya's and Nārada's *bhakti sūtras*. In this chapter, the salient features of Śaṅkaradeva's vaiṣṇavism and their differences from the all-Indian vaiṣṇvism have been dealt with, and Śaṅkaradeva's concept of *bhakti* and its relation with the Śaṅkarācārya and Rāmānuja has been discussed.

In the second chapter, sincere effort has been made to locate the research gap through the review of related literatures.

In the third chapter, the role of women as spokespersons as depicted in Śaṅkaradeva's literary works has been discussed with reference to his literary works.

In the fourth chapter, the women mentioned in the hagiographical accounts of Śaṅkaradeva and their roles in his individual life as well as in the preaching of his *bhakti* cult have been discussed.

In the fifth chapter, Śaṅkaradeva's outlook towards women as revealed in his writings along with the opinions of some scholars on the attitude of Śaṅkaradeva towards women have been discussed.

The concluding chapter represents the findings regarding the foregoing chapters, and it is endeavoured to arrive at the underlying principles of unity.

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