

CHAPTER- I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. A brief note on the research topic

The emergence of the worshipping of only one God as a reaction against the complex system of performing different rites and rituals of a large section of the *Vedas* of which the performance was reserved exclusive in favour of professional priesthood is the origin of the *bhakti* movement. This reaction gets its way in the writings of some mystic thinkers, who, focusing on the devotional aspect rather than the performing of particular rites and rituals, extracted the devotional essence from the *Vedas*, and keeping the devotional spirit, composed songs and poetry, and compiled them in different texts. The *Ālvārs*, a group of twelve devotees of Tamilnadu, were the prominent among these thinkers. They played the pivotal role in changing the method of worshipping God from performing rites and rituals to singing, reciting and listening to the devotional songs and poems. This devotional sentiment of the *Ālvārs* was widely spread throughout India in the Fifteenth century C. E. and was known as the Vaiṣṇavite movement.

Śaṅkaradeva, the founder of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, made two long pilgrimages and visited different holy shrines across India. He came into contact with different like-minded reformers of the time, and interacting with them, he became acquainted with the Vaiṣṇavite Renaissance sprouting in the context of all-Indian Vaiṣṇavite belief. Śaṅkaradeva was so deeply impressed with the reformatory zeal of

those reformers that he felt the urge of his heart to start a socio-religious reformation in the land of the then Assam. He therefore, started his reformatory mission by heart and soul to relieve the people, who were exploited in the name of religion and societal norms by the so-called elite class of the society. In his mission, Śaṅkaradeva kept the basic principles of the Vaiṣṇavite movement, but he added his fundamental genius and made them more effective and conducive to the socio-religious atmosphere of Assam, and for that reason, his mission was something different from the all-Indian Vaiṣṇavite movement. This reformatory mission of Śaṅkaradeva was known as the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement, and later, it became *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. Śaṅkaradeva realized that a new religious belief, of which the mode of worship is easy, attractive, and easily accessible to common masses, would be more effective to unite the divergent people under one umbrella. He therefore, initiated *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, a vehicle of his reformatory zeal, of which the pivotal principle is the same with the Vaiṣṇavite movement that was started by the *Ālvārs* in South India. The sole Godhead to be worshipped, according to his religious belief, is Kṛṣṇa or Rāma, the incarnations of Lord Viṣṇu, and the mode of worship of Kṛṣṇa to attain *mokṣa*, the eternal liberation of the soul, is the chanting and listening to His names and glories with devotional love and attraction to Him.

In the context of the social unrest, religious degeneration and exploitation, and political turmoil that were prevalent in Assam before the inception of Sankaradeva's *bhakti* cult, it was the desideratum of the time for upcoming of a new religious concept. In such a desperate situation, Śaṅkaradeva emerged and initiated a monotheistic *bhakti* cult as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, and fabricated the

divergent society in one fold. He used literature, performing art, and paintings as the means to provide the teachings of his religious principle. To bring his religious teachings to the illiterate common masses, Śaṅkaradeva used women, particularly the women characters of his literary works, as spokespersons of his cult, through whom the teachings of his cult have been revealed and spread among the inhabitants of Assam. People from different occupations joined hands and took part in the long span of the preaching and spreading of this cult. Mādhavadeva, Nārāyaṇdās Thākur Ātā, Jayantī Madhāi, Ananta Kandalī, Rām Rāi, Dāmodar Deva, Śrī Rām Ātā, Chānd Khā alike, accepted and became the followers of this new religious belief. Śaṅkaradeva along with the company of these followers tried to preach the greatness of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* through chanting and listening to the names and glory of Kṛṣṇa. The number of followers of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* increased as time rolled. They took part in preaching and spreading the greatness of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* with their preceptor, Śaṅkaradeva. The women counterparts of those followers of Śaṅkaradeva, though they were few in numbers at the initial stage of the inception of *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, did not remain confined within their household chores. They too indirectly took part in the preaching and spreading of this religion through offering their service to the *bhaktas*, and by relieving their husbands from their household duties. In this way, they created an atmosphere conducive to the preaching of this religion. The noteworthy point is that the women mentioned in the hagiographical accounts of Śaṅkaradeva, for whose invaluable contribution, Śaṅkaradeva could become a literary genius and a religious preacher, and could make his literary works and paintings infallible, can be regarded as the most important

spokespersons of his cult. These women, besides, the women characters of his works, and the female counterparts of the male *bhakatas* have played vital roles in the preaching and spreading of his *bhakti* cult. Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult would have never been originated nor ever been preached if these women did not render their services in their respective fields.

On the contributions of Śaṅkaradeva towards the socio-religious, cultural and literary domains of Assam, Karabi Deka Hazarika rightly comments - 'Among the pioneers of the all-Indian *bhakti* movement, Śaṅkaradeva was unique and incomparable in many respects. The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement, under the mighty leadership of Śaṅkaradeva, united the identity-less and manifold people of Assam under a hood, and provided them a new identity as the Assamese. Such example in respect of the other religious preachers is not available in all-Indian context. Moreover, it is rare not only in Indian, but in world's perspective what a massive reformation has taken place in respect of the Assamese literature and culture under the mighty leadership of Śaṅkaradeva and his associate Mādhavadeva.'¹

1.2. The explanation of the term Spokespersons

The term spokesperson is a singular neutral noun form; its plural form is spokespersons/ spokespeople. It means "a person who speaks on behalf of a group or an organization."² "Spokesperson noun [c]/ plural - people > a person who makes official, public statements for a group or organization:" (Definition of "spokesperson" from the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary (Cambridge University Press. (C).

¹ Deka Hazarika, Karabi. (2016). *Baikunṭha Dutaya*. P 2.

² Hornby, A. S. (2015). *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. 1508

Spokesperson definition: “spokesperson is a person who speaks as the representative of a group or organization.” Collins English Dictionary.³ Here in this thesis, the researcher uses the term ‘spokespersons’ in figurative sense. Those women characters mentioned in different hagiographical accounts of Śaṅkaradeva’s life, who brought up, nourished, guided and educated him, shaped his life, helped him in his household chores, detected and showed his faults in his paintings, advised him in different situations; for whose invaluable contributions to his life, he could become a religious preacher, a literary genius and a craftsman, and initiate a new religious belief as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, create a huge treasure of literature with a gallery of paintings, and introduce the craftsmanship of making different masks and their use in the performing of dramas; those women characters depicted in his literary works, who revealed or expressed, the philosophy, the teachings, the principles, and the methods of worshipping the Godhead Kṛṣṇa, through her or their words, activities, prayers, desires, hopes and aspirations, who chanted and listened to the names and glories of the Godhead Kṛṣṇa, and who taught lessons, provided knowledge and inspired common people to accept and follow the path of salvation through practising this religion are categorized as spokespersons of the saint’s *bhakti* cult. Spokespersons herein also imply the supportive role played by the womenfolk in his life.

1.3. The concept of *bhakti*

The term *bhakti* is a Sanskrit word which is derived as – “*bhakti*: (feminine) [*bhaj* + *ktin*] 1. *viyujana*, *prthakkaraṇa*, *vibhajana* 2. *prabhāg aṇśa*, *hisshā* 3. *upāsanā*, *anurakti*, *sevā*, *svāmibhakti*_ NO-0000, *radgu* 000, *Mudra* 0000.

³ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com>. 2018.

4. *Samman, sevā, śraddhā.*”⁴ It literally means love, affection, devotional attachment, fondness, passion, faith, reliance, strong attachment, worship, and desire to do anything, etc. In Hinduism, it means the strong attachment to, intense fondness of longing, earnest desire for, devotion to, a personal god or a representational god, which is aroused in the mind of a devotee through humble solicitation.

“According to S. Radhakrishnan, the word *bhakti* is derived from the word *Bhaja*’ (Sanskrit), meaning - to rever. In the terminology of theology, it means the worship of the personal God in the spirit of love and attainment of liberation (*Mokṣa*). The origin of the cult is traced back to the *Veda*, but its tenets for the first time were expounded in the *Bhāgavata*, which is a post Buddhist and pre-Christian work. The *Bhāgavata*, as its teacher (Kṛṣṇa) explain:

“But by unswerving devotion to Me, O Arjuna, I can be thus known, truly seen an entered into, O oppressor of the foe”.⁵

In the *Bhakti Sūtra* of Śrī Śāṇḍilya, *bhakti* is defined as –

‘*sa parānuraaktirīśvare.2.*’

Bhakti means the deep and selfless attachment to a devoted god. Again, attachment means love, affection, reliance, faith, passion, and desire to do anything, which can be substituted by intense fondness of longing, strong attachment, or earnest desire. When this attachment to a particular object or a subject reaches at its zenith of excellence, it is called absolute attachment, and at that point, the attachment to other things will decrease or extinct, and nothing will be delightful except the object or the

⁴ Apte, Baman Sivaram. (2001). *Saṅskrit-Hindi Kosh*. P 726.

⁵ Zaki, M.: (1996). *Muslim Society in North India during 15th and first half of 16th century*. Pp 123, 124, 127.

subject on which, the absolute attachment is concentrated. The absolute attachment to one's own physical beauty or for a particular person may arouse in one's heart, but such absolute attachment does not mean *bhakti*. According to *Śāṇḍilya's bhakti Sūtra*, the absolute attachment that grows solely in one's mind to the Supreme God is called *bhakti*.

“*Bhakti* has got only one definition, that is unalloyed attachment or love for the Supreme Godhead; therefore, it is concerned only in relation to cognized soul with the Over-soul. It is not born of worldly things, for there is no grammatical rule that enjoins the application of locative case ending to the cause nor mere philosophical knowledge can affirm it. It is causeless and unswerving love and attachment to Godhead where there is no iota of the aspiration of elevation or salvation as explained in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*:”⁶

The attachment for God has no limitation. It is infinite and absolute. When one experiences it, one never thinks of anything except God, because the love of God fills one's heart with extreme delight, and in this state, one's all desires are substituted by the contentment that arises out of love of God. This love of God is *bhakti*. It is spontaneously evoked in one's mind through the hearing of the excellent qualities of God, and is free from any prompt.

The sage Nārada was not contended with the *Bhakti Sūtra* propounded by Śāṇḍilya. He, therefore, put forward a new principle of *Bhakti*. According to Nārada, *Bhakti* is –

“*sā tu asmin parama-prema-rūpā. // 2//*”

⁶ Yati, Tridandī, Śrī Bhakti Prajñan. (1991). *Śrī Shandilya Bhakti Sutras*. Pp 4.

It means – *sā* – it; *tu* – and; *asmin* – for Him (the Supreme Lord); *parama* – highest; *prema* – love; *rūpā* – having as its form.’’⁷

The service offered to God with unshaken and deep faith in Him is the love for God. Self-realization is the origin of one’s service to God. If a person realises that he is not an individual entity, but a part of the Supreme Being, and he has nothing to do with this mundane world then he becomes free from his attachment to this material world. In this state, service to God arises in his mind, and this is the beginning of his spiritual life. When the person fully realises that he has nothing to do except offering his love for God, he will attain the stage of perfection in self-realization. The service offered to the Godhead at this self-realized stage is unshakable and God will reciprocate His love to the servitor. This reciprocation of God, which can be achieved through offering one’s love for God, is called *bhakti*.

In the *Bhakti Sūtra* of Nārada, *bhakti* is not regarded as the absolute attachment; it is regarded as the most elevated, pure devotional love for God. Here the word love signifies a higher level than the absolute attachment, where the mind is melted and diluted in love. When one’s heart is melted in attachment, love evolves, and at this state of mind, there will be no difference between love and ecstasy. At last, love and ecstasy become one.

One has to be free from the addiction to material prosperity, economic development, sense gratification, and salvation from material existence and above liberation, or salvation to attain highest perfection in the love of God. The next stage is to develop one’s consciousness of service to God being associated with a person or

⁷ Prabhupada, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami.(1989). *Narada-Bhakti-Sutra*. P 4.

persons already in the highest stage of love of God. He should accept the regulative principles of worshipping the Supreme Godhead and should accept one such person as his spiritual master, the *Guru*, and under the guidance of his *Guru*, he should execute regulated devotional service to the Supreme Godhead. After accepting the *Guru* and regularly performing the primary principles of devotional service under his *Guru*, one should abstain from the four principles of sinful life, illicit sexual relationships, eating animals as food, indulging in intoxication and gambling, to reach the highest stage of perfection of love of God. God is pure, and one cannot rise to the stage of perfection of love of God without being purified. When all illusions of materialistic world are vanquished, one attains the stage of firm faith in the God. At this state, one can conceive the Godhead and understand his relation with Him. From this point, the process of reciprocation between the Godhead and a devotee begins, and by constant reciprocation with the Godhead, a devotee is elevated to the highest point of love of the Godhead.

“Devotion is closely linked with the idea of a personal God, who bestows divine grace on his devotee who, in his turn, responds with devotional service to the Deity. Although hints of devotion are found in the *Upaniṣads*, its first exposition is found in the *Bhagavadgītā*.’’⁸

The term *bhakti* is not mentioned in the *Upaniṣads*. The texts, which speak of the *upāya* for *mokṣa*, use other terms such as *jñāna*, *vedanā darśana*, *dhyāna*, *dhruva-smṛti*, *nididhyāsana* and *upāsanā*. Though the term *bhakti* is not used in the *Upaniṣadic* texts, the concept of *bhakti* is implied in them. This fact is evident from the verses of the *Bhagavadgītā*, which explicitly mention the term *bhakti*, while

⁸ Jaiswal, S. (1967). *The Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism*. P 112.

elucidating the *Upaniṣadic* text in which *bhakti* is implied. Thus the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* says ‘This Self (Brahman) cannot be attained by the study of *Vedas*, nor by meditation nor through much hearing. He is to be attained only by one, whom the Self chooses. To such a person, the Self reveals Its true nature. ‘The implication of this statement, as explained by Rāmānuja, is that mere *śravaṇa* (hearing), *manana* (reflection), and *nididhyāsana* (meditation) undertaken without intense love for God (*bhakti*) cannot serve as means to attain God. Only that individual, on whom God showers his grace, can achieve him. The *Bhagavatagītā* says: “To those who crave for eternal union (with Me) and meditate (on Me), I bestow with love that clear divine vision (*buddhiyoga*) by which they attain Me.” It also says: “One who is most devoted to God is the one dearest to Me.” By way of elucidating the statement of *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, it further points out that there is no other way of attaining God except *bhakti* or intense loving meditation on God.”⁹

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* mentions nine modes of *bhakti*. They are *śravaṇa* (listening to the glory of Kṛṣṇa), *kīrttana* (chanting the names and fame of Kṛṣṇa), *smaraṇa* (contemplating the greatness of Kṛṣṇa,) *arcana* (offering flowers with recitation of His names), *pādasevana* (worship in the lotus-feet of Kṛṣṇa), *dāsyā* (servitude to Kṛṣṇa), *saksya* (friendly disposition to Kṛṣṇa), *vandana* (prostrating before Kṛṣṇa), and *ātma-nivedana* (total surrender of oneself to Kṛṣṇa).

Bhakti is not fulfilled in one stroke nor does it rise to its higher stage in a day, it has two stages - *Sādhana bhakti* and *sādhya bhakti*. The stage, at which *bhakti* is offered in the hope of attaining other goals is *sādhana bhakti*. It is also known as *gaunī bhakti* or *sakāma bhakti*. The other stage of *bhakti*, at which *bhakti* overcomes the

⁹ Śrīnīvasa Chari, S. M.: (2017). *Vaiṣṇavism*. Pp 100, 101.

sādhana bhakti stage, and the *bhaktas* offer *bhakti* without any selfish purpose is called *sādhya bhakti*. It is known as *parābhakti* or *niṣkāma bhakti*. *Sādhana bhakti* or *sakāma bhakti* is of three types – *sāttvika*, *rājasika*, and *tāmasika*. The desire of living beings to become free from the bondage of mundane world is associated with *sakāma bhakti*. In this type of *bhakti*, the *bhaktas* offer *bhakti* with an intention of getting blessings to have become free from the bondage of the mundane world. It is *sakāma* as it has a goal, and as the goal is to get blessings, it is *sāttvika*. *rājasika bhakti* is offered with the selfish purpose of the attainment of wealth and material prosperity while the *tāmasika bhakti* is offered to acquire more physical power to bully over others. Another state of *sādhana bhakti* is *jñānamayī bhakti*. It is practised to realize the *Brahman*. The chief aim of a *bhaktata* is generally liberation (*mukti*), or salvation (*mokṣa*), again, the pre-requisite state of the realization of the *Brahman* is the acquiring of the knowledge of Viṣṇu. Hence, the *bhakti* that is practised with a view to acquiring the knowledge of Viṣṇu is *jñānamayī bhakti*. The fruit of *jñānamayī bhakti* is the state of *nirguṇa* (without attribute). This *jñānamayī bhakti*, of which the fruit is *brahmajñāna*, is called *nirguṇa bhakti*. In the 11th skandha of the *Bhāgavata*, Śrī Kṛṣṇa says to Uddhava about *nirguṇa bhakti*.

samasta bhutate ātma buddhi nuhi yāve I
kāya vākya mane abhyāsibā ehi bhāve II
samaste prāṇika dekhībāhā ātmāsama I
upāya madhyata iṭo āti mukṣatama II 260
nirguṇa bhakati iṭo dharā mahāmānī I
*jānā satye ihāra alparo nāhi hāni II 261*¹⁰

¹⁰ Hazarika, Surjya. (ed.). (2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Vākyāmrta*. 2nd skandha Bhagavata. P 658.

sādhya bhakti is also known as *parā bhakti* or *niṣkāma bhakti*. It is totally devoid of selfish purpose. In this state of *bhakti*, living beings are not aspirants of *mukti*, or *mokṣa*, but they offer *bhakti* for *bhakti*'s sake, and they dwell in the extreme state of ecstasy of love of God. *sādhya bhakti* or *niṣkāma bhakti* like *sādhana bhakti* or *sakāma bhakti* is of three types based on the intensity of attachment for God that evolves in the mind of a *bhakata*. They are *antaraṅgā*, *uttamā* and *sapremā*. *Antaraṅgā bhakti* is that state of mind of a *bhakata*, in which the *bhakatas* feel the existence of Viṣṇu in every living being. *Uttamā bhakti* is the immediate next stage of *antaraṅgā bhakti*. The *bhakatas* feel everything in this world as *māyāmaya* (illusive) except God. In this state, the *bhakatas* feel that only God is truth in this world, and they surrender their body, mind and soul to Him. *Sapremā bhakti* is the best stage of *sādhya bhakti* or *parā bhakti*. In this state of *bhakti*, the *bhakatas* feel their unification with God and follow the *līlās* and *karmas* of God, they lose their individual identity, and they are not concerned with the existence of the world.

The deep devotional attachment that evolves in the mind of *bhakatas* is of five types as like as *bhakti*. They are *vātsalya*, (childhood dalliance), *sakhya*, (friendship), *dāsyā* (servitude), *māduṛya* (affection), and *śānta* (calmness).

1.4. Śaṅkaradeva's concept of *bhakti*

Śaṅkaradeva's concept of *bhakti* is nothing new, but a modified one based on the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*, the *Harivaṁśa*, the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The chief Godhead of his cult is Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa with His different incarnations - *Hari*, *Rāma*, *Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa* and *Narasimha*. In the opening verse of the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*

Śaṅkaradeva prays Nārāyaṇa, the incarnated form of the Supreme Being and the cause of all the other incarnations.

prathame praṇāmo brahman-rūpī sanātana I

*sarvva avatārara kāraṇa nārāyaṇa II I*¹¹

“The idolization of the female element which formed the marked feature of Northern Vaiṣṇavism and of the Chaitanya movement in Bengal is conspicuous only by its total absence from Śaṅkara’s Vaiṣṇavism. Chaitanya’s conceptions 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 Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa of Chaitanya, nor of Gopī-Kṛṣṇa of Vallabhāchārya, nor of Rukmiṇī-Kṛṣṇa of Nāmdeva, nor of the Sītā-Rāma of Rāmānanda. The *Eka-Śaraṇa* of the *Gītā* superimposed upon the idealism of *dāśya-bhakti* with *satsaṅga* or companionship with *bhaktas* of the *Śrīmadbhāgavata* and the *Hanumāntīkāsthā*, i. e., the unwavering and firm devotion and allegiance to one and only one God as of Hanumān to Rāmachandra, is the main plank of Śaṅkara’s creed.”¹²

There is no room for idol worship or performing of extravagant rites and rituals of Brāhmaṇism. The chief mode of worship of his cult is *bhakti*, as the *cult* is the religion of his age, the *Kali*. He insists on the *dāśya* aspect of *bhakti* that is one of the nine modes of *bhakti* prescribed in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and the method of worship is the chanting and listening to the names and glory of Kṛṣṇa. The chief scriptures of

¹¹ Goswami, Jatindra Nath. (ed.). (2001). *Kīrttan-ghoṣā Āru Nāma-ghoṣā*. P 1.

¹² Bezbaroa, L, N., (1968). *The Religion of Love and Devotion*. P 15.

his cult are the *Kīrtana-ghoṣā*, the *Daśama skandha Bhāgavata*, *Bhakti-Ratnāvalī* and *Nāma-ghoṣā*. It is easy to follow and easily accessible to common people.

1.5. The origin and development of Vaiṣṇavism in the larger perspective

The *Puruṣa Sūkta* of *Ṛgveda* elucidates *Brahman* as the Supreme Being. *Brahman* pervades in living beings and matters. He is the sustainer, the creator of the Universe, the Lord of all the deities, and He is *Vāsudeva*, the Supreme Being.

“The famous hymn known as *Viṣṇu-gāyatrī* appearing in the *Taittirīya Nārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* (which is a part of *Taittirīya Āranyaka*) states: “We endeavour to know Nārāyaṇa, we meditate on Vāsudeva and let Viṣṇu bestow wisdom on us.” This Vedic statement evidently reveals the identity of all three deities. In the post-Vedic period, the *Āgamas*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* and the *Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas* have used these names repeatedly to denote the same one ultimate Reality of the *Upaniṣads*.” The *Ahirbhudhya Samhitā* interprets every letter of the word and explains how the term *Bhagavān* implies the essential characteristics of the Supreme Reality. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* states explicitly that the term refers to Vāsudeva who is the *Para-Brahman*. Nārāyaṇa is known by the name Viṣṇu in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, as Hari in the *Harivaṁśa*, as Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as Vāsudeva in the *Bhagavadgītā*, as Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, as Narasimha in the *Nṛsimha-tapanīyā Upaniṣad* etc., indicating the different manifestations of Viṣṇu.”¹³

It is already mentioned that Śaṅkaradeva’s *bhakti* cult is nothing new, but a refined one. The Vaiṣṇavite literatures divide the age of the Universe into five ages and define *bhakti* accordingly. They are the *Satya yuga*, the age of *dhyāna*

¹³ Śrīnivasa Chari, S. M.: (2017). *Vaiṣṇavism*. P 134.

(meditation), the *Tretā yuga*, the age of *Jajña* (sacrifices), the *Dvāpara yuga*, the age of *Pūjā* (ritualistic worship), the *Kali yuga* the age of *bhakti* (*Śravaṇa-Kīrttana* – listening to and chanting of the names and glory of Kṛṣṇa), and the *Kalki yuga* the age of total Annihilation which is yet to start. Śaṅkaradeva (1449 A.D. – 1568 A.D.) was a religious preacher of the age of *Kali*. The ultimate mode of worship of Godhead, in this age, as prescribed by the Vaiṣṇavite literatures, is *bhakti*. Śaṅkaradeva insists on the *dāśya* aspects of *bhakti*, and advocates the *Śravaṇa-Kīrttana* as the mode of devotion.

satya juge kari dhyāna samādhi I

tretāta samaste yajña ārādhi II

dvāpare pūji nānā bhaktibhāve I

*kalita kīrttanese gati pāve II 3*¹⁴

The religious belief that has occupied an important place in the history of religion of India is Vaiṣṇavism of which Viṣṇu is the ultimate Reality, and the belief is the worship of Viṣṇu through which one may attain the highest spiritual goal. This is one of the oldest living religions of India with a huge literature. The origin of Vaiṣṇavism can be traced in the *Ṛgveda*, the oldest among the four Vedas. Like Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism centering the deity Śiva, Śaktaism centering the deity Durgā or Pārvatī, Gaṇapatyaism centering the deity Ganeśa, and Sauriya centering the deity Sun have been in vogue traditionally from distant past, but as time rolled, the tradition of Vaiṣṇavism has got its prominence among these traditions. Before the discussion of the origin and development of Vaiṣṇavism, it is necessary to discuss the term Viṣṇu,

¹⁴ Goswami, Jatindranath. (ed.). (2001). *Kīrttan-ghoṣā Āru Nāma-ghoṣā*. Pāṣaṇḍa Marddan. P 17.

because Vaiṣṇavism is originated centering the worship of Viṣṇu. “Viṣṇu means all-pervasive – *bevesti eti viṣṇu*. “Viṣṇu is the creator, and he enters in all his creations”’.(*Taittirīya Upaniṣad*). In the *Padma-purāṇa*, this Viṣṇu is called the all-pervasive God in Nature.”¹⁵ In several hymns of the *Ṛgveda*, though Viṣṇu is mentioned about hundred times, here Viṣṇu implies *Sūrya* (the Sun-God). “Some scholars are of the opinion that Viṣṇu of *Ṛgveda* is one among the other deities and He was raised to the status of a Supreme Being at a later period by the Epics and *Purāṇas*.”¹⁶ The supremacy of Viṣṇu is also obvious in *Brāhmaṇa* and *Āraṇyaka*. This Viṣṇu is implicitly ascribed as the supreme deity to be worshipped in *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣada*. The development of Vaiṣṇavism can be found in the *Āgama saṁhitās*. The concept of Viṣṇu as the Supreme deity to be worshipped exclusively is developed into a cult in the *Vaiṣṇava Āgamas*, and the cult is known as the Vaiṣṇava cult in later age. Though the Vaiṣṇava cult evolves from the practice of worshipping Viṣṇu as the Supreme Deity, there are different sub-cults amongst them. They are *Vasudevīya*, *Pañcarātrīya*, *Nārāyaṇīya*, *Bāl Gopālīya Sattvata* etc. of which, the *Vāsudevīya* cult is the oldest one. All these cults, of course, worship Nārāyaṇa, Vāsudeva, Gopāla etc. as the incarnations of Viṣṇu, and in later age, the worshipping of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma begins attributing them as Viṣṇu. The worshipping of Viṣṇu that was started in Vedic age was gradually culminating into a higher level, and it was in vogue in the age of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Śrīmadbhagavat-gītā*. In the post-Vedic age, the development of Vaiṣṇavism took place in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and

¹⁵ Sastri, Manuranjan. (1991). *Asamar Vaiṣṇava Darśanar Ruprekḥā*. Pp 15, 16.

¹⁶ Bhandarkar, R. G.: (1983). *Vaiṣṇavism, Saivism and Minor Religion*. Pp 47, 48.

the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* it is revealed that Viṣṇu incarnates Himself in the form of human being as Rāma. Nārāyaṇa (worshipper of Viṣṇu), a deity of *Śveta dvīpa*, is mentioned in the *Nārāyaṇīya* section of the *Mahābhārata*. The sage Nārada initiated a new cult, of which Nārāyaṇa was the Supreme Deity, and the cult was known as *Pāñarātra*, on the other hand, Kṛṣṇa the son of Vāsudeva also initiated another cult emphasizing on the worship of Nārāyaṇa as the Supreme Deity, and the cult was known as *Sattvata*. The identity of Viṣṇu, with Vasudeva, Nārāyaṇa and Kṛṣṇa was established, and Kṛṣṇa identical to Viṣṇu got prominence as the Supreme Deity to be worshipped in the *Mahābhārata*. The term Vaiṣṇava was used for the first time in the *Svargārohaṇa* section of the *Mahābhārata*.

The basic tenets of Vaiṣṇava doctrine are the contributions of the *Purāṇas*. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* is the oldest one that deals with the Greatness of Viṣṇu. The *Purāṇas* are of three categories - *Sāttvika Purāṇas*, *Rājasika Purāṇas* and *Tāmasika Purāṇas*. The *Sāttvika purāṇas* are - *Viṣṇu*, *Padma*, *Garuḍa*, *Varāha*, *Nārādīya* and *Bhāgavata*. They uphold the Supremacy of Viṣṇu, His all-pervasiveness, and assert that Viṣṇu is the sole cause of creation, sustenance and dissolution of the Universe.

The *bhakti* movement is the consequence of affects and counter-affects of societal behaviour and religious dogmas of sixth to ninth centuries A. D. It is originated in South India, and gradually spreading to North India and at last, to East India, it creates a new era in the socio-religious and literary history of Indian. The age from sixth century A. D. to ninth century A. D. is regarded as the age of *bhakti* in Tamil literature, during this period, the Tamil literature, the oldest of the modern Indian literatures, flourished in the writings of the famous Vaiṣṇava poets, *Ālvārs*, and

the Śaiva poets, *Nāyanmārs*. The age from second century to the pre-*bhakti* age is regarded as the age of Buddhism-Jainism. Though the litterateurs of this age were primarily interested in composing literature, but their interest in preaching religion increased gradually, and as a result, their predominance increased on the religious life of the common people increased. The Buddhists, emphasizing on the practice of ascetic monk's life, tried to convert common people to Buddhism, and started religious persecution. Common people became resentful to the teachings of Buddhism, because they strictly adhered to and showed their respect to the traditional idea, the idea of an ideal householder's life, which is contradictory to the life of an ascetic monk of Buddhism; moreover, there was no room for the Godhead in Buddhism. On the other hand, the followers of Jainism became bigot not to the basic principles of Jainism - non-violence, pity etc, but only to the name of their religion. They started their atrocities on the followers of other religions, particularly on the Śaivites and the Vaiṣṇavites, and even, they did not hesitate to kill them if they could not convert them to Jainism. There emerged another creed, who worshipped female deities as the energy of origin, and they even sacrificed human in front of their deities, and took the flesh of the sacrificed body as the fruits of their deities. Such practices aroused fear in the mind of people instead of arousing *bhakti*. Apart from these, there appeared the group of Brāhmiṇs, who remained busy with reading *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*, and performing *yajñas*. They kept themselves isolated from the common people and kept the scriptures out of reach of common people. Common people could not read both the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣadas*, nor could they take part in *yajñas*. In such a degenerated state of religion, it was the desideratum of the time for a new religious doctrine to relieve the

common people from the gamut of religious atrocities. The *Vaiṣṇava bhakti* poets, *Ālvārs* and the *Śaiva bhakti* poets *Nāyaṇmārs* emerged to mitigate the pressing need of the time.

“The *Ālvārs* were twelve Vaiṣṇava poets from different castes of Tamilnadu. The word *Ālvār* means one, who is deeply immersed in the divine love of God. They used the Tamil language as their medium of writings, and their writings are called *Prabandha*. All the writings of the *Ālvārs* are collectively called *Vaiṣṇavaveda*. The traditional date ascribed to them is 4203 B. C. but modern scholars assign to them the period from sixth century to ninth century A D. Strong emotion and deep devotional attachment for God are the characteristics of their writings.”¹⁷

It is evident in the hymns of the *Ālvārs* that they believe in the different incarnations of Viṣṇu. They emphasized on *bhakti* among the three tenets of *mokṣa* - *karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti* of the *Bhāgavadgītā*. The *Ālvārs*, though they emerged in different times, all of them accepted the same philosophy of the *Sanskrit Vedas*, *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhāgavadgītā* and expressed in the vernacular language of Tamilnadu. According to their belief, Viṣṇu is the Supreme Deity who could grant *mokṣa* to the *bhaktas* reciprocating their *bhakti*. They acknowledged *bhakti* as the best way of *mokṣa* and insisted on the *śaraṇāgati tattva*. “Every individual *Ālvār* made his or her contribution to the *bhakti* cult. Their individual and collective efforts made all the difference. The teachings of the *Ālvārs* included inter alia the meaninglessness of worldly life. They were for the liberation of the human soul from the cycle of life and death and life. They taught that only through pure devotion to Lord Viṣṇu one could

¹⁷ Chutia, Sonaram. (1995). *Asamar Vaiṣṇava Darśanar Swarnarekhā*. P 54.

get rid of endless births and deaths. Their single-minded devotion to Lord Viṣṇu paved the way for monotheism. The *Ālvārs* were monotheists (*ekāntikas*). They had no other God except Lord Viṣṇu. All other gods and goddesses are Lord Viṣṇu's manifold manifestations, they pleaded. Lord Viṣṇu is the source of all energies both spiritual and worldly.’’¹⁸

After the *Ālvārs* Vaiṣṇavism is developed in the hands of the *Ācāryas*. Nāthamuni, Yamunācārya, Śaṅkarācārya and Rāmānujācārya were the prominent among the *Ācāryas*. Nāthamuni is the first pontiff of Vaiṣṇavism. He collected and edited the hymns of the *Ālvārs* and compiled them in *Divyaprabandham*. Thus, he made an invaluable contribution to the further development of Vaiṣṇavism.

Yamunācārya dedicated his service in the preaching and spreading of the teachings of the hymns of the *Ālvārs* and wrote commentaries on them. According to him, *Brahman* is the cause and the soul of the living beings and matters, and is *saguṇa* and *sarvaniyantā*.

Śaṅkarācārya restored the ancient Upanisadic religion rescuing it from the anti-Vedic malpractice of Buddhism and Jainism by propounding a new philosophy as *Advaita Vedānta*, Monism, based on the teachings of *Upaniṣads*, *Brahmasūtra*, and *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*.

Rāmānujācārya designed and established the graphics of Vaiṣṇavism that was formed by *Ācārya* Nāthamuni and Yamunācārya in a disciplined way, and expounded *Viśiṣṭadvaitavedānta*, (Qualified Monism) as a reaction against Śaṅkarācārya's Monism.

¹⁸ Pathak, Dayananda. (2012). *Beautiful Mind of Śrīmanta Sankaradeva*. P 12.

I.6. Śaṅkaradeva's Vaiṣṇavism: Salient features

Śaṅkaradeva's Vaiṣṇavism is a slight modified form of the Vaiṣṇavite Renaissance that was originated centering Lord Kṛṣṇa in the context of all-Indian Hinduism of the medieval age of Indian History. Śaṅkaradeva a non-Brāhmin (*kāyastha*) initiated this faith in Assam. This is known as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*. Mādhavadeva, the disciple-in-chief of Śaṅkaradeva, named it as *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* and mentioned for the first time in his *Guru Bhaṭimā*, eulogy to his teacher Śaṅkaradeva.

bhakati bhāṇḍāra *dvāra sava choḍi*
mukuti kayali udāsa I
eka śaraṇa hari *nāma dharma kahu*
*rājā karu parakāśa II 15*¹⁹

This cult of Śaṅkaradeva is also called *Mahāpuruṣīyā-Dharma*, because Śaṅkaradeva is regarded as *Mahāpuruṣa* by his followers, and the cult expounded by him is named after the epithet *Mahāpuruṣa* as *Mahāpuruṣīyā-Dharma*. In this respect, S. N. Sarma commented- “The new cult thus moulded according to the local circumstances, was popularly known as the *Mahāpuruṣīyā-Dharma*. The real name of the cult was *Eka-Śaraṇa-Dharma*, or the religion of supreme surrender to one God, viz., Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. The term *Mahāpuruṣīyā* is popularly believed to have been derived from the epithet *Mahāpuruṣa*, generally applied to mean Śaṅkaradeva. He was

¹⁹ Das, Kailash. (ed.). (2015). *Śaṅkaradeva-Mādhavadeva-Viracita Bhaṭimā. Guru Bhaṭimā*. P 132.

known to his followers as *Mahāpuruṣa* (the great being), and therefore, the religion propagated by him came to be known as the *Mahāpuruṣīyā-Dharma*.”²⁰

1. The *bhakti* cult of Śaṅkaradeva is primarily monotheistic based chiefly on the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* and *Śrīmadbhāgavadgītā*. The monotheism of Śaṅkaradeva has a good deal of similarity with the monotheism of Śrī Sankarācārya. According to Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma* is the root of the origin, the Supreme power, the Absolute Truth and the Sole Godhead. There is no difference between *Brahma* and living beings. Living beings are also liberate and self-sufficient, but under the spell of *Avidyā* or *Māyā* (ignorance) living beings see the plurality of *Brahma*. *Avidyā* or *Māyā* is the cause of their bonding. Only Knowledge can substitute *Avidyā*, and Knowledge can be acquired through the realization of the inseparability of *Brahman* and *Jīva* (the living beings). This monism of Śaṅkarācārya is hidden in the monotheism of Śaṅkaradeva, but there are some differences between Śaṅkarācārya and Śaṅkaradeva. Unlike Śaṅkarācārya, Śaṅkaradeva’s *Brahman* is *Saguṇa* (with attribute) in spite of being *Nirguṇa* (without attribute), all-inclusive in spite of being all-exclusive, takes birth as different incarnations in spite of being birthless. *Brahman* manifests in different ways in different creations of the world. According to Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahman* is the Absolute Truth, and the world is only the illusion. He emphasized on to acquire knowledge to realize *Brahman* while Śaṅkaradeva insisted on to follow the path of *bhakti* to realize the same. From this point of view, Śaṅkaradeva’s religious philosophy is more akin to the Śrī Rāmānujācārya’s qualified monism than to Śrī Śaṅkarācārya’s monism, and the

²⁰ Sarma, Satyendra Nath. (2016). *The Neo-Vaisnavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*. P- xi.

influence of the philosophy of Śrī Rāmānujācārya is evident in the philosophy of Śaṅkaradeva. According to Śrī Rāmānujācārya, living being has individual identity like *Brahman*, but is identical to *Brahman* and both are inseparable. *Brahman* is *saguṇa* (qualified), *saviśeṣa* (manifested) and the Lord of living beings. *Bhakti* to this Lord determines the way of *Mokṣa* (salvation). Śaṅkaradeva supports this philosophy of Śrī Rāmānujācārya. According to Śaṅkaradeva, *Brahman* is the Absolute truth and the Supreme personality; He is the Lord of the Universe, the cause of creation, sustenance and dissolution. He is *Sarvaśaktimān*, (Omnipotent), *Sarvavyāpī*, (Omnipresent) and *Sarvajña* (Omniscient), and therefore, infinite and matterless, yet *Saguṇa* (qualified) and *saviśeṣa* (manifested). Lord Kṛṣṇa is the manifestation of *Brahman*, and therefore, remembrance of the name of Kṛṣṇa is the worship of *Brahman*.

kṛṣṇa nāme dhyāna kṛṣṇa nāme mahā japa I
kṛṣṇa nāme yoga kṛṣṇa mahā tapa II
parama sannyāsa kṛṣṇa nāme mahā jñāna I
*mora kṛṣṇa nāme sādhe samaste kalyāṇa II 286*²¹

2. Śaṅkaradeva emphasized on the *Bhakti Mārga* among the three *Mārgas* –*Karma Mārga*, *Bhakti Mārga* and *Jñāna Mārga* referred to in the *Gītā*.
3. In the *bhakti* cult of Śaṅkaradeva, the Supremacy of Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu is preached, and unlike the other Vaiṣṇavite preachers, Śaṅkaradeva regarded Kṛṣṇa as the sole Godhead to be worshipped. The other Vaiṣṇavite preachers advocate the worship of dual deities, but there is no room for other deities in Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult except Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu, all the others are his devotees only. The position of Rādhā

²¹ Hazarika, Surjya. (ed.). (2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Vākyāmr̥ta*. Bhaktipradip section. P 927.

is not specified in Śaṅkaradeva's literature, only the Gopīs are mentioned, but they too are produced as devotees not as *Brahma*.

jagatare atmā brahmādiro mai deva I
*jāni moke mātṛa ekacitte karā seva II 29*²²

4. The *bhakti* cult of Śaṅkaradeva is based on the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Bhāgavadgītā*. There is no place of idolatry, or sacrifice of animals in the altar of a deity, rather, it preaches the chanting and listening to the names and glory of Kṛṣṇa as the best way of *bhakti*.

rāma-nāma yīto satate gāve II
*sehise hātate mukuti pāve II 78*²³

5. Śaṅkaradeva does not accord *madhura* (deep attachment) or *śṛṅgār rasa* (eroticism) as the way of *mokṣa*; on the contrary, he emphasizes on the *dāsyā* (servitude) aspect of *bhakti*, the complete surrendering of oneself at the feet of Kṛṣṇa.
6. Amongst the nine folds of *bhakti*, Śaṅkaradeva insists on chanting and listening to the names and glory of Kṛṣṇa as the best way of achieving *mokṣa*. It is mentioned in the first *skandha* of the *Bhāgavata*.

yadyapi bhakati navavidha mādḥavara I
śravaṇa kīrtana tāto mahā śreṣṭhātara II
arccana bandana dhyāna samastate kari I
*yaśa kīrttanata āti tuṣṭa honta hari II 38*²⁴

²² Hazarika, Surjya. (ed.). (1st Edn., 2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Vākyāmrta*. Bhaktipradip section. P 907.

²³ Goswami, Jatindranath. (ed.). (2001). *Kīrttan-ghosā*. Pāṣaṇḍa-marḍdan section. P 18.

²⁴ Hazarika, Surjya. (ed.). (2014). *Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva Vākyāmrta*. Śrīmadbhāgavata 1st Skandha. P 189.

7. Another noteworthy feature of Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult is that both Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are identical to Viṣṇu.
8. *Cāri bastu* (four things) and *Cāri puthi* (four scriptures) are the most essential features of the *bhakti* cult of Śaṅkaradeva. The four things are – *Nāma*, *Deva*, *Guru*, and *Bhakata*, and the four scriptures are *Kīrttana*, *Daśama*, *Ratnāvalī* and *Nāma-ghoṣā*. In Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult Viṣṇu is regarded as the chief Godhead, He is the *Deva*. The chanting and listening to His names is the best mode of worship, this is *Nāma*. A religious teacher is inevitable for one to learn the process of realization of the Godhead and to learn the modes of worship of the Godhead. This teacher is called *Guru*. The *Guru* has nothing to do without *bhakatas*, because the relation between a *Guru* and *bhakata* is complementary to each other and it is an integral part of Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult. The beautiful combination of these four things and the four scriptures are the integral parts of Sakaradeva's *bhakti* cult. The *bhakti* cult of Śaṅkaradeva would be incomplete if it lacks of any one of these things.
9. Besides religious prospect, Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult has a far-flung contribution to the societal behaviour and social status of common people. Equality among different castes and liberty in terms of *bhakti* are outstanding features of Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult.
10. Humanism is the most important feature of Śaṅkaradeva's Vaiṣṇavism. Śaṅkaradeva showed his humanitarian attitude towards every living being even to a beast too in his writings.

11. Equality, liberty and generosity towards women and elevation of their social status are noteworthy feministic views of Śaṅkaradeva's Vaiṣṇavism.

1.7. The female exponents of *bhakti* movement across India

In preaching and spreading the *bhakti* movement that was expounded by the Vaiṣṇava *Ālvārs* and Śaiva *Nāyanmārs*, some female *bhakti*-poets also played a significant role at large. They had to struggle for their recognition within the fold of *bhakti* movement, because the movement was largely dominated by males, and they were the stakeholders of societal norms and religious dogmas. The intrinsic inquisition of truth with utter devotion for the Supreme Reality, and stubborn insistence on spiritual uplift, which characterized the poetry of the female saint poets, tempered the radical edge of the inclusion of women in the fold of religion, and therefore, these female *bhakti* poets were reluctantly accepted as devotees as well as preachers of their respective cults.

Andal was the sole female *bhakti* poet among the *Ālvārs* of Tamilnadu. She was the adopted daughter of Perialvar. Perialvar was unmarried and an ardent devotee of Viṣṇu. He took Andal as the gift of God to him. She was called *Kodhai* – garland given by God. Legends about her say that she was not born of a woman, but was found in a *tulsi* (basil) garden by her adopted father, and was brought up in a complete devotional atmosphere at a time, when *bhakti* movement reached at its full glory. She had received the knowledge about the legends of Viṣṇu with His different incarnations, and she precociously fell in love with Kṛṣṇa, the incarnation of Viṣṇu at her tender age. Andal's father, Perialvar, used to worship the temple deity, Kṛṣṇa, everyday with a garland of basil. One day, Andal adored herself with the garland of

basil that her father kept for the temple deity. She felt that she had all the right to wear the garland. It was considered as a serious crime on her part according to the sacred codes, but Lord Kṛṣṇa legitimized it reciprocating her love. Lord Kṛṣṇa appeared in parialvar's dream and commanded him that henceforth, He would accept only the garlands worn by Andal. After reciprocation of her love from Lord Kṛṣṇa, she immersed in deep love of Kṛṣṇa and carved the way for the union with Kṛṣṇa. She achieved her goal of union with her beloved Kṛṣṇa in her lifetime. She described her imagination of Kṛṣṇa as the most loved one, and herself as the beloved of Kṛṣṇa in 143 verses. Her compositions are *Tiruppavai* and *Nachiyar Tirumoli*. The *Tiruppavai* is a single narrative poem with thirty songs, of which the theme is the journey to the abode of the Lord for union with Him. The essence of these poems is *Mādhurya Bhakti* where the poet is herself the beloved, Gopikas, and her love is Kṛṣṇa, while the theme of *Nachiyar Tirumoli* is *viraha-bhāva*, the separation in love from the loved one, Kṛṣṇa. Here the *bhakta* is the beloved who expresses her deep anguish due to separation from her love, God.

Ākkāmahādevi or Mahādevi was a saint-poet and a devotee of Śiva from the southern region of Karnataka in the 12th century A.D. She became frustrated with societal norms and rules that restricted her, and leaving her family and home out of frustration, she wandered naked in the pursuit of her eternal soul mate, Lord Śiva. She recorded the experiences of her journey in *vachanas*. Before she started her journey in search of her eternal soul mate, she went out in quest of fellow seekers and found solace in *Anubhavamantapa in Kalyāṇa*, later known as *Basavakalyāṇa*, a gathering of many learned people to debate about philosophy and attainment of enlightenment. At

first, they were reluctant to enlist her in the gatherings for her refusal to wear clothes. Legend says that her body was covered by hair for her true love and devotion for God. All the learned people greeted her as *Ākkā*, an elder sister, her preceptor Allama Prabhu showed her the way of reaching at her ultimate goal, and thereafter, she started her spiritual journey to the temple of Chenna Mallikārjuna and ended up with her union with her eternal soul mate Śiva. “*Ākkā* is one of the best known poets of Karnataka. At least three hundred and fifty of her *vachanas* can be culled from various sources. Besides these *vachanas*, some songs and two works titled, *The Vachana* of Creation and *Yogangatri* are in her name. (Dabbe, Manushi, 1989, 42)”.²⁵

Janabāi was a female poet-saint of 13th century of Maharashtra. She was born in a low caste, *Śūdra* family, but brought up in the upper class family of Nāmdeva, one of the most revered *bhakti* poets. Within the household of Nāmdeva, she served him both as a servant and as a devotee, and she developed her awareness about the conventional respectability towards upper class and restrictions on lower class. Though she was treated with a certain amount of respect for her associations with the family of Nāmdeva, she was well aware of her place in the society as of her low caste origin. She imagined herself as one, who is out of any social convention, but a beloved of Vithoba, another name of Kṛṣṇa, and went with Cymbals and *Veena* and performed singing and dancing in the market place. She composed over three hundred poems focusing on domestic chores and the restrictions facing her as a low-caste woman.

²⁵ Pande, Rekha. (2012). *Women Voice in Bhakti Literature*. P 69. (Available from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236680232>).

Mirābāi was a renowned poet and an enthusiastic devotee of Lord Kṛṣṇa. She was born around 15th century into a Royal Rajput family of Rajasthan. Legends centering her life tell of her vision of becoming the forever bride of Lord Kṛṣṇa. According to a popular legend, Mira began to imagine herself as the forever bride of Lord Kṛṣṇa, and became His devotee from her childhood. However, she was married into another Rajput family at her young age, and she suffered a lot within the family she had been married. Her husband made an unsuccessful attempt to kill her, and her in-laws made an effort to resist her from joining the company of wandering saints as it was deemed improper for a woman like her of a high caste status. All the efforts of her husband and of her family to resist her from joining the company of wandering saints went in vain; she went out for pilgrimage to various places rejecting the conventional status of high caste family and finally arrived at Bṛndāvana the holy city of Kṛṣṇa.

Mirābāi's poetry is characterized with unique devotion for Lord Kṛṣṇa. Her devotion for Lord Kṛṣṇa is the symbol of her resistance of social order of the day.

1.8. Significance of the Topic

The socio-political and religious states of Assam were unrest during the period 15th and 16th centuries. Various evil practices in the name of religious dogmas and societal norms of the patriarchal society, Tāntricism, Non-Vedic practices, growing influence of Brāhmaṇical rites, sacrificial rituals and superstitions of Śāktaism, and different prejudices of Śaivism, all these ravages of the time were in vogue and increased day by day, of which women were the soft targets and the worst victims. They were harassed socially, deprived economically, cast-out from religious matters, molested physically and exploited sexually, and even considered as the source of

carnal pleasure. In such a gloomy state, it is always the desideratum of the time for the immergence of a mighty reformer. Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568) too, immersed in such a hard time in Assam. He initiated *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*, a new religious belief, and with a reformatory zeal, he undertook the mission of a social reformer to mitigate the pressing need of the time. In this context, it is relevant to discuss the attitude of Śaṅkaradeva towards women. The endeavour of the researcher is to scrutinize, whether Śaṅkaradeva, as a religious preacher, opened the door of his cult for women, encouraged their active participation, and accorded them the same and equal status with menfolk without any discrimination in terms of religious matters. Whether he, as a literary genius, did elevate the status of women in his writings, and as a social reformer, whether his outlook towards marriage and householder's life was favourable; whether he respected the opinions of women in terms of *bhakti*, and in his individual life as well as in his own activities. whether the women characters of Śaṅkaradeva's literary works, through whom the teachings of his cult is expressed, spread and preached, and the women, who are mentioned in his hagiographical accounts, for whose contribution, Śaṅkaradeva could initiate a new *bhakti* cult, have played the role of spokespersons either directly or indirectly in preaching and spreading his *bhakti* cult. All these questions need to be discussed to define the social status of women and their role in the preaching and spreading of Śaṅkaradeva's *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma* as well as in the development of a society in the prospect of present day's women-welfare. From these points of view, the topic selected for the research work is deemed significant. No sufficient discussion on this topic has been come to the notice of the researcher.

1.9. Scope of the study

The women as depicted in the literary works of Śaṅkaradeva through whom the might of Kṛṣṇa is revealed expressed and spread, and the women who are mentioned in the hagiographical accounts of Śaṅkaradeva are included in the present study. The women who are mentioned in the songs of Śaṅkaradeva have played little role in the preaching and spreading of his cult, therefore, they are excluded from the discussion of the present study.

1.10. Research questions

- i. Did women play the role of spokesperson of Śaṅkaradeva's *Bhakti* Cult?
- ii. Was Śaṅkaradeva liberal or free from male chauvinism in portraying his women characters?
- iii. Did Śaṅkaradeva portray the women characters as enthusiastic devotees in his writings?
- iv. Is there a dominant tone of feministic view in any literary works of Śaṅkaradeva?

1.11. Objectives of the study

- i. The analysis of the role of women as spokespersons of Śaṅkaradeva's *bhakti* cult as revealed in his writings
- ii. The analysis of the modes of *bhakti* followed by the women of Śaṅkaradeva's literary works
- iii. The analysis of the influences of different women in different stages of Śaṅkaradeva's life and their consequences
- iv. The defining of the outlook of Śaṅkaradeva towards women

1.12. Hypotheses

The following are the hypotheses selected for the research work.

- i. Śaṅkaradeva highlighted a few women characters as devotees to preach *Eka-Śaraṇa-Hari-Nāma-Dharma*.
- ii. As a social reformer, Śaṅkaradeva cherished a liberal outlook towards women.
- iii. Śaṅkaradeva was influenced by women at different stages of his life, and these are revealed in his writings.
- iv. Śaṅkaradeva elevated the position of women above their men folk in terms of *bhakti*.
- v. In most cases women characters proved to be the spokespersons of the saint's *bhakti* cult.
- vi. In his writings women characters received priority as heightened role.

1.13. Methodology

Collection of sufficient and adequate data from different sources and their proper analysis is the fundamental condition of proceeding in a research work. The data for this study have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data have been collected from the original literary works of Śaṅkaradeva and from his hagiographical accounts, and the secondary data have been collected from different books, references, Research Theses, Research Journals, periodicals, magazines, souvenirs, and visiting different websites. After collecting the data, they have been discussed in descriptive method.