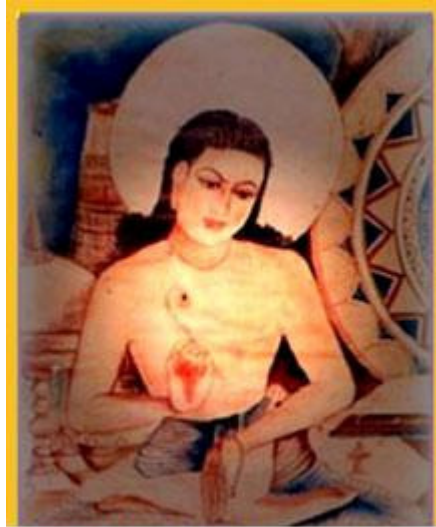


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Sankardeva and His Prose

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.



Imaginary portrait of Srimanta Sankardeva by Bishnu Prasad Rabha
Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Srimanta_Sankardeva

1. 1 Introduction – Plays of Sankardeva, Beginnings of Assamese Prose in Writing

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12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

Saint Sankardeva (15th-16th century) was not only the founder of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam but also the first person to exercise the use of Assamese prose in writing. The most remarkable phenomenon in the history of Assamese literature is that it was Sankardeva who started a new genre of literature in the Assamese language.

The earliest available Assamese prose writing is found in the form of *plays* that were composed by Sankardeva. The much travelled saint Sankardeva happened to visit most of the pilgrim centers of India. Undoubtedly, he had seen the dramatic performances in different parts of the country. In addition, there are so many popular dramatic performances in Assamese society since time immemorial. These might have influenced him to develop a new form of literature in the Assamese prose.

It should be mentioned that the playwright styled these plays as *nat or nataka*. Later on these plays gained the popularity as the *Ankiya nat* (a drama, one act play). Now it is considered as one of the generic terms in Assamese literature.

1.2 Prose of the *Ankiya nat*

The *ankiya nat* witnessed the first Assamese prose. The prose used by the playwright is known as *Brajawali*. To exalt the *bhakti* (devotion) in the mind of the common folk, Sankardeva might have used the language *brajawali*, as it was prevailing language of *brajadhama*, the home of lord Krishna.

Scholars and researchers very often come to the conclusion that the language of these plays is nothing more than an artificial language. S. N. Sarmah states that *the genuine Assamese Prose Literature is created by Bhattdeva*¹. He, of course, asserts that *Brajawali, is an artificial language, a blend of Maithili with the then Assamese language*.² Maheswar.Neog, on the other hand illustrates that *the prose literature created by*

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12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

*Sankardeva cannot be deemed as the actual Assamese Prose*³. It could be mentioned here that the author, later remarked, *Sankardeva was the sole pioneer of Assamese prose who composed **ankiya nat** in a mixed Indian language*⁴. But beforehand, Birinchi Kumar Boruah put on record that *the first Assamese prose literature emerged in the **Ankiya nat** composed by the great saint Sankardeva himself*.⁵

Furthermore, he termed the language of the *plays* as one of the dialects of the Assamese Language that was in vogue those days.⁶ According to Banikanta Kakoti, in Sankardeva's compositions '*there is a large admixture of what is popularly known as Braj-buli idioms.*'⁷ Even he states about the prose literature of Bhattadeva, that '*there is hardly anything remarkable in this prose rendering from the linguistics point of view, the diction is overloaded with Sanskritic words and the language is far less homely*'⁸

It has been already established that *the language Brajawali is a kind of Maithili mixed Bengali in Bengal and with Assamese in Assam with some earlier Aprabhansa and contemporary Western Hindi form.*⁹ Sankardeva the much explorer saint was a distinguished Sanskrit scholar who visited most of the sacred places of the country. Coming back from travelling, he composed these plays in the form of prose, which is popularly known as Brajawali. Birinchi Kumar Boruah illuminates that, *this literary medium was in vogue among the mediaeval Vaishnavite poets of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.*¹⁰ Perhaps he was impressed by them. At the same time, to influence the common folk, the playwright used such a language which is neither a spoken nor an unintelligible language, on the contrary it was a language through which he could draw the attention and develop an awesome regards and devotion among the common folk towards Vaishnavism. It is worth mentioning that the plays were composed with a religious motif.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

1.3 Initiator of Assamese Prose Writing

Now, the question is –‘Who is the father of Assamese Prose - Sankardeva or Bhattadeva?’ It needs to be clarified. It does not matter whether the prose is lyrical, mixed, dialectical or overloaded with Sanskrit words or less homely. *Ankiya nat* are composed in lyrical nature. Dialogues are used to elaborate the lyrical sentiments. By the *sutradhara*, situations and incidents are elaborated in prose. On the other hand, it is said that, Bhattadeva’s prose ‘does not give any idea of the spoken language of the time’. So, it has a great concern, not only with the scholaristic field or with the educated elite, but it carries a common interest of the people of Assam as well as in the realm of the world of languages.

The root of the prose used by the saint Sankardeva cannot be traced only to the home soil of Assam.¹¹ He was much conscious in using the morphological elements, vocabulary, phrases and other literary conventions imbued with the fragrance of home soil. The way he used the language in such a simple and forceful manner that the playwright won the laurels of becoming the father of Assamese Prose literature.

1.4 Morphological Comparison between Sankardeva’s Prose and Modern Assamese Prose

Plural suffixes:

<i>Ankiya nat</i>	<i>Assamese</i>
- <i>raja</i> : <i>rajax</i> (the kings)	<i>rajax</i> (the kings)
- <i>lok</i> : <i>xamajiklok</i> (the people)	<i>tumalok</i> (you all)
- <i>gopi</i> : <i>gopix</i> (milkmen’s wives)	<i>gopix</i> (the female prayer)
- <i>huti</i> : <i>huti</i> <i>x</i> <i>tini</i> (more wives)	<i>huti manuh</i> (many people)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

Plural meaning can be found by re-duplicating.

Ankiya nat

Assamese

ghchh ghchh (frequently)

ghchh ghchh (frequently)

pekhu pekhu (look)

sua sua (look)

Case-endings

Ankiya nat

Assamese

nominative: - ϕ ; rukmini bul (rukmini said) rukminiye k (rukmini said) - e ;

gopixbe bul (the milkmaids said) manuhe k (people say)

accusative: - k ; n rkh (the people) manuh k (to the people)

instrumental: - e ; lanje mehrawl (to wrap round with shame) laje meriyai dh rle (to wrap round with shame)

genitive: -r, -k ; nath (God) r nath (God)

Gender

Gender is distinguished by using different words and suffixes.

a. Different words : pita.... mata (father..mother)

 pti.....ptni (husband..wife)

 swami...xtri (husband...wife)

 raja.....rani (king...queen)

b. The feminine suffixes are –a, -i, -ini;

 -a: bhkt... bhkta (male worshipper.. female worshipper)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

-i : gop৮....gopi (milkman...milkmaid)

-ini : nilaj৮....nilajini (shameless man...shameless women)

The same procedures are used in modern Assamese too.

Pronoun

The reflexive pronoun in Assamese is, *-apuni* , *apon-*(oneself), it is remarkable that the said reflexive pronoun is found in the prose of *ankiya nat*.

- i. *krishn৮ lila apune ক৮lag৮lag*.(*ankawali.p74*)

apuni Krishn৮ lila ক৮bloi lagil (*mod. As.*)

Krishna, His goodself began to recite own glories (*Eng*)

- ii. *apuni d৮dhi m৮thite lag৮lag* (*ankawali, p.280*)

apuni d৮dhi m৮thib৮loi dh৮rile(*mod. As.*)

she herself was engrossed in churning (*Eng*)

Oblique Form

Nom.: *m৮i > hamu-*

m৮i > mo-(*mod. As.*)

I > my /me (*Eng*)

- iii. *hamu* thakite kun৮sinta thik৮s.(*ankawali, p.26*)

m৮i thakute kunu sinta nai (*mod. As.*)

Nothing to worry in my presence (*Eng*)

Acc.: *mo- > hama-*

m৮i > mo- (*mod. As.*)

I > me (*Eng*)

- iv. *hamak৮ k৮nath৮ k৮bi nahi*. (*ankawali, p.18*)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

*muk nith*כרוא ככריבא (mod. As.)

Don't make me feel forlorn (Eng)

Gen.: *mi*כי>hama -

*mi*כי > mo- (mod. As.)

I > my (Eng)

iv. hamarכ agמכמכ rukminik ככhכ giya.(ankawali, p.137)

mor agמכמכr ככtha rukminik kuagoi (mod. As.)

Inform Rukmini of my arrival (Eng)

Tense

Tenses are indicated by the addition of suffixes to the roots. There are three tenses, namely,

- Present, Past and the Future tense. Verbs are inflected for tenses.

Person denoting marker: 1st Person : -ō / -o / -u

2nd Person : -a

3rd Person : -a

Tense denoting marker: Past Tense : -/כ

Future Tense: -ibכ

Aspect denoting marker: -isכ

Present Tense

a. First Person

i *hrid*כיye alingכn ככye ככhכ (ankawali, p.43)

alingכn ככri ככō (mod. As)

Telling you embracing (Eng.)

b. Second Person

ii. *tuhu agu s*ככhכ (ankawali, p. 137)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

*tumi ag*תגב *bla* (mod. As.)

Go beforehand (Eng.)

iii. *tuhu h*תה *re haj*תה (ankawali, p.194)

tumi xunkale xaju hua (mod. As.)

Be prepared forthwith (Eng.)

iv. *tuhu tap*ת *tej*ת (ankawali, p. 200)

*tumi dukh n*ת *riba* (mod. As.)

Don't feel sad (Eng.)

v. *hamak r*ת *ikha k*ת *h*ת (ankawali, p. 129)

muk rakha ת ת k (mod. As.)

Save me (Eng.)

c. Third Person

vi. *gopi ka h*ת (ankawali, p. 60)

*gopie k*ת *i* (mod. As.)

gopi says (Eng.)

vii. *s*ת *khi tap*ת *sara h*ת (ankawali, p. 235)

*s*ת *khi*, *xok*ת *rihar k*ת *ra* (mod. As.)

Friend, be free from grief (Eng.)

Past Tense

a. First Person: ת

i. *hamux*ת *ב*ת *adham*ת *velō* (ankawali, p. 46)

*ami adh*ת *m*ת *h lō* (mod. As.)

We were mean (Eng.)

ii. *hamu krishn*ת *k*ת *swami paolu* (ankawali, p. 121)

*m*ת *I krishn*ת *k swamirupe palō* (mod. As.)

I got Krishna as my husband (Eng.)

iii. *hamu*ת *ngikar koie bul*ת *lu* (ankawali, p. 121)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

m i pr tigyā k ri k lō (mod. As.)

I said by swearing (Eng.)

b. Second Person

- iv. tuhu ki nimitte nahi m r li (ankawali, p. 125)

ti n m rili kiya (mod. As.)

Why must you not die (Eng.)

- v. srikrishn xire kuxum k khila (ankawali, p. 201)

srikrishn xir t kuxum k khile (mod. As.)

flowers were showered upon Krishna's head (Eng.)

c. Third Person

- vi. krishn bul (ankawali, p. 44)

krishn k le (mod. As.)

krishna said. (Eng.)

- vii. ohi buli srikrishn moune k h (ankawali, p. 36)

xeibuli k srikrishn m h i r (mod. As.)

Hence Krishna remained mum (Eng.)

- viii. krishn khedi aw k (ankawali, p. 156)

krishn khedi ahil (mod. As.)

krishna rushed towards (Eng.)

Future Tense

- i. hamu ki k h k (ankawali, p. 36)

m i ki k m (mod. As.)

What should I say ? (Eng.)

- ii. hamux k krishn k dekh k ,kat r k riye min ti k ribo (ankawali, p. 47)

ami krishn k sam, kat re min ti k rim (mod. As.)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

We shall see Krishna and will beg in benign (Eng.)

iii. *tuhu thir* כְּהִי *huiya* כְּכִי *h* (ankawali, p. 257)

tumi thirere thakiba (mod. As.)

Have patience (Eng.)

It is worth mentioning that aspect denoting marker ‘-is’ is rarely used to show doer’s continuance in Present Tense.

Examples

i. *thapi ohi pad* כְּכִי *renu axa* כְּכִי *rise* (ankawali, p. 64)

thapi teor pad כְּכִי *axa* כְּכִי *rise* (mod. As.)

Still his blessings are expected (Eng.)

ii. *Nar* כְּכִי *bul* כְּ he *Krishn* כְּ *tuhu bhumik* כְּ *bhar* כְּ *nimite* כְּ *rise*

(ankawali, p. 181)

nar כְּ *le*, he *Krishn* כְּ *tumi bhumir* כְּ *bhar* כְּ *nimite* כְּ *dh* כְּ *rise* (mod. As.)

Narada said, O Lord, you have incarnated to eradicate the evils from the earth (Eng.)

iii. *srikrishn* כְּ *bul*, e *is* כְּ *su* (ankawali, p. 195)

srikrishn כְּ *le*, m *is* כְּ *suei* (mod. As.)

Srikrishna said, ‘I am proceeding only’ (Eng.)

In Past Tense, the same is found inapplicable.

Syntax

The syntactic patterns are simple and straightway as also free from verbosity. It is observed that sentences have been made long by using more than one infinitive and punctuation marks.

a. Descriptive Sentence :

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12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

tahe **pekhi** כּהּתּרּכּחּכּהּ raja hridye muthi **hani** כּהּחּהּri ramchchndr כּהּכּהּg le **bandhi**

dhri כּהּכּהּri bol כּהּכּהּ (ankawali, p. 265)

take dekhi כּהּתּרּכּחּכּהּ rjai hiya dhkiyai, bare bare ramchchndr כּהּכּהּ dingit habti כּהּכּהּri
כּהּכּהּlQi כּהּכּהּrile (mod. As.)

Consequently the king Dasaratha, Embracing Rama, started to lament (Eng.)

b. Interrogative Sentence: No note of interrogation has been used to make interrogative sentence. The interrogative words have been used to express the sense.

Ex.:

i. ahe כּהּכּהּgi: ki bady כּהּכּהּ xuniye// (ankawali, p. 109)

he כּהּכּהּgi, ki bady כּהּכּהּ xunisō ? (mod. As.)

O' friend, what kind of musical sound am I listening ?(Eng.)

ii. bal כּהּכּהּ ram כּהּכּהּ kQise rak כּהּכּהּ hte dite sao: (ankawali, p. 239)

bal כּהּכּהּ ram כּהּכּהּ kenekQino raikhy כּהּכּהּ hat כּהּכּהּ tai dib כּהּכּהּ khuj ? (mod. As.)

How do you want to handover the child Rama to the demon ? (Eng.)

c. Negative Sentence: To make negative, a prefix '**na-**' comes , conforming with the initial vowel of the main verb and sometimes not.

i. m כּהּכּהּrite **najao** (ankawali, p. 211)

m כּהּכּהּri nathk (mod. As.)

Die not why ? (Eng.)

ii. banjuddhe **npari**.... כּהּכּהּri (ankawali, p. 214)

dhכּהּnu juddh כּהּכּהּ nuari..... (mod. As.)

Invincible in archery..... (Eng.)

iii. ucit **nuhe** (ankawali, p. 215)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

ucit nɔhɔi (mod. As.)

It's not just (Eng.)

Sometimes, to yield negation, unit word having negative sense is also used before or after the main verb.

i. *kisu sinta nahi kɔrɔbi* (ankawali, p. 239)

eku sinta nɔkɔribi (mod. As.)

Nothing to worry about (Eng.)

ii. *tuhu xtrijati kisu bujhɔyɔ nahi* (ankawali, p. 216)

tomalok xtrijatiye eku nubuja (mod. As.)

You, the woman folk understand nothing (Eng.)

Irregular verb 'nahi' is also independently used.

i. *mohi xɔmaɔ xubhugani awɔri nahi* (ankawali, p. 186)

mor xɔman xubhagini aru nai (mod. As.)

No one is as fortunate as I (Eng.)

Conclusion

From the inception of the period covering *Prahrad Charita*, vaishnavite era, mediaeval period, modern period till date, an immense transformation with remarkable changes have occurred in the areas of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexical context of the Assamese language.

After a minute and cross observation of all the components of prose literature contextualizing modern Assamese prose and the prose of *ankiya nat*, it can be established that none but the great saint Sankardeva is the father of Assamese prose. All sorts of ambiguities, controversies and doubts should be expunged in this regard.

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12 : 10 October 2012

Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.

Sankardeva and His Prose

Footnotes

- 1 S.N.Sarmah : *Asamiya Sahityar Samikhatmak Itibritta*, p.185.
- 2 idem. *Asamiya Natya Sahitya*, p. 22.
- 3 M.Neog, *Asamiya Sahityar Ruprekha*, p. 85.
4. idem. *Srimanta Sankardeva*, p.132.
- 5 . Birinchi kumar Boruah, *Asamiya Katha Sahitya(purani vag , p. 3.*
- 6 . ibid. p. 3.
- 7 Banikanta Kakoti , AFD. p. 88.
- 8 Ibid, p. 88.
- 9 S.KChatterjee, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilisation of India*, p. 62.
- 10 Birinchi kumar Boruah, : *Op.cit*, p. 34.
- 11 U.N.Goswami, *Asamiya Bhasar Udhav Samriddhi aru Kramavikash*, p. 122.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 10 October 2012
Deepak Gogoi, Ph.D.
Sankardeva and His Prose