ASSAMESE VAISHNAVISM ACCORDING TO THE GHOSARATNA

A Vaishnava reform movement against Tantrism and the cult of Durgâ began in Assam in the early sixteenth century. It centred around a new type of religious institution, called satra, a cloister-like meeting-place, from where it diffused through devotional gatherings, preaching, new songs and literature. Its leading figures were Šaṅkara Deva with his satra at Varalchung, Deva Dāmodar Guru who established his satra, first, at Patbaisi and then, due to persecution, at Cooch Behar with 12 disciples, and Harideva of Maneri. There are at present over 243 satras.

Deva Dāmodar's successor was Bhaṭṭa Deva, the first Assamese prose writer. His closest friend was another Dāmodar's disciple, Gopāl Miśra Kaviratna (fl. 1514-1578), who founded a satra at Khudiya. The Ghośaratna which he composed in verse has long been cherished by the Vaishnavas of Assam as the standard treatise of their bhakti cult. Hence, it is worth studying to get acquainted with this particular form of Vaishnavism.

The sources of this Vaishnavism are the Vedas, especially the Rgveda, the Upaniṣads and their overall Vedānta doctrine, the Bhagavadgītā, the Purāṇas, especially the Bhāgavata, and some Vaishnavas Samhitās (such as Brahma Rahasya, referred to in verse 291, Viṣṇu Dharmottara, verse 308, and Gautami Tantra, verse 262). References to the Purāṇas are as follows: Matsya (98), Padma (104, 107, 236, 240, 272), Nṛsimha (171), Gāruḍa (174), Agni (242), Nārada (175), Vāyu (243), Skanda (271) and Bhāgavata (34, 102, 124-126, 167-169, 186-189, and almost constantly from 483 to the end). It is to be noted that the Rādhā element of post-eleventh century Vaishnava bhakti is totally absent whereas it is prominent in contemporary sixteenth century Caitanya Vaishnavism. Of Bhagavadgītā, the 18th book is summarized 158 ff. Because of its allegiance to Vedas and Upaniṣads, Assamese Vaishnavism identifies itself as sanātana Dharma, the eternal religion. Yet Gopāl Miśra situates it more precisely when he says: "The four Vedas become the wish-yielding tree, the Bhāgavata becomes its chief fruit... This that has been told by the son of Devaki is the only essential scripture" (124-126).
After the normal dedication, Śri Kṛṣṇāya namah, Gopāl Miśra glorifies and takes shelter under the feet of Kṛṣṇa Dāmodara, Śrīmanta Saṅkara who “dived deep into the ocean of milk of the Bhāgavata (Purāṇa)” (3) and “became supremely happy by chanting the Names in the holy and good company of Rāmrām Deva, (his Brāhmin companion and family priest)” (4) and Śrīmanta Mādhava (5). Then, with a touching humility, he declares, “I am really a very sinful man and disloyal to the Lord’s service… but you all, (my companion-devotees), please grace me… and take me as your own and allow me to compose a little about Govinda (Kṛṣṇa)... When a lion… roars aloud, many of the beasts flee away out of great fear, but the cub of the lion tries to follow his example and he also begins to roar a little” (6-8).

Following the translator’s introduction, we may bring the topics of Ghośāratna under three broad heads: Tattva or the true Reality, Hita or the Way, and Puruṣārtha or the Goal of man.

1. Tattva: The knowledge of Reality came to the author from his guru, Deva Dāmodara, of whom he says, “Hari (the Lord Viṣṇu), filled with unbounded pity, took the form of Deva Dāmodara and once more descended as a saint chanting always the name of Kṛṣṇa... (so that) he hears the ecstasy of his own glory by remembering it... I can have no other than such a master” (20-23). This is the teacher who “spread over the land the religion of listening to (śravaṇa), chanting (kīrtana) and remembering (smaraṇa)” (27).

The Reality to be known (jñāṇa), praisefully loved (bhakti) and constantly focused upon (dhyāna) is Kṛṣṇa. He is “the support of this world and matchless in all kinds of happiness” (32). “By his grace the dumb get the power of speech and the lame can climb up mountains” (33). He is Rāma (37). He is Hari:

Satya vastu Hari — jānā niṣṭa kari;
prapaṇaśca ito asatya;
hi hetu satyar sakāṣata thāki
satya hena prakāśanta.45

(Hari is the true Reality — know this for certain;
this expanded world is non-Reality;
as it stays very close to the Reality,
it appears to be the Reality).

This is basic Vedānta non-dualism: “God being manifested in all, all appears to be real” (50). “If you ask, ‘Since the world exists with God and is phenomenal, inert and imbued with the guṇas (of Prakṛti), how can God be void of guṇas?’ The answer is that this doubt is in no case to be raised. Hari is pure Consciousness, Hari being manifested by his true nature (svarūpa prakāśī), the deceit of māyā has been removed far away” (60-61).
“As Hari is immanent in all things, bereft of God nothing lasts and everything becomes illusory in a moment” (67). “Know, therefore, that Hari dwells in all that exists... If you say that Prakṛti appears to be the cause of the world, and creation, preservation and destruction are done by its three guṇas, that is wrong; God is the cause” (69-70). “The entire universe becomes manifested as real due to his presence” (95).

2. Hita: “The only essential scripture is this (Bhāgavata) that has been told by (Krṣṇa), the son of Devaki. The only God is the son of Devaki. The only real action is the service of God alone, says the scripture. And the only worthwhile mantra is really the name of Krṣṇa alone” (126).

There are nine forms of this service of Krṣṇa: śaraṇa, bhajana, bhakti, śravaṇa, manana, adhyāpana, sīla, śikṣā, and svabhāva (127).

Śaraṇa (refuge) consists in taking refuge in Krṣṇa. It has three degrees: basic, intermediate and superior. Basic (prākṛta) śaraṇa consists in giving up one’s hopes in the gods (devatā) as well as one’s affection for children and practising faith in Hari alone (129). Intermediate śaraṇa consists in giving up hopes based on (pilgrimages to) holy places, penance and repetition (of mantras) and in worshipping Hari with body, mind and speech (130). But the best śaraṇa is that in which one gives up all desires for mundane objects and cherishes only the devotion of love (prema bhakti) towards the Lord of the universe, filling one’s mind with the chanting of his names (131).

Bhajana (worship) is also threefold: it is lower when one worships Krṣṇa in the form of an idol, middle when one bows down to one’s betters, treats friendly one’s equals and shows mercy to the poor, highest when one closes one’s ears to the world and utters the name of Krṣṇa alone. “By this kind of bhajana the devotee makes God subservient to him” (132-134).

Bhakti (devotion) is ordinary if the devotee’s mind remains fixed in God only so long as he chants his sports (līlā); intermediate if his body becomes thrilled with joy when he hears the stories of Krṣṇa; supreme if his mind rests in the real nature of Krṣṇa, who is pure Knowledge, Consciousness, Bliss, and he realizes in his heart that the Great One lives on in him; thus he attains eternal and undivided ecstasy of love and stands beyond mundane delight and distress (135-138).

Śravaṇa (hearing) and the next five are similarly threefold. Let it suffice to indicate their highest form. The best śravaṇa goes beyond mere hearing. It is attained when the devotee himself understands and makes others understand the līlā of Hari, hearing its narration with discerning penetration and thereby finding ecstatic delight (141).
Manana (rational consideration) attains its maximum when the devotee considers the universe not only as an embodiment of God but as Consciousness itself (144).

Adhyāpana (teaching) is best when one relates the story of Kṛṣṇa in the company of the good and makes others understand it with great joy, one's mind being enraptured by the charm of chanting the names of Hari (147).

Śīla (conduct) is best when one has no desire for the form of Hari but longs only for serving him after attaining him (150).

Śikṣā (training) becomes best when one ceases to worry about knowledge and action and, meditating on Hari within the mind, serves the saints earnestly by the advice of the guru, reveres them and adopts their motto (153).

Svabhāva (nature) reaches its optimum in him who, renouncing both mundane and Vedic rites, realizes devotion and waits upon his guru only (156). “The happiness of service of the devotee removes the distress of saṁsāra (the world of rebirths) and You become the friend of your devotee. The doer (adept of rites) and the knower (gnostic) do not obtain this” (166). “Through your grace, the devotee crosses over māyā (illusion) and You become subservient to him” (167).

It is in the Satsaṅga, the ‘company of the saints’, that the devotee should practise those nine forms of devotion. “The practice of yoga cannot make Me so much subservient to the devotee as the company of the saints for this is most excellent” (179). “Vaiṣyas, Śūdras, women and many of the degraded castes... attained Me from time to time and realized my true nature. They were not fit for Vedic rites, but they simply kept the company of the saints and they sang the song of my praise with love” (181). “I cannot be realized by performing sacrifices, controlling the senses, obtaining knowledge, making charity, observing vows, undertaking penance, study, renunciation and repetition of mantras. They realized Me with great joy in the company of the Vaiṣṇava saints” (185). “The milk-maids, worshipping Me with attachment and all the while looking upon Me as their paramour, could not know Me truly; yet, oh friend, by virtue of the holy company, they attained Me in full and saved many other numberless selves also” (189). “The company of the saints is My company, and there is little difference between Me and the saints” (192). “The moment a man takes the company of a Vaiṣṇava, he reaches all happiness... Even liberation (from rebirths) is not looked upon as equal to this” (195). “The saints are free from sorrows and they engage their minds always in Me, free from anger, equanimous in all, devoid of pride and selfishness, indifferent to happiness and distress, and they cherish devotion for Me after giving up attach-
ment to family life. Therefore, those who keep the company of such saints attain Me easily” (197-198).

In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Vṛṇdāvana is the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa and the place of his sports as a child with his friends, the cow-boys and the milk-maids. Therefore the prayer (prāthana) of the devotee is this: “I wish to be born as one of the trees of Vṛṇdāvana so that I may bear on my head the pollens of the dust of the feet of any one of the milk-maids again and again. ...Kṛṣṇa himself took also the dust of the Vaishṇavas on his head” (220-221). “To be born in India is a matter of yearning even for the gods” (229). “The land where the Lord himself gets his birth for the welfare of his devotees is the place where we shall surely be devoted to the Lord” (233). Such a birth in a human body is a great blessing: “The whole human body acts as a boat to cross this ocean of saṁsāra, and the guru is verily the boatman of this boat. I myself am the favourable wind” (234).

Nāmara Mahimā, the greatness of the Name (of Kṛṣṇa), is shown in this that it accomplishes seven ends: the Name burns out all sins, generates virtues, produces aversion for (mere) heaven, engenders unalloyed devotion to the lotus-feet of the guru, generates true knowledge, is the greatest atonement for all sinners and makes one cross the ocean of the world (236-243). A whole litany of divine names is poured down like a shower (nāmara jhumuri) from 224 to 251. The degenerated age of Kali has only one good merit which is that now, just by chanting Kṛṣṇa’s Name, one attains liberation (255-258). “No sinner can commit as many sins as the Name can remove” (261). Whereas a Brahmin uninterested in Kṛṣṇa fails to get the fruit of his Agnihotra sacrifice, an outcaste Chāndaśa becomes purified and great when he recites the divine names and utters Rāma Kṛṣṇa with his tongue (269-270). “This is the only essence of all the scriptures including the Vedas, the Purāṇas and the rest; and know it for certain that Rāma Nāma is the fruit which is easily accessible and sweet” (278). This exaltation of the Name stands as the focus of the Ghoṣāratna which in many verses shows it to be beyond any compare (269-288). “Oh Rāma, your Name is great and it is greater than You... Even You are not equal to your Name” (289). “At the time of death of my own devotee, I arrive at his heart and I myself remember within the mind the name of Kṛṣṇa. He uttered ‘Kṛṣṇa’ previously and I am indebted for this; and I repay my dues to him by granting him salvation” (337). Curious derivations of the name ‘Kṛṣṇa’ and its equivalents are provided (348-379) and followed by lyrical prayers and praises (380-426). The exemplary legend of Prahlāda is recalled (435-439).
3. *Puruṣārtha* (Man’s Goal). The effects of this whole manner of conduct centred on the Name are essentially saving knowledge of the one insurpassable God and blissful salvation itself. They are pointed out in the midst of praises and prayers.

“You are the Lord of the universe, please make my mind always pine for You” (451). “I am creature... and You are Bhagavanta, the ever blissful God. The difference between You and me is very great” (453). “I am a part of You but māyā ties me up. Now order me to the service of your feet” (454). “Man cannot be saved from the jaws of death except by the grace of Hari” (456). “Giving up then the painful means (sādhana) and sticking to your grace by the mind, I shall attain perfect happiness with delight” (458). “I shall go to the company of the saints free from jealousy... and I shall not again take up a body” (460). “Brahmā and the other gods do not reach to your end and even You do not know the end of your essence... As You have no end, I simply bow down at your feet” (462). “Gopāl Mīśra says that Hari is the essence of all” (469). “You are the Friend, You are the God, You are my Life” (473). “He who saves from the ocean of becoming is called a friend” (477). “O merciful One, the self does not know your grace even though You stay within the heart. You are the Goal, You are the mind’s Purpose and, by attaining love of your feet, the self forgets sanātana” (478).

Part of this saving knowledge is to know that Kṛṣṇa descended again and was born as the Brāhmin Dāmodara, the author’s guru, according to the promise made by Vyāsa in the Purāṇas that another avatāra would come, named Kalkī (483-491).

One must also know the power and primacy of divine grace. “People become bewildered as to the difference between grace and human effort. But Hari says to Brahmā that grace is the chief... Hence, considering that grace is primary, make efforts... There is no doubt about success when grace and efforts are combined” (494-495). “O Hari, I am a great fool and do not deserve your grace... Remembering only your quality of grace, I ruminate your specific name, Patita Pāvana (Purifier of the fallen)” (500). “O Hari, I am very poor and You are the friend of the poor (Dīnabandhu)” (503). “O Hari, giving up the desire for mundane objects, I shall obtain perfect bliss by listening to the nectar of your story” (505). In this story, Kṛṣṇa is depicted as eminent in all manners of love: filial, friendly, romantic, etc., and as accepting all types of reciprocal love (513-529).

The salvation one obtains is more than purification from sins and end of rebirths: “those who give up vain knowledge and honour your talk by body, speech and mind, actually conquer You although You are unconquerable in the three worlds” (531). “Kṛṣṇa gives them his own Feet” (546). “And the Ganges coming
out of his Toes as it were removes all sins by means of faith alone” (567). “By bowing down with faith and self-surrender one can destroy saṁsāra” (602). “When a wise man surrenders his body to Me by giving up all his actions, he becomes good then and there, and becomes equal to Me and crosses over the (world of) becoming with power and wealth” (625).

The power of loving devotion is so great that it literally conquers God who “makes Himself subservient to his devotees” (679). “My single-minded devotee binds Me with the rope of love... I do not think Myself to be perfect without my devotees. Who else is equal to My devotee in the three worlds?... The devotee makes Me obedient to him with his single-minded devotion as a chaste wife makes her husband do whatever she bids him do... The single-minded devotee is My heart and I am also his heart... I have no other favourite in the saṁsāra but such a devotee and as such the devotee is My life, wealth and vital breath. The devotees worship Me with speech and mind and I also worship them” (681-693).

The Ghoṣāratna ends with a long eulogy of Dāmodara as a perfect avatāra of Kṛṣṇa and of eighteen of his chief disciples and with an apology for the defects of the work together with an entreaty to use it nevertheless as an adequate guide-book for the successful practice of Vaishnava devotion.

It is, indeed, a pearl of mystical literature and discloses in brief compass and in lucid and ear-pleasing verse a type of Vaishnavism which, due to its geographical remoteness, has remained a little-explored area in the vast field of Indian studies. Its present English translation ¹ while being on the whole too pedes-


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