

## Assamese *Brajavali*: Creation and Srimonta Sankerdeva

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**Abstract:** *Srimanta Sankaradeva, the doyen of the Assamese race was an Assamese saint-scholar of medieval Assam. By using a common and all-pervasive language, "Brajavali" to bring unity to India Sankardeva had formed the base of Indian nationalism just in the Middle Ages. The important fact is that until 1826, Assam had not come under the geographical arena of India. So, it was the credit of Sankardeva to bring spiritual and cultural unity between India and Assam through the medium of the Brajavali language. When we analyse Sankardeva's writings, we find that three languages were used in his writings—Sanskrit, Brajavali and old Assamese or the language employed by his predecessors. Among his Sanskrit works is the theoretical work Bhakti Ratnakara. However some of theslukas of this book are not original, they are borrowed from other Sanskrit books. On the other hand, Sankardeva wrote Borgeets and his Ankia Natas (Drama) in Brajavali keeping in mind the people of the entire northeast, while his other writings were composed in the old Assamese language. Sankardeva had the purpose of propogating his Vaishnava religion behind his literary creations. The saint would have thought that it would be easier to attract the masses through the medium of dance, play,acting or song than through the other mediums. But when he used songs and dramas as the medium, another important idea was also in his mind, i.e., the use of a common national language, i.e. Brajavali. It is said that during his pilgrimage to different holy places in India,he came into contact with many vernacular languages and very easily acquired them, this thing is very natural from a linguistic point of view.In this way, Sankardevamay have learned to speak Oriya, Bangla etc. and deeply studied the lyrics of Maithili poets. From the linguistic point of view, it can be said that when a person passes his time in different places then a linguistic cross-connection happens between the native language of that person and the vernacular language of that place. Both languages influence each other and this influence is*

apparent more on the lexical level. Besides this linguistic viewpoint, it was not impossible that Sankardeva would create the language Brajavali by collecting the linguistic formula and vocabulary of various places in India. Though some scholars described the language of Sankardeva's Borgeets and Natas as artificial we can reject it directly. Because when we make an impartial comparison of the language of his nata's and Borgeets with that of the languages of his predecessors, with the language of Shreekrishna Kirtana, the language of Charyyapada, with Assamese standard language and dialect, we are in the opinion that Assamese Brajavasa is not a Maithili rooted artificial language. Its main base is the pre-existed literary form as represented in the Charyapada. Upendranath Goswami thinks that Brajavali has its roots in Assam is reasonable. On the other hand, the use of this linguistic form in the Ambari Stone Inscription in the last decade of the thirteenth century and the Gotal Stone Inscription in the last decade of the fourteenth century is remarkable. It is said that the great Assamese saint Sankardeva originated a distinct and common linguistic style, Brajavali, by mingling together not only various tatsamasardhatatsamas and tadvaba words but also different vernacular languages, languages of India, old Assamese words and grammatical characteristics, whose origin was in the soil of Assam. The linguistic knowledge of the great saint not only gives us the privilege to study the great literature flowing from his pen but also for the first time successfully represented Assamese social life and culture on the national stage through the medium of Sanskrit and Brajavali.

**Keywords:** Brajavali, Brajabuli, Artificial language, Phonetics, Morphemics and lexical

Sankardeva had a great purpose behind using the Brajavali language in Borgeets and the Natas instead of the Assamese language. His purpose was to bring unity to the states of India and also to make a bond between Assam and other parts of India through the medium of a common language like Brajavali. Moreover, in propounding his Vaishnava religion, the language of Borgeet played such a great role, that the researcher has decided to research the origin of the Brajavali language so that the researcher can acquire a deep and sound knowledge of it. Against the backdrop of perspective, the study intends to focus on the nature of the language of Sankardeva's Borgeets based on evidence from local newspapers, magazines and unpublished doctoral thesis including interview schedules.

Brajavali is the language invented by Assamese saint and social reformer Sankardeva and used in his Borgeets and Ankia Natas. However, there are many problems in studying this language. The first problem is in its identification, as both the terms Brajavali and Brajabuli are found in the writings of the writers. Rasaraj Lakhminath Bezbaruah uses both these words in his writings. According to Moheswar Neog, Brajabuli is a literary

language, but people call it Brajavali<sup>1</sup> by imitating them some Assamese scholars and authors also specify it as *Brajabuli*. The people of Assam, who live in Satras and sing "Lila" song and act play, call it Brajavali not as *Brjabuli*.<sup>2</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen specifies *Brajabuli* as the language of Mithilia's Khatriya family, *Brizzi*, and tells that it covers a large corpus of Bengali literature.<sup>3</sup> Kaliram Medhi, Dr. Horichandra Bhattacharria, Bapchandra Mahanta and other Assamese scholars used the traditional word *Brajabuli*. In the words of Bapchandra Mahanta, 'As this particular language was used only in the *Ankia Nata* and in the *namprasanga* of *satra* and the *sattriya namghar*, so only *sattriya* society and the people related to *satra* practiced this particular language. They had said this language as *Brajabuli*. However, the scholars started to use the word Brajavali in place of the word *Brajabuli*.<sup>4</sup> Mahanta again says that 'by the word *Brajabuli* nothing comes to our mind except *Brajabhasa*. But the word *Brajavali* brings to our mind a distinct linguistic style. Therefore, the word *Brajavali* is more appropriate than the *Brajabuli*.<sup>5</sup> Sukumar Sen wrote that Madhadeva, the disciple of Sankardeva, during the middle of the sixteenth century applied the word Brajavali.<sup>6</sup> However in Bengal the word *Brajabuli* was first used by the nineteenth-century poet Ishwar Chandra Gupta.<sup>7</sup> From these opinions, it can be guessed that this language had been used earlier in Assam than it was used in Bengal and Orissa. The use of the word *Brajavali* by Madhabdeva also supports this. However, the *Brajavali* of Assamese Vaisnava poets and the *Brajabuli* of Bengali poets are not always the same. Thus, the variance in name also indicates the linguistic variance.<sup>8</sup> The word *Braja* brings to our mind the *lilabhumi* of Lord Krishna. In Rig-Veda, the word *braja* is used to refer to the grazing fields.<sup>9</sup> Thus the language of the *Brajadhama* is called *Brajavasha*. The scholars cite that in the sense of the language of *Brajadham*, the words *Brajabuli*<sup>10</sup>, *Brajabolee*<sup>11</sup> and *Brajavali*<sup>12</sup> are formed. However, the word *Brajavali* does not originate from *Brajavasha*. The adjective *Brajavali* is formed by adding an *avali* affix to the word *Braja*. The use of the *avali* affix is found in the writings of Sankardeva. For instance, 'Chandravalirataratakale (Kirtans 22/27), Saratakale Chandravali Pai (Kirtana 23/299)'. As the *avali* affix is added to the word *Ratnavali* etc. So, it is grammatically correct to add *avali* to the word *Braja*.<sup>13</sup> Different scholars have offered different opinions on the language of Sankardeva's Borgeets or the origin of the Brajavali language. Here, a brief discussion has been outlined regarding the opinions.

Most of the scholars, who have opined about *Brajavali*, are agree on the point that Brajavali is an artificial language or a mixture of two languages. Sukumar Sen,<sup>14</sup> Birinshi Kumar Baruah,<sup>15</sup> Dr Satyandra Nath Sarma,<sup>16</sup> Maheswar Neog,<sup>17</sup> Bapchandra Mahanta<sup>18</sup> Bhulanath Tiwari<sup>19</sup> etc. All these scholars advocate that Brajavali is an artificial language. Most of them express Maithili as the base of Brajavali. According to Sukumar Sen, Maithili is its mother, while Bangla is its nurse.<sup>20</sup> Moheswar Neog focuses on Brajavali as an artificial dialect, 'with Maithili as its basis, to which is added

Assamese, with a sprinkling of Western Hindi. It is an artificial literary language.<sup>21</sup>

However, Sen himself is confused in his own opinion that Brajavali is an artificial language. So, it is unnecessary to discuss distinctly his opinion that Assamese is a Bangla dialect. On the other hand, he also writes that Assamese Brajavali has a direct relationship with Mithila.<sup>22</sup> Then he compares Brajabuli with Pali.<sup>23</sup> But the fact is that Pali is not the language of original writing, it is only the language of translation. On the contrary, Brajavali is the medium of authentic creation, not of translation. Therefore, Pali is incomparable to that of Brajavali.<sup>24</sup> Hence, the comparison between Pali and Brajavali is completely unnecessary.

But the important thing is that a part of the scholars who declare Brajavali as an artificial language, a few lines later amplify it as an all-acknowledged language.<sup>25</sup> So, it is clear that his own opinion is contradictory. On the other hand, Sen amplifies his earlier opinion that Brajavali originated from 'Abahattha.' In this sense, it is the youngest Indu Arya Bhasa.<sup>26</sup> Thus he rejects his earlier opinion that Brajavali is an artificial language.

Another scholar also describes that it is not Maithili but western Hindi is the basis of Barjabuli. However, this opinion is also baseless. It is unreasonable to express such an opinion only by noticing a few elements of Western Hindi in Brajavali.

Dinesh Chandra Sen feels that Barjabuli, the language of a Mithila's Kshatriya family named Brijji, covers a vast area of Bengali literature (composed after the 19th century).<sup>27</sup> According to him, Barjabuli is the language of the Brijji people. But Dr. Konika Tomar<sup>28</sup> says that this opinion is also confusing. However, Grierson's successes more to spread more dilemmas about the origin of Brajavali.<sup>29</sup> According to him, the Bengali poets while imitating Bidyapati originated Brajabuli in ignorance. Though Sen earlier accepts this opinion of Grierson later he says that Brajabuli is not the property of any particular region. It is the all-acknowledged property of Arya Bhasa. To him is just a false guess to think that Brajavali originated from the imitation of the lyrics of Maithili poets. Sen's later opinion is indeed more scientific than before.

Now our research based on evidence would like to draw a view on the above differentiating opinions of the scholars. First of all, Brajavali, as the scholars say, cannot be accepted as an artificial language. Because our observation supposes that no scholar takes any artificial language to express his opinion, he will take the standard poetical language. Secondly, if Brajavali is an artificial language, the successors of Sankardeva would not use this language to compose their lyrics. It should be noted that until the nineteenth century lyrics were composed in the Brajavali language.<sup>30</sup> It is also the subject of notification that if Brajavali is an artificial language then there was no need to compose amateur plays in it. Sankardeva and Madhavdeva composed dramas only to act on the stage not for any

academic purposes. Thus, it proves that Brajavali was not an incomprehensible language during Sankardeva's contemporary society. The people of Assam could understand a national language along with their mother tongue. Pandit Bapchandra Mahanta rightly comments that there were such writers who composed literature both in their mother tongue and also in the national language Hindi. It does not mean that Hindi is an artificial language. The same fact can also be applied in the case of Brajavali. He says that some people created a confusing attitude about Brajavali as no linguistic analysis is found about it.<sup>31</sup>

Our point is that the language employed by Sankardeva and Madhabdeva in the Borgeets and Ankia Natas is Brajavali. It is a distinct linguistic style created by Sankardeva or a distinct edition of the old Assamese language.<sup>32</sup> The multilingual pandit Sankardeva originated Brajavali, common to the whole of India, to expound and propound his Vaisnava religion, whose main root lies in Assam.<sup>33</sup> It is said that Sankardeva composed his first Borgeet *Mana Meri Rama Charanahi* (o my mind rest on the feet of Rama) in 1488 in Badarikashrama when he had been on a 12 years long pilgrimage to different holy places of India.<sup>34</sup> According to Moheswar Neog, it is Sankardev's first Borgeet and also the first example of Brajavali.<sup>35</sup> Though, some believe that Brajavali originated in the writings of Bengali poets Jashuraj Khan and Omapati Oza, the period during which they wrote cannot be traced back to that of Sankardeva. Sankardeva is already recognized as the first Brajavali writer in Bangla and Orissa.<sup>36</sup> W.L. Smith opines that 'Barjavali or Assamese Brajabuli as it was formerly known is the vehicle of old impressive literature, virtually invented single-handedly by the Assamese saint and social reformer Sankardeva.'<sup>37</sup>

While we analyze Sankardeva's writings, we find that three languages are used in his writings-Sanskrit, Brajavali and old Assamese or the language employed by his predecessors. Among the Sanskrit works is the theoretical work 'Bhakti Ratnakara'. However, some of the 'sloka's of this book were not original, they were borrowed from other Sanskrit books. On the other hand, Sankardeva wrote Borgeets and his 'Ankia Natas (Drama) in Brajavali keeping in mind the people of the entire northeast, while his other writings are composed in the old Assamese language.

The saint would have thought that the Sanskrit Pandit could not find pleasure in reading literature and writing in vernacular languages. So, he used both Sanskrit and Brajavali in his Natas and surprised his followers. We can understand the theme of the play by reading it either in Sanskrit or in Brajavali language.

Sankardeva had the purpose of propagating his Vaishnava religion behind his literary creation. The saint would have thought that it would be easier to attract the masses through the medium of dance, play, acting or song than through the other medium. But when he used songs and dramas as the medium, he also kept in mind another important thing, the use of a common national language, *i.e.* Brajavali. It is said that when he had spent

his time in India's various holy places during his pilgrimage, he was familiar with different vernacular languages and very easily acquired these languages. Besides, it is also said that in this way Sankardevs would have learned to speak Oriya, and Bangla during his long pilgrimage period and deeply studied the lyrics of Maithili poets. From the linguistic viewpoint, it can be said that when a person passes his time in different places then there is linguistic cross-connection between the language of the immigrant and vernacular languages and thus both languages influence each other and this influence is more on the lexical level. Besides this linguistic viewpoint, it was not impossible that Sankardeva would have created the language Brajavali by collecting the linguistic formula and vocabulary of various places in India.

Though some scholars describe the language of Sankardeva's Borgeet's and 'Nata's as artificial we can reject it directly. Because when we compare impartially the language of his natas and Borgeets with that of the languages of his predecessors, with the language of Shreekrishna Kirtana, the language of Charyyapada, with Assamese standard language and dialect we are in the opinion that Assamese Brajavali is not a Maithili rooted artificial language. Its main base is the pre-existing literary form as represented in the Charyyapada. Dr Upendranath Goswami's opinion that Brajavali has its roots in Assam is reasonable. On the other hand, the use of this linguistic form in the Ambari Stone Inscription in the last decade of the thirteenth century and the Gatal Stone Inscription in the last decade of the fourteenth century is noticeable.<sup>38</sup>

Another fact that is important at this point that the languages which have a grammatical and lexical similarity with Brajabhasa, they are all originated from the Indo-Aryan language. Generally, it is natural to have pronounced, lexical or grammatical similarities among languages which are originated from the same root. To justify this, W.L. Smith sorted out some Maithili, Magadhi, Oriya and Assamese words.<sup>39</sup>

The important thing is that no medieval languages had acquired standardization. So, the grammatical and lexical elements of these languages are differentiated according to the writer and books, and to a certain extent, every medieval language borrowed elements from each other. The scholars have cited the examples of Bidyapati's *Kirtilata* and *Kirtipataka* to express the idea that in the formation of Brajavali, the Maithili has a deep impact or direct relationship. But when we analyze the language of *Kirtilata*, it becomes clear that nobody identified the language of *Kirtilata* as Maithili, till Bidyapati composed his book. He identifies the language as 'desi bhasa', which was an apavransha and the elements which Assamese writer Sankardeva has borrowed from other non-Assamese languages are common in both 'apavransha' and Maithili. As Assamese and Maithili originated from the same linguistic family, various similarities are found in their linguistic uses.<sup>40</sup>

There is another similarity between the language creation of English

poet Geoffrey Chaucer and Sankardeva. Geoffrey Chaucer, a thirteenth-century English poet is termed as the founder of English language and literature. He is also called the first English poet because English language and literature had not been before Chaucer. A proper English dialect had not also been developed till that time. First Anglo-Saxon dialect and then the East Midland dialect were used by English writers. During, Chaucer's time, the East Midland dialect was used by the writers of that period. However, Chaucer was not only a writer, he was also a political leader and performed the duty of a diplomat. He served first to King Edward the Third and then to King Richard Third. As a diplomat, Chaucer travelled to countries like France, Italy and Spain. Along with performing diplomatic duties, he was also engaging in creating literature. Thus, he contributed to the birth of a new language by enriching the East Midland dialect with the elements of rich French and Latin language. Therefore, the influence of contemporary Italian writers like Boccaccio, Dante and Petrarchis found in Chaucer's writings. At the same time, the direct influence of romantic poems of French literature is also found in his writings. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Sankardeva created 'Bargeet' and 'Natas' with a common language which was called 'Brajawali'. It is already discussed how Sankardeva gathered knowledge of various languages during his period of pilgrimage.<sup>41</sup>

It is evident from the discussion that the language of Borgeet has a similarity with the language of stone inscription of the thirteenth century to the language of Katha Ramayana of Raghunath Mahanta of the eighteenth century. So, it is certain that the language used in Borgeet is not artificial. Another fact is that languages which belong to the same linguistic family naturally carry some common linguistic characteristics. In the Borgeets of Sankardeva, we also found several words from Bengali, Oriya, Hindi, Maithili, Magahi etc. as all these languages originate from the same root, i.e. Sanskrit. Some of these words are in their original form in the Borgeets while others are used in a developed form. Most scholars think that the initial form of the Assamese language was found in the Charyapada. Because there are many similarities between the languages of Charyapada and the Assamese language. From this research, we found that there are many words in Sankardeva's Borgeets which have similarities with Charyapada. From this research, we found a similarity between Chaucer and the way he developed the Brajavali or old Assamese language similar to that of Chaucer developed the old English language to modern English. The great Assamese saint Sankardeva originated a distinct and common linguistic style, Brajavali, by admixing together not only various 'tatsamas', 'ardhatatsamas' and 'tadvaba' words but also different vernacular languages, languages of India, old Assamese words and grammatical characteristics, whose main root was in the soil of Assam. The linguistic knowledge of the great saint not only gives us the privilege to study the great literature flowing from his pen but also his linguistic genius through the medium of Sanskrit and Brajavali for the first time successfully

representing Assamese social life and culture on the national stage. Anyway, further micro-level research will bring a new focus to this vital issue.

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