

# ITP 2014

## Exhibition Projects

Name (s):

WUnglengton Yazing Shimray

Country:

INDIA

Project title:

" THE VRINDAVANI VASTRA : A CELESTIAL DELIGHT "

Date: 01/ September / 2014

# The Vrindavani Vastra: A Celestial Delight

The Vrindavani is a kind of massive tapestry unique to Assam, India, woven under the supervision of Saint Poet and Reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva in 16th and 17th centuries.

They were woven in the Karsana–Ghar at Patkausi, Assam. This object is a smaller version of a Vrindavani. It has several strips of coloured silk known as *lampas* and each strips was stitched together to form a whole. Each strip features several repeating images.

The narrative is centred on Krsna’s childhood at Vrindavan, where Lord Krsna spent his life in his human form in the company of cow-herds, cows, buffalos, their calves and so forth. The depiction is naturalistic with a lot of floral designs. Figures of birds and animals are profusely depicted as well. Many images like Garuda, various avatars, Krsna’s battle against the demon Bakasura, dances on Kaliya, the swallowing of the forest fire and hiding the “Gopis” garments in the trees and so on. Assamese script consisting of words Rama, Hari and Narayana are seen. Along the top are also attached four strips of Chinese brocade.

The Vrindavani is a ritual object that continues to be highly venerated among the people of Assam and its neighboring states. Its greatest impact in the region is social integration and cohesion, irrespective of caste and creed.







**THE BRITISH MUSEUM**

**VRINDAVANI VASTRA**

**A Celestial Delight**

[Vrindavani picture]

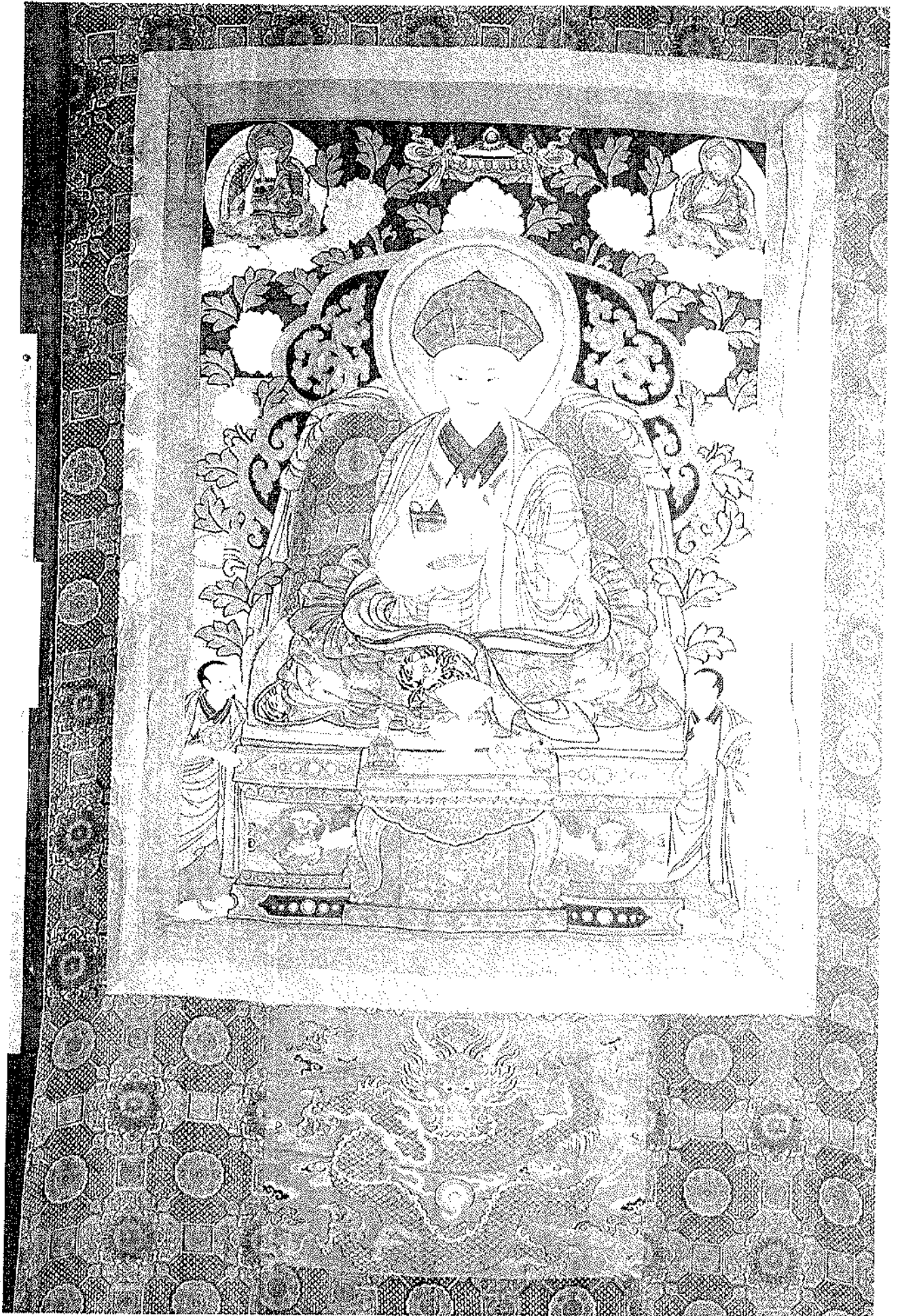
**10 October - 9 December 2014**

The Vrindavani Vastra (VV) is a religious object, highly venerated and used in eastern India in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The huge tapestry is made of several strips stitched together to form a whole. Each strip has several repeating images illustrating the childhood life of Lord Krsna at Vrindavan.

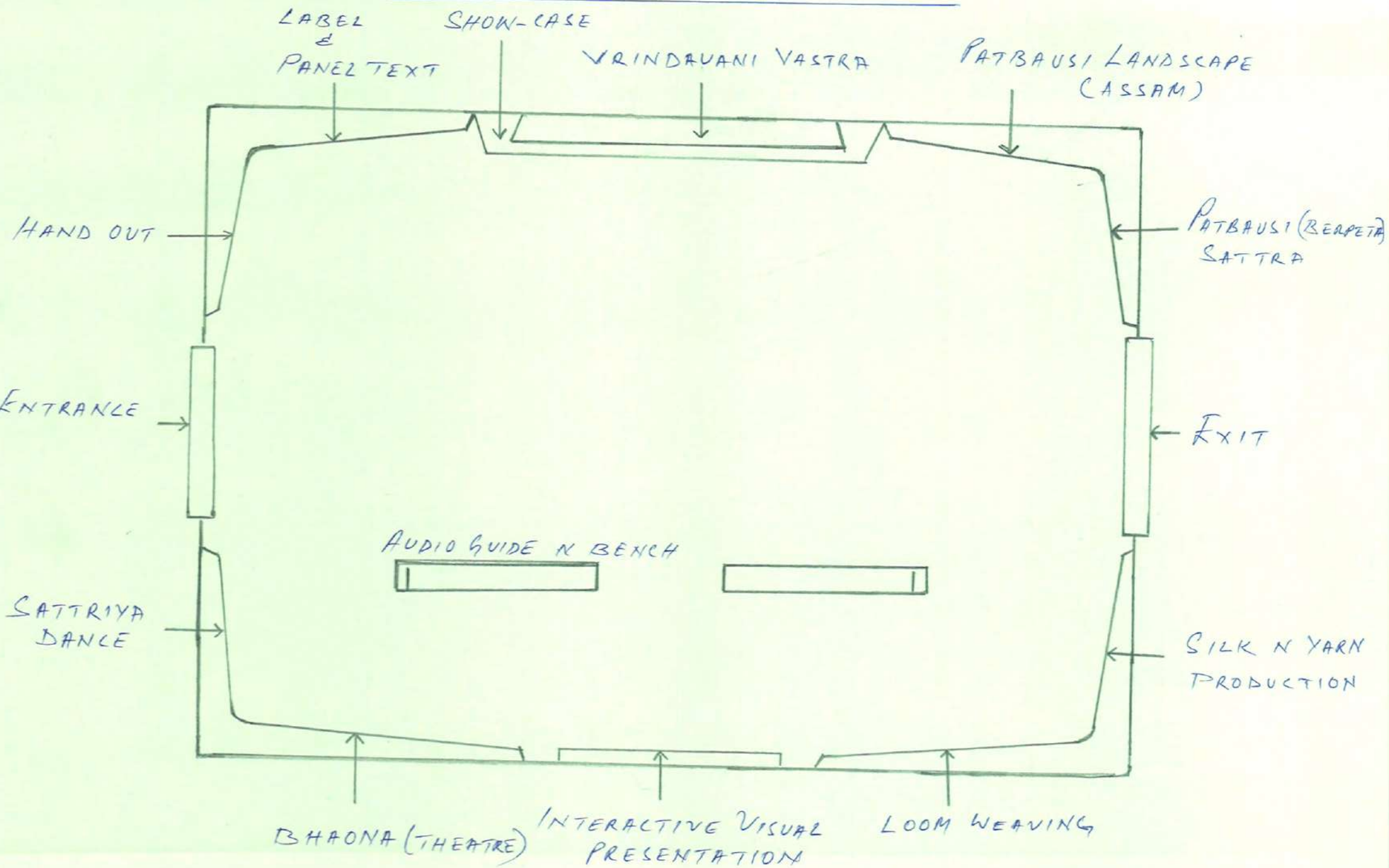
The images are: Krsna playing among the cow-herds, buffalo, calves; Krsna battling with the crane-demon Bakasura; dancing on Kaliya; the swallowing of the forest fire; and hiding of the "Gopis" garments in the trees and so on.

The VV was woven under the supervision of Srimanta Sankaradeva, a great saint and social reformer, on the request of the King Narayana and his brother General Chelarai of Koch Behar kingdom in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He engaged many weavers and made this beautiful tapestry measuring 60 yards long and 30 yards wide. The technique of weaving is also unique, a compound weave in which in addition to the normal warp and weft of the ground, a binding warp and pattern weft are used to make the design.

This type of tapestry was made in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries only, and now a few representative examples of this object are preserved in the British Museum and other leading museums in Europe and America.



# EXHIBITION PLAN AND LAY OUT



As1905,0118.4 PRN: EAS10748

COMPASS object number: OBJ4309

release to Collection Online:

Textile Collection

Strips of lampas-woven coloured silk, each slightly different, and each stitched to the next one. Each strip is made up of registers of repeating images illustrating Vaisnava and specifically Kṛṣṇa-related stories. For example, rows of Garuda images are seen, as are various of the 'avatars'. However, the majority are of images of Kṛṣṇa - battling with the crane-demon Bakasura, dancing on Kaliya, swallowing the forest-fire, hiding the 'gopis' clothes in the tree, and so on. They are all important elements of the Kṛṣṇa devotion associated with the Assamese mystic and teacher, Sankaradeva (d.1568). This type of textile is known in Assam as Vrindavani Vastra. Along the top are four strips of Chinese-style brocade and metal suspension loops, added to the original textile during the time that it was in Tibet.

Inscription details: Inscription (throughout) in Assamese in Assamese script

Length 937.00 cm

Width 231.00 cm

Bibliography: *Blurton 2006* p.55

Bibliography: *Crill 1992*

Bibliography: *Crill 1996*

Bibliography: *Borah 2008*

Date: 17thC(late)

Made in: Asia, South Asia, India, Assam (probably around Barpeta, in Kamrup.)

Found/Acquired: Asia, China, Tibet, Gobshi, Gobshi is on the route between Gyantse and the Karo La as one travels to Lhasa. Obviously, the textile - which is entirely Assamese and Indian in origin and iconography - must have been brought to Tibet from further south, and re-used in a Tibetan context. There is no functional connection between the Hindu imagery of the textile and the fort or monastery from which Landon acquired it in 1903.

Found/Acquired: Asia, China, Tibet, Gyantse Region, Gyantse (near)

Donated by: Perceval Landon

Permanent Location: BI/STX/AS/TIB/rack26/sh4

Curator's comments:

dberenguer

04 Mar 2008

Blurton 2006:

In Assam, just to the north of Bengal, devotion to Krishna is associated with the equally charismatic and saintly figure of Shankaradeva (died 1568). A miraculous story is told of how the 'Bhagavata Purana' came to be the basis of the devotional cult that he founded. A brahmin pundit, Jagdish Misra, came to Puri to read the 'Bhagavata Purana' to the image of Lord Jagannatha in the great temple (Jagannatha is the deity of Puri who is regarded as a form of Krishna). While there, he had a dream in which the deity told him to take a copy of the text to Assam, where he was to find Shankaradeva and read it to him, too. This Jagdish Misra did, reading all twelve books to the saint. The contents of the text had such a profound effect on Shankaradeva that from that time onwards he made this text concerned with devotion to Krishna the basis of all his teachings. One feature of this bhakti cult that was different to that propounded by Chaitanya was that it was practised almost entirely without images. The most important elements of the cult became congregational singing of the god's praises and the calling on his and Radha's names by devotees in prayer-halls, or 'namghars'.

A striking exception to the rule of worship without images is seen in the outstanding woven-silk textiles that use themes from the Krishna legend as the basis for their decoration. These were made in Assam for ritual use in the Krishna cult in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In one register after another they

show scenes from Krishna's life in Vrindavana, along with other mythological scenes. The Krishna stories illustrated include the defeat of the snake-king Kaliya and of the crane-demon Bakasura sent by the evil King of Mathura, Kamsa, to assassinate Krishna. Bakasura triumphantly swallows up the divine hero only to find him unbearably hot. He consequently has to vomit him out or risk being burnt to death, and Krishna then swiftly kills him. All these episodes are part of Krishna's 'lila', his play, for nothing can truly alter or interrupt his eternally graceful and delightful existence - all of which is so captivatingly different from the material world from which his devotees long to escape.

---

1933,0508,0.120

PRN: RFI1053

Students' Room Card: IF11900

release to Collection Online:

Thang Kha. Religious. Figure of a lama. Appliqued and embroidered on textile. The cloth backing on the reverse is made up of fragments of the so-called Vrindavani Vastra lampas silk, from Assam (see Bibliographic reference)

Bibliography: *Zwalf 1981* fig. 56 (p. 102-3) (caption on 102; image on 103)

Bibliography: *Crill 1992* p. 76-83

Bibliography: *Crill 1996*

Date: 18thC(late)-19thC

Made in: Asia, South Asia, Bhutan

Found/Acquired: Asia, South Asia, Bhutan

Donated by: Sir Charles Alfred Bell KCH, CMG

Collected by: Maharajah of Bhutan

Permanent Location: KEB/Mezz/Thangka 1

---



## SANKARDEVA - A VERSATILE GENIUS OF EASTERN INDIA .

One of the greatest saints of Medieval India, Srimanta Sankardeva ( 1449-1568 AD) has left his mark in the history of mankind. An epoch making personality , Sankardeva played his role as a Saviour of humanity , more particularly in the eastern parts of this country- the vast region , known as Asama-Kamrupa-Kamata of the 15<sup>th</sup> -16<sup>th</sup> centuries. This region then comprised the undivided Bengal and parts of Bihar and almost the entire North Eastern Part of India, He was a versatile genius – an ace swimmer and sportsman, a capable administrator , an intellectual, a social reformer, a spiritual guru , a visionary, an artist, a litterateur, a celebrated scholar , a linguist with sound knowledge and understanding of Assamese , Sanskrit Prakrit, Brajvali , Maitheli etc. He was an educationist , a musical master, an actor cum playwright , a strong votary of secularism and classless society , and above all a unifier of the people of diverse races, tribes and religions.

Son of Siromani Kusumbar Bhuyan , the then Governor of the principality of Bara Bhuyan, present central Assam and born to Satyasandhya Devi, the daughter of the powerful Bhuyan landlord, Sankardeva had the least inclination for the power and pelf of the mundane world. Having lost his mother in early childhood and father also after a few years of his birth , Sankardeva known as Sankar as a young boy was brought up by his grandmother , Khersuti. He was educated in a school of Mahendra Kandali , who added the epithet DEVA ( God) owing to his high erudition and many Godly qualities. He was married to Suryabati at an age of about 22 years , at the insistence of his family elders . Having lost his wife after three years of marriage , soon after the birth of a daughter , Sankardeva left Alipukhuri ( Bardowa- Present Nagaon district) , the place of his birth, accompanied by seventeen bhaktas( disciples) for an all India tour- his first pilgrimage. He travelled for a 12 year period, inclusive of Mathura, Brindawan, Prayag, Kasi, Ayodhya, Badarkasram, Dwarka, Jagganath , Puri etc. On his return to his ancestral village , Sankardeva now fully devoted his time to *Krishna Bhakti* or *Ek- Saran Nam Dharma* – monotheism with Krishna as his sole deity.

He now set up Nam ghar at Bordowa giving incitation to hundreds of devotees to his faith besides writing his works , the first such composition being the “*Harischandra Upakyan*” – a poetry in Sanskrit. He then took to vernacular writings in Assamese for the benefit of the not so literate common man. Earlier at the age of 19 years Sankardeva composed his first play “*Cinha Yatra*” and staged through paintings , music and illumination to the delight of thousands of spectators. Sankardeva playing the role of *Sutradhara* or linkman. This makes Sankardeva the pioneer playwright of the world, which in fact preceded Shakespeare by more than a century.

Sankardeva propounded a total surrender to Krishna or Hari a form of Bhakti or devotion to God, accepted by the Vaishnavite sect. He introduced his faith , in order to make the core of Bhagawat Gita easily accessible to the illiterate and down trodden masses as also the various ethnic tribes, who were practicing different religious rituals, and relieve the common man from the Brahmanical accesses of priestly classes and Bamacari form of Buddhism. Sankardeva was totally against animal sacrifices, the exploitation of the women and girls in the name of the religion , and the abominable human sacrifices , that was practiced in some temples.



(2)

In order to educate the people in the core of his religion and to attract the masses to his fold , Sankardeva introduced certain major innovations which were his own. These are the *Nam Ghars* or community prayer hall, musical instruments , the *Anka*- one act plays , the *bar git* or the Noble Psalm , the *Bhaona* or staging of his plays , *bhaoria* or the actors , instruments like the masks for different characters of the Ankas, costumes of Gods, kings, demons, warriors, jesters, imitation ornaments etc. He introduced different colours , using all indigenous raw materials ie, *hengul, haital, kajal, bali chanda* or silver dust etc for making up of the players . He introduced the *Sutradhar*- the linkman , hence the *Sutradhara* dance , now recognized by the Govt of India as a major classical dance form of India. The *Namghar*- the community prayer hall , where apart from daily *Nam Kirtan*( prayer) , religious discourses, social and educational problems of the village community are also discussed and resolved. Presently there are at least 100,000 such *Namghars* scattered across the state of Assam, which were all constructed by the village or local community. Apart from the *Namghars* each vaishnavite follower has a family prayer chamber at their houses known as the *Gosain ghar*.

Another unique gift of Sankardeva is the *Sattra* institutions, which he started at Bordowa, by establishing what he called a *Than* ( monastery) . Presently Assam has more than 600 such *sattra* which continue to serve as religious , cultural and educational centres. All *sattras* are private institutions built by the people , with their own toil, moil and money , whom choose the *Sattradhikars* or *Spiritual Head* . In order to promote his religion he produced a huge quantity of vernacular literature in Assamese, *Prakit*, *Brajavalli* and translated many Sanskrit scriptures into Assamese for the benefit of the common man.

A large number of talented disciples and followers of the saint , the more distinguished amongst them being *Madhabdev, Damodardev, Ananta Kandali, Ram Saraswati*, etc. Some of them composed valuable works based on the episodes of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* , the two great Indian Epics. The penultimate work of Sankardeva was the *Ram Vijay Nat*, which he composed at the request of the *Koch Generalissimo Chilarai* and also stages at his request. For writing these works *Sanchi Pat* or leaves from the bark of *Sanchi Plant* were generally used. *Tula pat* or paper made of cotton was also in use. Numerous literary creations were made in all branches of literature –prose , poetry, songs, hymns, stories, biographies, grammer and so forth by Sankardeva and his illustrious disciples For these reason Sankardeva's times are regarded as the *Golden period of Assamese Literature* also called *Sankari Renaissance*.

While propogating *Ek saran nam dharma* , Sankardeva and his followers incurred the ire of the priestly classes , who became afraid of losing their professional earnings . These led to a number of conspiracies against him, some even lodged false complaints to the *Ahom kings*. During his stay in the *Koch kingdom* with its capital at *Koch Behar* , where he shifted his place of campaign headquarters , through his extraordinary personality, virtuous character , erudition and unparalled debating skills , together with thorough knowledge of scriptures , he could overcome all opposition. Withen a short period a large number of people from all walks of life , both members of ethnic tribes and others , including socially inferior sections of the society joined his fold. This could happen without mush effort , due to the principle of equality , that he preached and practiced by making his religion accessible to all, without caste distinctions . Sankardeva treated every one on the same footing as the *dasa* or slave of Krishna or



(3)

Hari. Many members of the so called lower castes, tribals, scheduled castes and Muslims included were elevated by Sankardeva to the position of Atai and Deori quite high up in his religious order.

The Vaishnavism of Sankaradeva or Neo-Vaishnavism was in reality a local incarnation of the Vaishnava Bhakti movement in the country. It was devised to suit the local social conditions prevailing in Assam. The 16<sup>th</sup> century of the Vikrama era or the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century of the Christian era saw a religio-social renaissance in the country. It produced several giant saints and teachers with greatest influence in the society. They were Ramananda, Kabir, Sankardeva, Nanaka, Vallabhacharya, Chaitanya, Tulsidas. There were definite reasons for the appearance of the saints, and the role they played in the Bhakti movement. This was the age of resistance against the Mohammedan inroads on the Indian soil, the like of which was entirely unknown to Indian social and religious setup.

In Assam as well as the kingdom of Kamrupa-Kamata the genesis of Sankardeva's Bhakti movement had hardly anything to do with the originating reasons in Northern India. The rationale behind the launching of Sankardeva's Bhakti movement was to benefit the humanity, from the then existing social ills and religious prejudices. The exploitation of the socially downtrodden by the priestly class, worshipping of the female form as well as the phallus accompanied with sexual orgies, animistic and nature worships by the tribes, social discrimination on grounds of caste, religion and so forth were primarily the motivating forces behind Sankardeva's Bhakti movement.

Contributions to the economy.....

Sankardeva was a great promoter of cottage industry of which weaving occupied his unique personal attention. His supervision of the weaving work of the famous Vrindavani bastra is one such illustration. He engaged a large number of weavers in weaving the massive cloth. It took sixty persons to spread, roll back, tie and lift it. The bastra measured 60 yards in length and 30 yards in breadth.

The staging of the drama (bhaona) like cinha yatra engaged a large number of actors called bhaorias. The bhaonas continue till date in the original as well in the form of mobile theaters (Jatra Party). Thousands of people are engaged through these theaters.

Sankardeva introduced the system of distributing Prasad- (the holy left over of the religious eatable offerings) after Naam Kirtan (Prayers) all over the places of religious congregation. These Prasad composed of pulses like gram and green gram, available seasonal fruits, ginger, betel leaves and arecanut, coconut, sugarcane etc. The followers took the extra effort in producing them for common good.

Brass metal industry was also promoted by the introduction of taal or cymbals which are universally used in naam kirtan at satras and naam ghars, which still survives now. Lot of other bell metal utensils were also introduced for daily use for cooking or eating, and other religious purposes. A flourishing bell metal industry still exists in the Barpeta and Nalbari (Sarthebari) district of Assam.

Other forms of handicrafts got a fillip after Sankardeva introduced various kinds of musical drums like the khol, mridanga, daba, kanh etc. Other musical instruments that Sankardeva introduces are khanjara.



In staging of some dramas like the Cinha yatra , illuminations and fire works were put to use to give the right effect of the scenes. This might gave birth to the fireworks industry in Barpeta which is famous these days too.

Sankardeva encouraged cattle and goat rearing as curd, butter, milk , cream were very much used in the religious occasions. The dairy industry thus was encouraged. Sankardeva promoted cultivation of rice . After long hours of naam kirtan the bhaktas ate Koomal chawl –or glutinous rice with curd and jiggery. This tradition continues in upper Assam villages as well as towns .

Cottage industry like cane and bamboo, pottery, woodcraft etc flourished because of the demand of certain items for the bhaonas ( dramas) like goda, mukha- mask, and othe decorative as well as artificial weapons, religious furnitures like guru asana, mayor asan, gaduda asan, thaga, mythic animals, sarai religious items like earthen lamps, salita (lighting threads), dunari, bar pachi, baskets of different shapes and sizes, bamboo dolls, japi ( head gear) of different sizes etc. Sachi pat and tula pat or the writing pages for the manuscripts were prepared widely along with colours like haital, hengul, neel, angar, gerua mati (off white soil) were extensively used. The writing on manuscripts employed specialized proffesionals called the khanikars. The khanikars were also engaged in the painting works of the naam ghars ,and the sattras also in the construction of the decorated gates of the sattras and the some nam ghars.

The sattras were set in huge land grants. Some measured 21000 acres ( Auniati) . These lands were used for cultivations besides having the living and other departmental quarters .

It would be abundantly clear that Sankardeva's Ek sarana naam dharma and the institutions that he created for propogation of his faith as also his disciples and the followers had immensely contributed to the economic self sustainance of the people



PLATINUM JUBILEE YEAR Ph: 0361-2540651  
OF

ASSAM STATE MUSEUM

E-mail : assamstatemuseum@gmail.com

21<sup>st</sup> April, 2014 - 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2015

## Reasons

1. The tapestry is unique and only one of its kind in India.
2. Ideal principle of equality is preached and practiced under Shakti cult which also make accessible to worshipping God without caste distinction.
3. Sankarabera was totally against animal and human sacrifices in some temple, and also exploitation of women and girls in the name of religion.

Practice of









# **VRINDAVANI VASTRA**

**A tapestry made of silk and cotton**

**Barpeta (Patkausi), Assam, India**

**c. 17<sup>th</sup> century**

**Dimensions 937 x 231 cm**

**Donated by Perceval Landon**

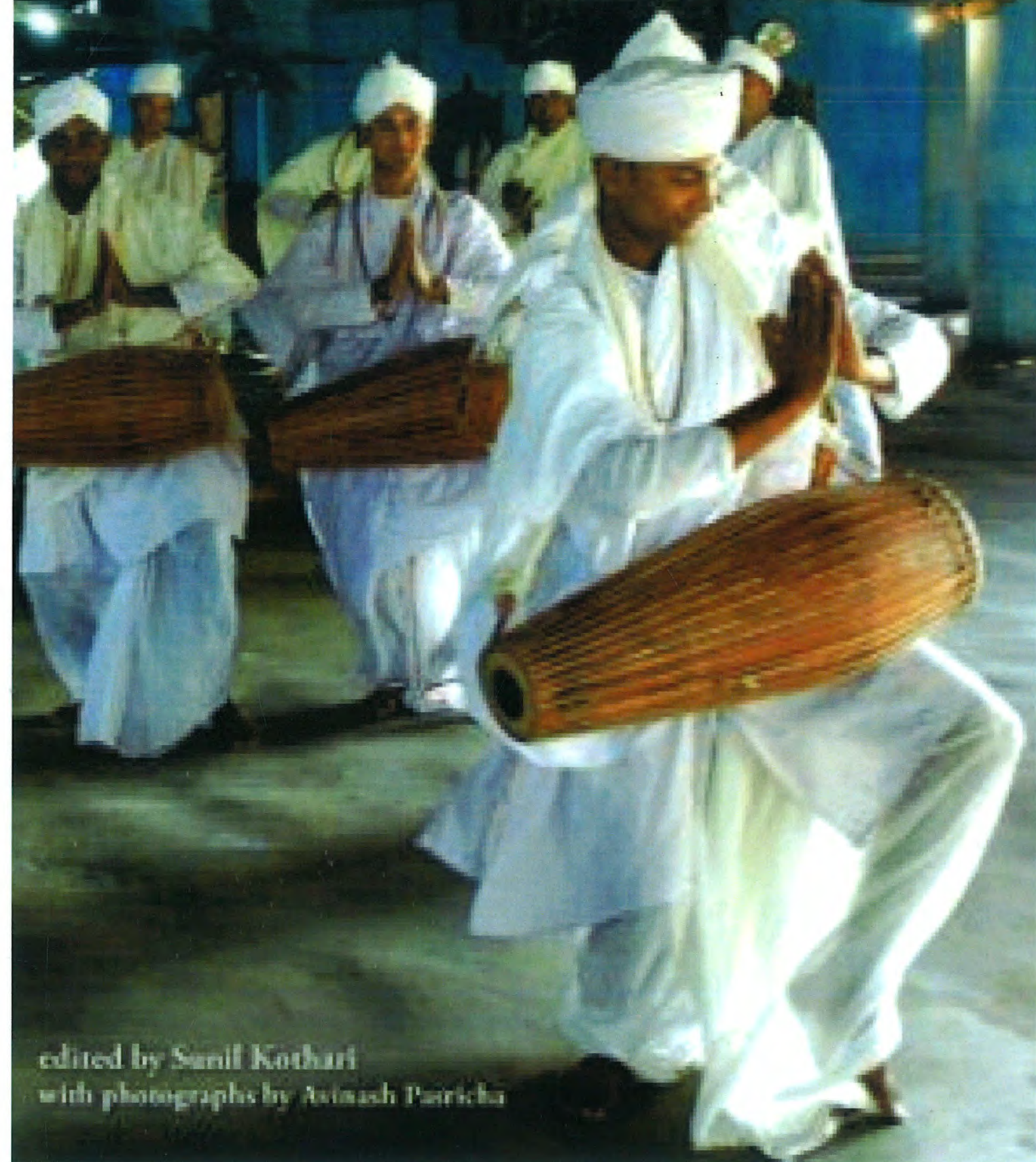
**As1905,0118.4**





# Sattriya

Classical Dance of Assam



edited by Sunil Kothari  
with photographs by Anirash Patra









# BARDUWA KIRTANGHAR

Diganta Talukdar's Photography



























