SOME REMARKS ON THE SUPPOSED
NĀRADA-PĀÑCARĀTRA

More than a century ago, in 1865 A.D., a Sanskrit text appeared in the Bibliotheca Indica as No. 38 of this illustrious text series. It bore the title 'THE NĀRADA PANCHA RĀTRA in original Sanscrit' and had been edited by Rev. K. M. Banerjea, Second Professor of Bishop’s College, Calcutta. The editor in his introduction to the work (pp. 3–9) praises the text as “one of the oldest, if not the very first, specimen of Vaishnava literature in Sanscrit”. “The only work which can contest the palm of seniority with it is the Bhāgavata Purāṇa…” (p. 3).

The popularity that this work immediately gained in Bengal is attested by the fact that in the following two decades at least three expositions of this work, including translations in prose and verse form, appeared in Bengali and the work was even translated into English in 1921 for the ‘Sacred Books of the Hindus’ series.¹

A work bearing the title Nārada-Pāñcarātra is, in fact, an important work of Vaiṣṇava theological-philosophical literature, although not as old as Rev. Banerjea would have us believe. It is frequently quoted in the works of Dharmaśāstra originated in North-East India, Bengal and Orissa as well as in the Agamas, especially in those belonging to the Bengal Viṣṇuism and composed in the 16th century by the six Gosvāmins of Vṛndāvana. It is the object of this paper to show that the Nārada-Pāñcarātra quoted by the older authors is an entirely different work than the one passed on to us under the garb of ‘Nārada Pancha Rātra’ by Rev. Banerjea.

The first scholar to examine the printed text of Nārada Pancha Rātra in some detail was perhaps Sir R. G. Bhandarkar, who in his work ‘Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and minor religious systems’² remarked:

¹ These expositions are:
(i) Śrīnāradapāñcarātram, tr. in Bengali by Rameśvara Bhāṭṭācārya and commented upon by G. C. Gosvāmī, Vidyaratna Press, Cal. 1873.
(ii) Nāradapāñcarātra, tr. in verse form by Sarvāṇanda Sudhi, Kavitā Ratnākār Press, Cal. 1886.
(iii) Nāradapāñcarātram, Samvāda Jñāna Ratnākār Press, Cal. 1887.

² Published in Grundriss der Indo-Arischen Philologie, Bd.III.6, Strassburg 1913.
The glories of the boy Kṛṣṇa are sung in this work... In this book Rādhā is mentioned as the highest of the women whom Kṛṣṇa loved... The exaltation of this woman is thus one of the main objects of this Śaṁhitā. The Śaṁhitā we have been considering, seems thus to be entirely devoted to the advancement of the cult of Kṛṣṇa of the cow-settlement or Gokula and his beloved mistress Rādhā, now raised to the dignity of his eternal consort. The Vṛīhas which form a peculiarity of the Pāñcarātra school, are not mentioned in it. The creed afterwards promulgated by Vallabhaśāraya is exactly similar to that set forth in this book. This Śaṁhitā, therefore, must have been written a short time before Vallabha, that is, about the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Rāmānujāyas consider the Śaṁhitā to be apocryphal.3

0. Schrader, an authority on the Pāñcarātra literature, writing only 3 years after Sir Bhandarkar shared fully the reservations of Bhandarkar and the Rāmānujāyas with regard to the text of Nārada Pānchārātra and in his famous treatise Introduction to the Pāñcarātra and the Aḥirbudhnyā Śaṁhitā4 he used the terms “apocryphal” (p. 3) and “spurious” (p. 3, 17) for it. He considered it a “strange misfortune” “that of all the works bearing the name of the Pāñcarātra exactly the one Śaṁhitā called Jñānāmṛtaśāra or Nārādiya was destined to survive in Northern India in order to be published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal under the name of ‘Nārada Pañcarātra’... and thus it happened that an altogether wrong impression of the latter (i.e. Pāñcarātra) obtained until quite recently in Europe and... even in India”.5

But once the text of the Nārada-Pāñcarātra of Bibliotheca Indica was thus adjudged to be ‘apocryphal’ by two great Indologists, the title Nārada-Pāñcarātra itself came to stand for an unguenuine work and no special importance was attached to the quotations from Nārada-Pāñcarātra found in many Vaiṣṇava works since they were all considered to be from a ‘late’ and ‘apocryphal’ work which could not have originated before 16th century. A good example of this tendency is the scholarly work of S. K. De entitled The early History of Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Bengal,6 who quite often speaks rather lightly of Nārada-Pāñcarātra in his work (cf. p. 200 et passim).

I was attracted towards Nārada-Pāñcarātra because of my pre-occupation with the works dealing with the pūjā of god Jagannātha who is identified with Kṛṣṇa.7 A number of the pūjā manuals of Jagannātha, which are mostly available in form of palmleaf manuscripts8 in or around Puri in the state of Orissa,