

Sankardeva and the Assamese Bhakti Movement

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Abstract

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568) in medieval Assam represents one of the most significant socio-religious transformations in northeastern India. This research examines Sankardeva's revolutionary contribution to the Bhakti movement through his establishment of Ekasarana Dharma, which emphasized devotional surrender to a singular divine entity—Krishna as Narayana. The study analyzes his multifaceted genius encompassing literature, music, dance, drama, and social reform that fundamentally reshaped Assamese cultural identity. Through his transcreation of the Bhagavata Purana, creation of Borgeet devotional songs, development of Ankiya Naat theatrical performances, and establishment of Sattra monastic institutions, Sankardeva created an inclusive religious framework that transcended caste, class, and tribal divisions. The movement's emphasis on congregational worship, vernacular literature, and egalitarian principles fostered unprecedented social unity while preserving distinct regional cultural characteristics. This comprehensive analysis employs historical methodology, textual analysis, and socio-cultural examination to demonstrate how Sankardeva's Bhakti movement not only transformed religious practice but also laid the foundation for modern Assamese cultural identity, creating lasting institutions that continue to influence contemporary society.

Keywords: Sankardeva, Bhakti movement, Ekasarana Dharma, Neo-Vaishnavism, Assamese culture

1. Introduction

The medieval period in Indian history witnessed profound transformations in religious consciousness, social organization, and cultural expression through various Bhakti movements across different regions (Das, 2013). Among these remarkable religious reform movements, the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition established by Srimanta Sankardeva in 15th-16th century Assam stands as a unique synthesis of devotional spirituality, cultural innovation, and social transformation (Hussain, 2021). Sankardeva's revolutionary approach to religious practice fundamentally altered the socio-cultural landscape of medieval Assam, creating an enduring legacy that continues to shape contemporary Assamese identity. Born in 1449 CE in Alipukhuri village near Bordowa in present-day Nagaon district, Sankardeva emerged during a period when Assam's diverse tribal and cultural communities lacked unified religious and social cohesion (Goswami & Bhuyan, 2022). His comprehensive reform movement, known as Ekasarana Dharma or the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, represented more than mere religious transformation; it constituted a comprehensive cultural renaissance that addressed spiritual, artistic, literary, and social dimensions of Assamese life (Kalita, 2023).

The significance of Sankardeva's movement extends beyond regional boundaries, as it represents a distinctive manifestation of the pan-Indian Bhakti

tradition with unique characteristics adapted to northeastern India's multicultural context (Sharma, 2021). Unlike other contemporary Bhakti movements that often focused primarily on devotional aspects, Sankardeva's approach integrated artistic innovation, social reform, and institutional development into a comprehensive system that addressed the holistic needs of medieval Assamese society (Neog, 2011). This research examines the multidimensional impact of Sankardeva's Bhakti movement on Assamese society, analyzing its religious innovations, cultural contributions, social transformations, and lasting institutional legacy. The study seeks to understand how Sankardeva's unique synthesis of devotional spirituality and cultural creativity established foundations for Assamese cultural identity that persist in contemporary times.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly examination of Sankardeva and the Assamese Bhakti movement has evolved significantly over the past century, with researchers approaching the subject from various disciplinary perspectives including religious studies, cultural history, literary analysis, and social transformation studies. Early biographical works by traditional scholars established foundational narratives about Sankardeva's life and contributions, though modern scholarship has refined understanding of his historical context and impact. Contemporary academic discourse, as exemplified by Goswami and Bhuyan (2022), emphasizes the complex interplay between regional identity formation and national symbolic representation in educational institutions named after Sankardeva. Their analysis demonstrates how Sankardeva's legacy functions as both a regional cultural marker and a symbol of broader Indian spiritual tradition, highlighting the

enduring relevance of his contributions to contemporary identity formation processes.

Recent interdisciplinary research by Kalita (2023) explores Sankardeva's educational philosophy and its implications for modern pedagogical approaches. This work demonstrates how Sankardeva's institutional innovations, particularly through Sattras establishments, created comprehensive educational frameworks that integrated spiritual instruction, artistic training, and social development. The research reveals striking parallels between Sankardeva's holistic educational approach and contemporary movements toward integrated, culturally responsive education. Historical analysis by Hussain (2021) situates Sankardeva's movement within the broader context of medieval Indian Bhakti traditions while highlighting its distinctive characteristics. This scholarship emphasizes how Sankardeva's approach to religious reform differed from contemporary movements through its systematic integration of cultural innovation, institutional development, and social transformation. The research demonstrates that Sankardeva's movement represented not merely religious reform but comprehensive cultural renaissance.

Social transformation studies, particularly the work of Das (2013), examine how Sankardeva's Bhakti movement functioned as a unifying force among Assam's diverse tribal and cultural communities. This research highlights the movement's role in creating shared cultural identity while respecting local traditions and customs. The analysis reveals how Sankardeva's inclusive approach fostered social cohesion without imposing cultural homogenization. Literary and cultural studies have extensively examined Sankardeva's artistic innovations, particularly his development of new literary forms,

musical traditions, and theatrical expressions. Research in this domain demonstrates how Sankardeva's creative works served multiple functions: spiritual instruction, cultural preservation, artistic innovation, and social communication. These studies reveal the sophisticated integration of aesthetic and spiritual dimensions in Sankardeva's comprehensive approach to cultural transformation.

3. Objectives

1. To analyze the theological and philosophical foundations of Sankardeva's Ekasarana Dharma and its distinctive position within the broader Bhakti movement tradition.
2. To examine the socio-cultural impact of Sankardeva's movement on medieval Assamese society, particularly its role in fostering unity among diverse tribal and cultural communities.
3. To evaluate the artistic and literary innovations introduced by Sankardeva, including Borgeet, Ankiya Naat, Sattriya dance, and vernacular literature, and their contribution to Assamese cultural identity.
4. To assess the institutional legacy of Sankardeva's movement through analysis of Sattria monastic centers and Namghar prayer halls and their continuing influence on contemporary Assamese society.

4. Methodology

This research employs a comprehensive qualitative methodology integrating historical-descriptive analysis with textual examination to investigate Sankardeva's Bhakti movement and its transformative impact on Assamese society. The study adopts a multidisciplinary approach combining religious studies, cultural history, and social transformation analysis to provide holistic understanding of the movement's various dimensions. Primary data sources

include Sankardeva's original literary works, particularly his Assamese transcreation of the Bhagavata Purana, Kirtan Ghosha, Bhakti Ratnakara, and dramatic compositions, alongside historical chronicles and institutional records from Sattria monasteries. Secondary sources encompass contemporary scholarly research, peer-reviewed academic publications, and cultural studies examining the movement's theological, artistic, and social aspects. The analytical framework employs comparative historical methodology to situate Sankardeva's innovations within broader medieval Indian Bhakti traditions while identifying distinctive regional characteristics. Textual analysis techniques examine philosophical and theological content of Sankardeva's works to understand his religious innovations and social reform agenda. The research utilizes systematic content analysis of institutional structures, particularly Sattria and Namghar organizations, to assess their historical development and continuing social influence in contemporary Assam.

5. Results and Discussion

Theological and Philosophical Foundations

Sankardeva's Ekasarana Dharma represents a distinctive theological synthesis that drew primarily from the Bhagavata Purana while incorporating Advaita Vedantic influences through Sridhara Swami's commentary Bhavartha-dipika (Gupta & Valpey, 2016). The movement's central theological principle, "Eka Sarana Nama Dharma," emphasized singular devotional surrender to Krishna as the supreme manifestation of Narayana, distinguishing it from other Vaishnavite traditions that included Radha worship or complex ritualistic practices (Neog, 2011). The philosophical framework developed by Sankardeva demonstrated remarkable sophistication

in adapting classical Vedantic concepts for popular understanding and practice. Unlike contemporary Bhakti movements that often emphasized either Saguna (with attributes) or Nirguna (without attributes) approaches to divine worship, Sankardeva's system acknowledged both dimensions while maintaining practical focus on devotional engagement with Krishna's personal form (Sen, 1977). This theological balance enabled the movement to attract diverse populations, from sophisticated scholars familiar with Sanskrit philosophical traditions to tribal communities seeking accessible spiritual practice. Sankardeva's transcreation of the Bhagavata Purana into Assamese represents more than linguistic translation; it constitutes theological adaptation that made complex Sanskrit concepts accessible while preserving essential spiritual content (Sarma, 1966). His selective approach to textual material, emphasizing devotional narratives while minimizing caste-based prescriptions, demonstrates deliberate theological choices that supported his egalitarian social vision. The resulting vernacular Bhagavata became the movement's central scriptural authority, establishing textual foundation for Ekasarana Dharma's distinctive characteristics.

Social Transformation and Cultural Integration

The Assamese Bhakti movement under Sankardeva's leadership achieved unprecedented social transformation by creating inclusive religious framework that transcended traditional caste, tribal, and cultural divisions (Das, 2013). Medieval Assam's diverse population, including various tribal communities, immigrant groups, and established Hindu castes, found unified identity through participation in Sankardeva's congregational worship practices and cultural activities. The movement's egalitarian principles challenged prevailing social

hierarchies without directly confronting established political structures, enabling peaceful transformation of social relationships (Hussain, 2021). Sankardeva's emphasis on spiritual equality, demonstrated through shared participation in Nama-Kirtan congregational singing and communal worship in Namghars, created alternative social spaces where traditional status distinctions became irrelevant. This approach proved particularly effective in regions where diverse communities had previously maintained separate religious and cultural practices.

The establishment of Sattras monastic institutions created new forms of social organization that functioned as centers for spiritual instruction, cultural preservation, and community development (Kalita, 2023). These institutions served multiple social functions: they provided education in spiritual and practical matters, preserved and transmitted cultural traditions, offered social services to surrounding communities, and created networks connecting different regions of Assam. The Sattras system thus became instrumental in developing shared Assamese cultural identity while respecting local variations and customs.

Artistic and Literary Innovations

Sankardeva's creative genius manifested through revolutionary innovations in literature, music, dance, and drama that established new artistic traditions uniquely adapted to Assamese cultural context (Mahanta, 2021). His development of Borgeet devotional songs created a sophisticated musical tradition that combined spiritual content with regional melodic forms, producing works that remained popular across centuries and continue to influence contemporary Assamese music. The creation of Ankiya Naat one-act plays represents perhaps Sankardeva's most innovative artistic contribution,

establishing theatrical tradition that integrated spiritual instruction with entertainment (Bhuyan, 2023). These dramatic works employed local languages, cultural references, and artistic techniques while conveying complex theological concepts through accessible narrative forms. The plays' use of masks, music, dance, and audience participation created immersive religious experiences that educated while entertaining diverse audiences.

Sankardeva's development of Brajavali artificial literary language demonstrates his sophisticated understanding of linguistic adaptation for religious and artistic purposes (Sen, 1977). This language combined Assamese vocabulary with Maithili grammatical structures, creating medium that remained comprehensible to local audiences while maintaining literary dignity appropriate for sacred subjects. The success of Brajavali in Sankardeva's works influenced subsequent Assamese literary development and established precedent for creative linguistic innovation in regional literature. The introduction of Sattriya dance tradition through Sankardeva's dramatic works created classical dance form that preserved ancient Indian dance principles while incorporating regional characteristics (Sharma, 2021). This dance tradition served dual functions: it provided artistic expression for spiritual themes and created professional artistic traditions that supported temple and monastic institutions. The sophisticated choreographic and musical requirements of Sattriya dance established high artistic standards that influenced broader Assamese cultural development.

Institutional Development and Continuing Influence

The institutional framework created by Sankardeva's movement, particularly through Sattria monastic centers and Namghar prayer halls, established

enduring organizational structures that continue to influence contemporary Assamese society (Goswami & Bhuyan, 2022). The Sattria system created decentralized network of religious, educational, and cultural institutions that maintained movement coherence while adapting to local conditions and needs. Modern analysis reveals that Sattria institutions functioned as comprehensive community centers that provided multiple services beyond religious instruction (Kalita, 2023). They served as schools teaching literacy, traditional arts, and practical skills; libraries preserving manuscripts and cultural materials; hospitals providing medical care using traditional and contemporary methods; and economic centers supporting local agricultural and artisanal activities. This multifunctional approach enabled Sattras to maintain social relevance and community support across changing historical circumstances.

The Namghar tradition established democratic community institutions that provided local governance, conflict resolution, and social coordination functions (Das, 2013). These prayer halls served as community meeting places where villagers discussed local issues, made collective decisions, and coordinated community activities. The inclusive character of Namghar participation, welcoming people regardless of caste or social status, created precedent for democratic participation that influenced subsequent social and political developments in Assam. Contemporary research demonstrates that Sankardeva's institutional innovations continue to influence modern Assamese society through organizations like the Srimanta Sankardev Sangha, which adapts traditional principles for contemporary contexts (Hussain, 2021). These modern institutions maintain commitment to cultural preservation, social service, and spiritual instruction while addressing

current social challenges including education, healthcare, and economic development. The continuity between historical and contemporary institutions demonstrates the enduring relevance of Sankardeva's organizational innovations.

6. Conclusion

Srimanta Sankardeva's Bhakti movement represents one of medieval India's most comprehensive and successful socio-religious transformations, creating enduring impact that extends far beyond its historical context. Through his systematic integration of theological innovation, cultural creativity, social reform, and institutional development, Sankardeva established foundations for Assamese cultural identity that continue to influence contemporary society. His unique approach to religious reform, emphasizing inclusion rather than exclusion, cultural preservation alongside innovation, and practical spirituality accessible to diverse populations, created sustainable transformation that survived changing political and social circumstances across five centuries. The movement's success in fostering unity among Assam's diverse cultural communities while preserving local traditions and customs provides valuable insights for contemporary efforts to balance cultural preservation with social modernization. Sankardeva's institutional innovations, particularly the Sattras and Namghars, demonstrate how religious organizations can serve comprehensive community functions while maintaining spiritual focus and cultural authenticity. The continuing influence of these institutions in modern Assam illustrates the enduring relevance of Sankardeva's organizational vision and its adaptability to changing social needs.

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